

**Wednesday
28 January 2026**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 28 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

Wednesday 28 January 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

LGBTQ+ Rights

1. **Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to protect LGBTQ+ rights. [907530]

The Minister for Equalities (Olivia Bailey): The Government are improving LGBTQ+ healthcare, equalising hate crime laws and banning abusive conversion practices. We will reject the politics of division and hate, which leads some in this House to say that families like mine are less stable, and we will build on Labour's proud record of fighting for equality.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy: The Equality and Human Rights Commission's draft code of practice has caused uncertainty and anxiety among the trans and non-binary community. It has also left many workplaces, businesses and single-sex spaces confused about how they should proceed. Although I am pleased that the Government have not rushed ahead with the EHRC's proposals, we urgently need guidance on how to remain trans inclusive while also protecting single-sex spaces. Will the Minister provide an update on where her Department is with the guidance, and what assurances and guidance she can give on single-sex spaces that will fully consider and guarantee the human rights of all trans and gender non-conforming people in the UK?

Olivia Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question. I absolutely recognise the anxiety felt by many trans people at the moment. The Government are clear, as was the Supreme Court judgment, that trans people are protected in law from discrimination and harassment. The independent EHRC has submitted a draft updated code of practice to Ministers, which we are reviewing with the care that it deserves. This will provide further guidance to service providers on how to meet their legal obligations.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): It has been 146 days since the Equality and Human Rights Commission laid the revised code of practice before Government. Have the Government asked the EHRC to make any changes to the code of practice? If they have, can the Minister tell us what they are?

Olivia Bailey: The EHRC is an independent body. We are engaging with it to ensure that the draft code provides clarity for service providers. It is crucial that providers have legally robust guidance on how to apply the Equality Act 2010, which is why we are considering it properly. We have always been clear that proper process must be followed so that service providers have certainty over these issues and are not placed in legal jeopardy again.

Non-disclosure Agreements: Workplace Harassment and Discrimination

2. **Louise Haigh** (Sheffield Heeley) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the proposed prohibition of the use of non-disclosure agreements by employers in cases of harassment and discrimination. [907531]

The Minister for Equalities (Seema Malhotra): I thank my right hon. Friend for her work both in this area and with Zelda Perkins, who has rightly been recognised in the new year honours list. I am proud that our Employment Rights Act 2025 introduces a new measure that will void any provision in an agreement between a worker and their employer that prevents a worker from speaking out about harassment or discrimination in the workplace. My right hon. Friend will be aware that implementation of this measure is subject to consultation. We have engaged closely with the Department for Business and Trade on this policy and continue to do so.

Louise Haigh: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her answer. I could not be prouder that this Government, through the Employment Rights Act, announced world-leading legislation to protect victims of harassment and discrimination from the use of confidentiality and suppression clauses. Will the Minister confirm that the Government will soon set out the timetable and process to ensure that victims will permanently be protected from these gagging clauses—no ifs, no buts?

Seema Malhotra: The Secretary of State for Business and Trade has stated that the delivery of the non-disclosure agreement measure is his personal priority. The Government will be consulting on the secondary legislation to ensure that we deliver on protecting workers from the misuse of NDAs in cases of harassment and discrimination. It is a high priority and we will move forward as quickly as possible.

Race Equality Engagement Group

3. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What recent progress the race equality engagement group has made on helping to tackle race inequalities. [907532]

The Minister for Equalities (Seema Malhotra): The race equality engagement group, chaired by the wonderful Baroness Lawrence, is determined to tackle race inequalities and barriers to opportunity. Strengthening the Government's links with ethnic minority communities is crucial. The group has already convened roundtables of experts and those with lived experience of inequalities in entrepreneurship, policing and maternal health. We are meeting with relevant Ministers across Government to discuss its findings and to make sure that we tackle race inequalities wherever they persist.

Janet Daby: I represent a hard-working, diverse community, yet the latest Office for National Statistics figures on the median-adjusted pay gap for UK-born black, African, Caribbean or black British employees show that they earn 5.6% less than UK-born white employees. That means that many of my hard-working constituents are not being paid fairly. The Government have committed to enshrine in law the right to equal pay for black and other ethnic minority people. Will the Government say when this welcome manifesto commitment will be met?

Seema Malhotra: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. The race equality engagement group is engaging with minority communities across the country to tackle inequality. We are committed to our manifesto commitment and to making the right to equal pay effective for ethnic minority people. We are also introducing mandatory ethnicity pay gap reporting for large employers. Last year, we published a call for evidence on equality policy, which closed last summer. We are working to analyse the responses and will update the House on our plans soon.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): It is 316 days since the Minister announced that consultation, and it is 560 days since the King's Speech when the draft legislation was announced. The Minister has made it clear that she expects the draft Bill to be published during this Session. Please will she update us on whether that is still her promise and when we can expect to see that draft Bill to reduce and remove the ethnicity pay gap that people are struggling with?

Seema Malhotra: As I have highlighted, we are continuing to move forward with our plans. We published the call for evidence and are analysing the responses. We will update the House on our plans soon.

Health Inequalities: Women

4. **Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD):** What steps she is taking with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to help tackle health inequalities affecting women. [907533]

12. **Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD):** What steps she is taking with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to help tackle health inequalities affecting women. [907541]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): We are committed through our 10-year health plan to prioritising women's health as we build an NHS that is fit for the future. That includes renewing the women's health strategy, investing in research that addresses health inequalities and continuing to build on vital progress in women's health.

Max Wilkinson: I am grateful to the Health Minister for coming to the House today. She is aware of the case of Cheltenham general hospital and the Aveta birth centre, which four years ago under the previous Government was closed temporarily to labour and births. There is a national rapid review, which Gloucestershire is subject to, and a local service review. The trust tells me that it cannot make any decisions on reopening for labour and

births until those two reviews have completed, and even then there is no timescale for giving women in my constituency what they need: to be able to give birth in Cheltenham when they need to. Will the Minister have a word with those in charge of the reviews and the local trust to try to move things along and get us the answer that we need?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Member and I discussed this issue before he brought a debate on it to Westminster Hall, and I know that he has campaigned hard on it for local women. He raises an excellent point: we must ensure that what is happening on the ground with regard to maternity and the changes that people are proposing line up adequately with the national task. He has made that point very clearly today, and I will make sure that the local system is aware of it.

Calum Miller: My constituent Debra was advised over 20 years ago to take sodium valproate during her pregnancy. Alongside thousands of other women, that advice has had severe consequences for her family. Both her sons have faced significant challenges through their lives and remain highly dependent on their parents, as a direct result of that drug. On Saturday, I visited Debra and she shared her fears for her sons' future and her anger that more than two years after the Hughes report was published, no action has been taken. Will the Minister meet Debra and me to hear her family's story and to discuss how the Government intend to put right this terrible injustice?

Karin Smyth: It was the cases of many women like Debra, which have often been raised in this House, that led to that report, and we understand that people are facing serious and long-lasting conditions. I am happy to arrange for a Minister to get back to the hon. Member on that specific case and update him on the review.

Ms Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I support Valerie Amos's report on maternity services. I am very keen to hear how the Government are ensuring that black voices, particularly black women's voices, are key during this investigation, so that their voices are heard and their experiences taken into consideration.

Karin Smyth: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she has done, alongside many others, on behalf of black and Asian women in particular to make sure that that work is included in Baroness Amos's report. That is central to the work that she will do. We know that there are high risks. There are engagement groups as part of that work, and I will make sure that my hon. Friend and others are kept up to date on that.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Earlier this month, Derby County Community Trust launched its "See you at your smear" campaign, encouraging women across the city to visit the pop-up cervical screening clinics that are in place until March. The trust does amazing work on women's health. We know that increasing the uptake of smear tests is very important as, nationally, one in three women are overdue. Will the Minister outline what work she is undertaking with the Health Secretary to improve smear test uptake?

Karin Smyth: My hon. Friend raises the great work going on in that local system. The work to renew the women's health strategy is partly about finding those good examples. We rightly talk about how the experiences of women are often poor examples of healthcare—we know that—but we also want good examples of where local systems are leading that work. We certainly want to learn from what they are doing to inform the wider strategy, and part of renewing that strategy is making sure that it is effective.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Seventy-five-year-old Valerie Kneale died four days after a stroke due to manslaughter, a coroner ruled. Her death prompted a murder investigation, as the post-mortem showed that a forcible sexual assault directly caused her death. Surviving in Scrubs campaigns to tackle sexual harassment and, crucially, sexual assault across the healthcare system. Hospitals and care homes should be the safest places to recover from childbirth, accident or illness. What is the Minister doing to deal with predators lurking in our NHS who target women at work or, sickeningly, those who are at their most vulnerable?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Lady raises a shocking example. I think I have said this at the Dispatch Box before, but it is one of the most shocking experiences, on coming in as a new Minister, to see the scale and depth of sexual harassment of staff and other women. We have worked hard with staff groups to make sure that that is given primacy in our strategy. I am working with the Minister with responsibility for violence against women and girls—the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips)—and this is part of our attack more generally on misogyny and violence against women. We absolutely recognise that it needs to be resolved.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): In September, I raised the case of my constituent Mary in the House. Mary is among the parents of at least 7,000 children who have suffered birth defects because of the anti-epilepsy drug sodium valproate after it was prescribed to pregnant mothers in the 1970s. Next week marks the second anniversary of the Hughes report into the sodium valproate and pelvic mesh scandals. Mary and other mothers like her needed redress and support for their children years ago, and the Government response to the Hughes report is long overdue. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact on the women and their children who are left in limbo by this Government's failure to respond to the Patient Safety Commissioner's report of February 2024?

Karin Smyth: As we have discussed in this House and with the many people who have led the campaign on this issue, of course we are clear about the impact on those women. The Government will continue to review the recommendations of that report and will report back in due course.

Access to Work: People with Disabilities

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

5. **Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): What recent progress she has made with Cabinet colleagues on improving access to work for people with disabilities. [907534]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): Our Pathways to Work guarantees will tackle the unnecessary barriers that keep disabled people out of work, Connect to Work employment support will be nationwide by April, last week we expanded WorkWell, and regular meetings of the lead Ministers on disability ensure cross-Government working.

Sarah Owen: Nearly half of disabled people in the UK say that they feel it is harder to get or keep a job. It is even worse for those with learning disabilities—just 6% find their way into the workplace. The problem is not just employer discrimination; it is the UK's infrastructure. Three in four train stations are not step-free. Stations such as mine in Leagrave are completely out of bounds for people who are physically disabled. What is the Minister doing to ensure that cross-departmental working meets the need of disabled people to access public spaces and the workforce?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the disability employment gap is too big. Every Department has a lead Minister on disability and I chair regular meetings. The Minister for Roads and Buses champions disabled people at the Department for Transport, and the rail accessibility road map sets out planned improvements for disabled people ahead of the establishment of Great British Railways.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): My constituent Becky relies on Access to Work, but her application was denied and it has taken eight months just to receive an acknowledgement of her complaint to the Independent Case Examiner. We cannot progress an ombudsman claim until that is dealt with. What is the Department for Work and Pensions doing to arrange for complaints to be dealt with more quickly so that people can get back into work?

Sir Stephen Timms: I would be grateful if the hon. Lady would let me have a note on the hold-up with that particular complaint. There are delays with Access to Work, reflecting the big surge in demand for it, and that is why we have proposed reform. We have consulted on reform, and we will come back with our proposals quite soon.

Long-term Health Conditions: Women

6. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help support women who are disproportionately affected by long-term health conditions. [907535]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): Through the big shifts in our 10-year health plan, we will ensure that more tests and care are delivered in the community, improving working between services, using greater use

of technology to support women who are managing long-term conditions and, crucially, learning from the work led by the pioneering women's health hubs.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister very much for that answer. Arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions are the single biggest cause of pain and disability in the UK and one of the most common reasons for workplace absences. This affects women and girls in particular: 60% of those with arthritis in the UK are women, which accounts for some 6 million women across the United Kingdom. Will the Minister work to ensure that musculoskeletal health is included in the next phase of the modern service frameworks, so that the health of women and girls is made a priority?

Karin Smyth: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that osteoporosis disproportionately affects women and plays a crucial part in absence from the workforce. Baroness Merron, who leads on this work, and I met Charlie Mayfield when he was looking at how to get more women back into the workforce, and we will ensure that women's health and these sorts of long-term conditions are part of that. I cannot commit to an MSK strategy, but we are absolutely committed to including this in our renewed women's health strategy.

Children in Poverty

7. **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce inequalities experienced by children in poverty. [907536]

8. **Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce inequalities experienced by children in poverty. [907537]

10. **Irene Campbell** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce inequalities experienced by children in poverty. [907539]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): Tackling child poverty is a moral mission for this Government, and someone's background should not determine what they go on to achieve in life. I am proud that we have now published our historic child poverty strategy, which will deliver the largest reduction in child poverty within a single Parliament by scrapping the two-child limit, expanding free school meals and backing families.

Patrick Hurley: Earlier this week, I visited the Bishop David Sheppard school in my constituency and saw at first hand the difference that breakfast clubs are making to children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Will the Minister explain how the Government's commitment to expanding breakfast clubs will tackle child poverty and reduce inequalities across the country?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is a real champion for local families, and I would be grateful if he extended my thanks to all the staff team at the Bishop David Sheppard primary school for the work that they are doing. Breakfast clubs make a huge difference to parents and children by expanding learning and giving our

children a great start to the day, and this Labour Government will deliver a national roll-out of breakfast clubs across our country.

Baggy Shanker: In Arboretum in my constituency, half the children are growing up in poverty. That means hungry mornings, cold homes and kids who are four times more likely to face mental health problems by the time they are 11. What urgent action are the Government taking, across Government, to tackle child poverty and eliminate health inequalities so that all children can grow up in warmth and stability?

Bridget Phillipson: Alongside the expansion of our new free breakfast clubs, we are massively expanding free school meals and extra childcare for families. That runs alongside our work to roll out Best Start family hubs in every area, building on the proud Labour legacy of Sure Start to support families early when their children are young.

Irene Campbell: In my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran, healthy life expectancy is currently 52.5 years for women and 52.6 years for men. That is, shockingly, the lowest in Scotland and provides clear evidence of increasing health inequalities compared with other parts of Scotland. Years ago, the Glasgow effect was often cited when looking at life expectancy and healthy life expectancy, but I fear that we now also have a North Ayrshire effect. Does the Minister agree that this is no way for people to start their lives and that the Scottish Government must do more to address these inequalities, given that they have had the biggest financial settlement in the history of devolution?

Bridget Phillipson: Those are truly shocking statistics. I know that my hon. Friend, Anas Sarwar and all Scottish Labour colleagues are working to kick out the SNP and show how Labour can make the NHS fit for the future, alongside our child poverty strategy, which will lift thousands of children in Scotland out of poverty. That is the difference that a Labour Government here in Westminster are making in Scotland.

Shivani Raja (Leicester East) (Con): The best way to lift poverty is to support people into work and create jobs. What assessment have the Minister and her colleagues made of the impact that their crippling national insurance hike has had on families with children living in poverty?

Bridget Phillipson: Our child poverty strategy will deliver the biggest reduction in child poverty in any Parliament ever. That is the difference that a Labour Government are making. The hon. Members will surely recognise that the majority of children in poverty are in working families—people doing the right thing and working hard—and we are determined to support them.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): We know that poor housing contributes to child poverty. I have recently heard concerns about social housing providers in my constituency failing to carry out vital repairs to tackle damp and mould—some even choose to sell off homes rather than bring them up to the standard required under Awaab's law, because it is too expensive to do so. What are the Government doing, particularly in the Women and Equalities unit and the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, to stop social

housing providers selling off homes and to ensure that every child has access to safe, warm, dry and affordable social housing?

Bridget Phillipson: Housing issues were a key feature of our work on the child poverty taskforce. Colleagues across Government are taking up such work. I am concerned about the cases that the hon. Lady raises. If she would like to share some details, I will make sure that a Minister looks into them and provides a response.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Of course, poverty of aspiration contributes to inequalities. As the Minister will know, over 100,000 children in this country are in looked-after care, in secure homes, children's homes and foster care. Every single one of those children has a skill, an ability, something to contribute to society. With her Secretary of State for Education hat on, will she consider scholarships for looked-after children so that they can develop those skills?

Bridget Phillipson: The right hon. Gentleman raises children's social care reform, which has been an important focus of the Department for Education. We are supporting more families through kinship arrangements, expanding fostering and ensuring that we support children earlier in order to stop crises escalating. I would be happy to discuss further any other ideas that he might have.

Topical Questions

T1. [907545] **Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): Next week is Race Equality Week, with the theme "Change needs all of us". The Government's race equality engagement group, chaired by Baroness Lawrence, is ensuring that we hear directly from those most affected by race inequality. Yesterday we marked Holocaust Memorial Day, and across the House we remembered the 6 million Jewish people murdered by the Nazis. We redouble our efforts to combat prejudice, hatred and antisemitism in all its forms.

Douglas McAllister: The gender pay gap for full-time employees in Scotland widened from 2% in 2024 to 3.5% in 2025. It is utterly unacceptable that, on the SNP's watch, women in Scotland are earning less for the same hours. What can the UK Government do to improve matters for women across the country?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right: we must narrow that gap. We are ensuring that large employers, including in the Scottish private sector, publish plans on how they will address the gender pay gap. Of course, I am proud that, alongside my hon. Friend, this Labour Government are delivering the biggest upgrade in workers' rights in a generation.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): Nurses up and down the country, including the Darlington nurses and Jennifer Melle, are being hounded and harassed by the NHS simply for recognising that biological sex is real.

I am grateful that the Minister has previously agreed to meet Jennifer and hope that she still will. The Minister takes up the cause of working-class women—these are working-class women, and they are being abused by people in positions of power—so will she go further by holding accountable those in the NHS, the Nursing and Midwifery Council and the unions who have harassed and victimised those hard-working nurses?

Bridget Phillipson: I look forward to meeting Jennifer soon to discuss her experiences and what more we can do to ensure that women in the NHS are safe at work. I am determined to ensure that the rights, voices and spaces for women who work in the NHS and women who are patients in the NHS are protected.

Claire Coutinho: In the case of Gorton and Denton, we heard this week that the Muslim Vote has decided to endorse the Green party. This is overt sectarianism in our midst, and we know that where we have sectarian politics, conflict and strife follow. Even one of Labour's candidates at the last election was threatened with beheading, but nobody in the Labour party seems to be able to confront this problem. Will the Secretary of State call it out for what it is—sectarian politics that has no place in Britain?

Bridget Phillipson: I am not aware of the particular case that the right hon. Lady describes. What I can say is that violence, intimidation or harassment has no place in our politics. No political candidate or Member of Parliament should be subject to that kind of experience. I am very much looking forward to going to campaign and make the case to the people there.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked— Engagements

Q1. [907515] **Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab):** If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 28 January.

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr David Lammy): Mr Speaker, I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Prime Minister, who is visiting China and Japan.

Yesterday was Holocaust Memorial Day. For the first time, a Holocaust survivor, Mala Tribich, addressed Cabinet. I found her testimony profoundly moving, especially having recently visited the Majdanek concentration camp in Poland. We owe it to every survivor, and to the 6 million Jewish people murdered in the Holocaust, to never forget. We will build a national Holocaust memorial and learning centre next to this Parliament, so that the voices of survivors are never forgotten and their courage inspires future generations.

I know that the thoughts of the whole House will be with the family and loved ones of Captain Philip Gilbert Muldowney of the 4th Regiment Royal Artillery, who died on Sunday. We will never forget the courage, bravery and sacrifice made for our country by British servicemen and women.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Anneliese Midgley: I associate myself with the remarks of the Deputy Prime Minister about Holocaust Memorial Day and that British serviceman.

This week, the BBC and “Good Morning Britain” have reported on the national disgrace of out-of-control waste dumps. For years, my constituents in Kirkby have lived with such a dump. People struggle to breathe, they are sick, they have to live with their windows shut and schools sometimes shut down for days. I have been campaigning on the issue with our Labour councillors, but the response from the Environment Agency has been slow and ineffective. Will the Government work with me to sort this nightmare and to stop the Simonswood stink?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The Government will work with my hon. Friend. The situation she describes is unacceptable and people are right to be furious. The Environment Agency is taking action to prevent further dumping, and we are giving it more powers and resources to crack down on fly-tipping. I will ensure that Ministers keep her updated with their efforts.

Speaking of garbage, I note that Reform UK’s spring-cleaning of the Conservative party is continuing this week. The Leader of the Opposition says that the Conservative party is full of unwanted rubbish, but the public worked that out long ago and got rid of them.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State for Business and Trade.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): May I start by echoing the Deputy Prime Minister’s comments about Holocaust Memorial Day? We must never forget. May I also associate the Opposition with the condolences expressed by the Deputy Prime Minister to the family of Captain Philip Gilbert Muldowney. I also offer the condolences of the House to the family of Lord Flight, one of my predecessors in Arundel and South Downs, who served in Parliament with distinction for more than two decades.

After the Chancellor’s U-turn yesterday, can the Deputy Prime Minister confirm that over 90% of retail, hospitality and leisure businesses will get nothing?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I welcome the shadow Business Secretary to the Dispatch Box and join him in his condolences—I remember Lord Flight well from when I arrived in this House. It is always a pleasure to hear from the co-author of the mini-Budget and the man who said that Liz Truss had

“the best plan to deliver for the voters.”

Do you remember that?

Of course, all of us want to see our pubs in good health and to support hospitality. That is why the Chancellor announced a £4 billion package of support. Yesterday, in addition, it was announced that business rates for pubs and music venues will be cut by 15% this year and frozen for the next two years, and we will review the methodology for valuing pubs in the future. I must say that contrasts with the Conservatives, who saw 7,000 pubs close under their watch.

Andrew Griffith: The Deputy Prime Minister wants to talk about experience. I spent 25 years building businesses and creating jobs; he spent 25 years

manufacturing grievance. If the Labour party knew anything about business, it would know that this is too little, too late. Our high streets—their high streets—are bleeding out, and the Chancellor is handing out—*[Interruption.]* Government Members do not want to hear this. Our high streets are bleeding out, and the Chancellor is handing out a box of sticking plasters. They cannot even U-turn properly. A senior adviser to Andy Burnham said yesterday:

“The Chancellor just wants a cheap headline”.

Meanwhile, our high streets are being decimated. He is right, isn’t he?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks about business. We know what his plan for business is. This is the man who opposed the minimum wage and said that it was

“simply something that legislators pass to make themselves feel good.”

Let me tell him that raising the minimum wage does not make us feel good; it changes lives. Labour is proud of how we are supporting small business. On small business, we are creating hospitality zones to cut red tape, creating greater licensing freedoms, which are very important, and tackling late payments. All of that is supporting business. That is a far cry from what small business saw before.

Andrew Griffith: You do not make young people better off by putting them out of work. The Deputy Prime Minister’s MPs are already banned from pubs. Where next? Shops, restaurants, hair salons—that might not make a difference to him or to me, but it would for many of them. They should back our plan to scrap business rates, but they have not got the backbone to cut welfare to pay for it. It is not just business rates; under Labour, the cost of hiring is up. Can he tell the House how much more it costs to hire a 21-year-old under Labour?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman talks about young people. The Conservatives left a shameful legacy: one in eight young people were not earning or learning when they left office. We are investing a record amount in apprenticeships, which the Conservatives had on their knees. We are creating technical excellence colleges for our young people, and Alan Milburn is doing a review on young people who are currently out of work. By contrast, the Conservatives would freeze the minimum wage and oppose giving young people an increase. They have nothing to say for the next generation.

Andrew Griffith: Mr Speaker, you can feel the Deputy Prime Minister’s frustration. The Prime Minister is away, the Business Secretary is away, and here he is—left-behind Lammy, the designated survivor, having to defend the indefensible. It is very clear that he does not know the answer, so let me tell him. The cost will be up by £3,600 a year. Under Labour, businesses cannot afford to hire, and one in six young people cannot find a job. This Government are blocking people who just want to get on in life—ambitious people like Andy from Manchester, having his dreams crushed by Labour. Could the Deputy Prime Minister explain why unemployment has gone up almost every month that the Government have been in office?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The shadow Business Secretary should check his facts—500,000 more people are in work than a year ago under us. He is in no position to lecture anyone about U-turns, by the way; this man was Boris Johnson's net zero business champion, and now he opposes the renewable investment that is creating jobs and opportunities right across the country.

Andrew Griffith: The thing that the Deputy Prime Minister did not want to say is that every Labour Government leave office with unemployment higher than when they arrived. There is a reason for that: they do not understand what it takes to be an employer. They do not understand business. The Government are strangling business with their red tape, and they are about to make things infinitely worse. Will the Deputy Prime Minister tell us his Government's own estimate of the cost to business of the unemployment Act?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I will take no lectures from the hon. Member on business. My father was run out of business under the Thatcher Government—I know what it is like to grow up under a Tory Government. While we are talking about it, 26 Tory MPs and counting have already defected to Reform. Now they are all counting down, because today is 100 days until the Tory transfer window slams shut. It is going to be the longest and most disloyal transfer saga since Sol Campbell left Spurs, and the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage)—I do not know where he is—has signed three right wingers in the past fortnight.

Andrew Griffith: I do not know what is in the Deputy Prime Minister's head; it is our party that is getting stronger. Overnight we learned that the former Deputy Prime Minister has got 80 names. On Sunday we learned that the Health Secretary's allies claim he has got 200 names. Oddly, 50 Labour Members want the Mayor of Greater Manchester, who is not even an MP. They are supposed to be running the country.

Once again, small businesses across this country will see that the Deputy Prime Minister did not answer the question, so I will tell him. The burden to businesses of the Government's Bill is £1 billion a year. There we have it: they have no answers for small business, and there is no relief coming. They do not care about high streets, hotels, restaurants, farmers or young people. Will the Deputy Prime Minister not admit what the Members behind him are thinking: that it is not the Prime Minister going to China that is the problem; it is the fear that he might come back?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Let us face it, the shadow Business Secretary is not going to get this gig again, is he?

I have set out our position very clearly. This was the week when the Leader of the Opposition told "Desert Island Discs" that Britain needs to learn to queue again, and Tory MPs have taken her quite literally—they are lining up outside the office of the Member for Clacton while they squabble about the damage that they did to our country. Labour this week is capping ground rents, cutting the cost of living and rebuilding our public services. That is the difference a Labour Government make, and there is much more to come.

Q2. [907516] Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): Elemore Hall school is a fantastic multi-site provision, supporting more than 200 of County Durham's vulnerable young people with social, emotional and mental health difficulties. Its personalised alternative curriculum centre in Durham caters for 20 key stage 4 pupils, but special educational needs provision in Durham is at crisis point. With an extra school site and PACC extension, Elemore could offer more young people opportunities to thrive locally, saving thousands in costs for alternative provision and taxis. Will the Deputy Prime Minister arrange for a Department for Education Minister to visit the PACC site, and will the Government work with me to support the urgent need for additional school facilities and PACC accommodation, so that young people in Durham can access the education they deserve closer to home?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We are focused on fixing the SEN system so that every child, wherever they live, has the support they need to thrive. We will continue our national conversation on reforms. We are also boosting investment into SEN. That includes £200 million to roll out more training for teachers and over £100 million for Durham county council. I am sure that a Minister would be happy to meet my hon. Friend and visit the site at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Speaker: I call the deputy leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): On behalf of my party, may I join the Deputy Prime Minister in marking Holocaust Memorial Day? We will not forget. We also honour the service of Captain Philip Gilbert Muldowney, who died on Sunday.

While the Chinese regime still holds British citizen Jimmy Lai captive in prison, and while the Chinese regime continues to hunt down pro-democracy protesters on the streets of Britain with bounties on their heads, the British Prime Minister has gone cap in hand to China to ask for a trade deal, on the promise of a super-embassy from which the Chinese regime will continue to spy on us. The Chinese regime remains undeterred in its illegal actions against the UK and our citizens, so can I ask the Deputy Prime Minister to name one single consequence that the Chinese regime will face if they do not stop their campaign of espionage and repression?

The Deputy Prime Minister: China matters, and ignoring it would be a dereliction of duty. We will build a consistent, long-term and strategic approach that is grounded in reality. I set that out in the China audit statement I made a few months ago, and it is what our allies do. President Trump, President Macron, Chancellor Merz, Prime Minister Carney are all visiting and engaging. We will co-operate where we can—I am sure that, in areas like climate, the hon. Lady would expect us to co-operate—and we will challenge in areas where we disagree. That is the way that we deliver for the public of this country.

Daisy Cooper: I note that the Deputy Prime Minister could not name one single consequence if the Chinese do not stop their espionage and repression. The Deputy Prime Minister has responded as if the world has not changed, but with Russia waging war in Europe, with the Chinese hunting pro-democracy protesters on our

streets, and with President Trump undermining NATO and the rules-based order that keeps us safe, we have got to act with urgency to strengthen our alliances with trusted allies in Europe and the Commonwealth, and we have got to ramp up defence spending now. Will the Deputy Prime Minister consider as a first step the Liberal Democrat plan to issue defence bonds to raise £20 billion in the next two years, so that we can rebuild our armed forces and give British savers the opportunity to invest in the defence of our nation?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have been here long enough to remember when Labour left office. We were spending 2.5% on defence. When the Liberal Democrats were in government with the Conservatives, they cut it.

Q3. [907517] **John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that the good work of this Labour Government to get the NHS back on its feet, with waiting lists down—they are down by 2,400 in my constituency—as well as ambulance waits down and prescription charges frozen, could be put at risk by Reform UK, as was confirmed at the weekend, when the last-but-one defector, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), was asked about a private health insurance system and replied, “I don’t object to that”?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right—waiting lists are down by 3,200 in his local area—and he is also right to highlight the progress with our plan to get the NHS back on its feet. Thanks to this Labour Government’s decisions, waiting lists have fallen by over 300,000 since the election, and we have delivered 5.2 million extra appointments, slashed ambulance response times and recruited 3,000 more GPs. Meanwhile, the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) confirmed at the weekend that Reform would support privatisation of the national health service. Labour will never let it happen. Reform cannot be trusted with our national health service.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): This week marks two years from the attempted great deception on the part of the former Government and the Democratic Unionist party that the Irish sea border was gone. “No checks, no paperwork” was the strapline. Yet within the first few months of this new year alone, we have seen the imposition of a veterinary medicine border and a ban on new GB cars being sold in Northern Ireland. Now the European Union says that it plans to impose a €3 charge on small parcels coming into Northern Ireland from July onwards. What sort of Government allows a foreign power to impose a tax on parcels coming into its own territory?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I looked at this specifically when I was Foreign Secretary. We have provided a wide range of guidance and support for businesses and we have not seen evidence of significant disruption to the flow of parcels, but of course His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs stands ready to provide support wherever businesses have difficulties.

Q4. [907518] **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis** (Cardiff West) (Lab): When the Prime Minister visited Ely in my constituency recently to launch the UK child poverty strategy, I took the opportunity to discuss with him the much-needed

Pride in Place funding that we want in Ely and Caerau. My constituents are telling me that they want important things such as a youth zone and provision for recreational sports activities. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me to discuss securing this vital funding for my constituents in Ely and Caerau?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Of course I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets a meeting with the appropriate Minister. Look at the difference that Labour is making in Wales: NHS waiting lists have fallen six months in a row thanks to the largest ever devolution settlement; £445 million has gone into Welsh rail; and we have new offshore wind projects, AI growth zones and the UK’s small modular reactor in Anglesey. That is the difference a Labour Government make.

Q5. [907519] **Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The Met Office reports that climate change is driving wetter winters, but the United States withdrew from the Paris climate agreement yesterday, on the same day that much of the west country disappeared under floodwater. My part of Devon is submerged, and needs better flood defences. Would the Deputy Prime Minister like to invite his US counterpart on a fishing trip to the south-west?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Well, I will get a licence if I do!

My sympathies are with the hon. Gentleman’s constituents who have been affected by the recent floods. We are investing a record £10.5 billion in flood defences to protect 890,000 homes. The flood defences are of course inherited from the Conservative party, which was shameful, but we have committed to net zero and to the Paris agreement; it is good for lowering bills, and good for jobs and investment in the UK.

Q6. [907520] **Mrs Elsie Blundell** (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): In my borough, the social housing waiting list exceeds 7,000 live applications. Council housing offers my constituents the safety and security they deserve. What further steps can the Government take to speed up the delivery of the social and affordable homes programme, and build the high-quality social housing that my constituents deserve?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We on this side of the House believe in council housing. We are investing £39 billion to deliver the biggest boost to social and affordable housing in a generation. That will deliver 300,000 social and affordable homes, with at least 60% for social rent, and we will bring forward legislation to strengthen councils’ ability to buy back homes sold under the right-to-buy scheme.

Q7. [907521] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The Scottish press is full of stories about the plot by Scottish Labour MPs to bring down the Prime Minister. One Scottish Labour MP said he is terrible, another Scottish Labour MP said the handling of the Budget had been incompetent, and yet another Scottish Labour MP predicted that Scottish Labour will be slaughtered in May’s election. They are not wrong, are they?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The people of Scotland have a big decision to make later on this year—certainly not to vote Conservative, but to get rid of the SNP and vote Labour. I and my colleagues will be campaigning every single day to bring that about.

Q11. [907525] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham North) (Lab): As the UK's first borough of sanctuary, Lewisham has a proud history of welcoming people fleeing conflict, persecution and instability. Our council works closely with support organisations to help those people integrate and contribute to our community. How will the Deputy Prime Minister ensure that the proposed reforms to the asylum system support, rather than undermine, the positive outcomes already being achieved in boroughs like mine?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this issue. Britain has always been a fair, tolerant and compassionate country that has offered safe haven to those fleeing peril, and this Government will always defend those values. We are introducing the largest overhaul of asylum policy in modern times to restore control, contribution and fairness. That includes creating new, capped safe and legal routes for refugees. Asylum claims are falling across Europe, but in Britain they are rising, so we must make it less attractive for those who are coming here illegally to come to Britain, and easier to remove them, and that is what we will continue to do.

Q8. [907522] **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Six in 10 families say their pay is going backwards, with the lowest earners £73 a week worse off and middle earners worse off too. Will the Deputy Prime Minister admit that his Government have broken their promise to improve living standards?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Real wages have risen in nearly every single month since we came into office.

Q12. [907526] **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Sergeant Matthew Telford, Trooper Robert Pearson and Guardsman James “Jimmy” Major, who was aged just 18, were three heroic servicemen from Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes who made the ultimate sacrifice on their tours of Afghanistan. I want to put on the record my condemnation of President Trump's plain wrong comments that so undermine the commitment of our brave British servicemen and women at home and abroad, which the Deputy Prime Minister has rightly recognised. This Government have launched the Valour system to ensure that our veterans' support offer on housing, health, welfare and work is fit for purpose—fully backing our forces. That is in stark contrast to the leader of Reform, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), who happily takes cash to champion the IRA. My local armed forces charities want to know if the Deputy Prime Minister can set out what urgent action is being taken by this Government to house homeless veterans under Valour.

The Deputy Prime Minister: One of the greatest privileges of my life is visiting our servicemen and women who are stationed abroad. We are renewing the contract with our veterans, providing millions to eradicate veteran homelessness, and investing £50 million into a nationwide network of support centres.

I want to take this opportunity to pay my respects to Private Jonathan Kitulagoda. He was the first British soldier killed by enemy action in Afghanistan, on this day in 2004. He was just 23. The valour and heroism of those who have served our country to keep us safe must never be forgotten.

Q9. [907523] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): A month ago today, protests erupted across Iran. In response, the Iranian Government launched a deadly crackdown. They fired indiscriminately on protesters, and they shut off internet access to hide what they were doing from the outside world. In April 2024, the then shadow Home Secretary, who is now the Foreign Secretary, asked the Conservative Government if they would finally proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organisation. Just two weeks ago, she described the Iranian regime as a “consistent threat” to the UK's

“stability, security and freedom and to the UK national interest.”—[*Official Report*, 13 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 789.]

The world order that we thought we knew is being shaken up. The US is no longer able to show moral leadership to Governments who kill their own citizens. Can this Government step up and take the lead, and will they now proscribe the IRGC?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I utterly condemn the Iranian regime's brutal repression of peaceful protesters. It is a long-standing position under successive Governments not to comment on whether a specific organisation is being considered for proscription. We have long criticised Iran's authoritarian regime and taken robust action to protect UK interests from Iranian state threats, and that includes over 220 sanctions on Iran and placing the entirety of the Iranian state on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. We are working at pace, of course, to explore what further measures can be taken to respond to these horrific events.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): Violence is again escalating in north-east Syria—Rojava. A humanitarian crisis is unfolding and the city of Kobane is under siege yet again. The Kurdish communities who fought and helped defeat ISIS feel abandoned by their western allies. Will the Deputy Prime Minister commit to working with our allies to hold the Syrian regime to the March 2025 agreement by securing protection for Kurdish civilians, pushing for a meaningful and immediate ceasefire, opening humanitarian corridors into Kobane and supporting constitutional recognition for Kurdish regions?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Recent events in Syria have been deeply concerning. This is a significant moment for Syria's future, and we are using every diplomatic lever to urge all parties to stop the violence, protect civilians and ensure humanitarian support can be accessed. The Foreign Secretary has highlighted to Syria's Foreign Minister this week the importance of protecting the rights of the Kurdish community, and we have consistently advocated for an inclusive political transition. We remain committed to standing with the Syrian people as they seek to build a more stable, free and prosperous future.

Q10. [907524] **Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Reform): It was reported on the TV yesterday that the Labour Back Benchers are revolting. Now, that is a matter of opinion,

but unlike the Labour Back Benchers and the Prime Minister—[*Interruption.*] Unlike the Labour Back Benchers and the Prime Minister—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I did not want to have to get up. Mr Anderson, one of us will have to sit down, and it is not going to be me. [*Interruption.*] Order. Who was speaking out then? If they have not got the guts to admit to shouting somebody down, they should leave the Chamber.

Lee Anderson: Unlike the Prime Minister of our country, I have never been thrown out of or barred from a pub, and after yesterday's disastrous announcement to save our pubs, it is no wonder he has cleared off to China, but I have one question for the Deputy Prime Minister. Will he come with me to Ashfield to visit some pubs, speak to some landlords and explain to them why over 500 pubs have closed since this Labour Government came into power and why another 500 pubs will close in the next year? Come on, be a man!

The Deputy Prime Minister: I think I once campaigned with the hon. Gentleman when he was a member of the Labour party. It has been said of him that, when he left, he enhanced the IQ of the Labour party and the IQ of the party he went to. I wonder what job he is pitching for in Reform's shadow Cabinet. They have Nadhim Zahawi to advise on tax and the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) to open up the borders, and now they need Liz Truss to crash the economy!

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): I hope you get well soon, Mr Speaker.

Lillia Jakeman is 19 years of age and has been given a devastating diagnosis of motor neurone disease. When she was told that she has a very rare form of the disease that can be treated with a groundbreaking new drug called tofersen, her family were given hope. They have since discovered that although the drug is being made available to the NHS free of charge, her local trust has declined to deliver it. This afternoon, her family will be arriving at Downing Street, having walked from Southampton, to highlight this injustice. Will the Deputy Prime Minister work with me, MPs from across the House, Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS bosses to deliver fair access to tofersen for all living with this rare form of motor neurone disease?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am sorry to hear about those who are waiting for this treatment. Of course, I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets the appropriate meeting with the relevant Minister.

Q13. [907527] **James McMurdock** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Ind): G R Carr is a business in Burnt Mills in my constituency with more than half a century of experience in steel manufacturing and fabrication. It is exactly the kind of medium-sized business that builds this country and that we should be championing. Following my visit to the business last week, I was disturbed to find out that many of our contracts, from our flagship deals in Teesside to our nuclear programmes, go offshore, such as the 7,000-tonne order for steel from China and the more than 200 km of fabricated pipework

from Germany. That is exactly the kind of investment that should be made in the UK. How does sending it offshore play into the Government's growth plans?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman will remember that we stepped in to save British Steel, and we committed up to £2.5 billion to rebuild the sector. We will publish a steel strategy setting out how we are going to achieve that shortly. The British industry supercharger will also bring down energy costs for strategically important UK industries.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): At a time when the Government are promoting a duty of candour to ensure that all public servants, including Ministers, have a legal duty to act with transparency and frankness, and when the Scottish Government have indicated that they hope that that legislation will apply in Scotland too, does the Deputy Prime Minister support calls for the current First Minister, a former First Minister and a former Health Minister to appear before the inquiry into the deaths of adults and children as a result of contaminated water at the Queen Elizabeth university hospital in Glasgow, a scandal widely thought to be the worst since devolution began?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise that serious matter. It is a scandal—one of the worst failures in modern Scottish public life. The SNP Government must acknowledge the grave failures at Queen Elizabeth hospital. When whistleblowers raised serious failings, SNP Ministers sided with the health board and dismissed families who went through tragic circumstances. That should be condemned as wholly unacceptable, and there is no clearer example of why Scotland needs change with Anas Sarwar.

Q14. [907528] **Mark Pritchard** (The Wrekin) (Con): The UK's nuclear deterrent has kept this country safe for over five decades. As the Deputy Prime Minister will know, it is operationally independent, but it still relies on US defence supply chains. Given the shaking of traditional alliances, could the Deputy Prime Minister reassure the House and the country that the UK has sufficient stockpiles of the component parts of the Trident II D5 missiles in our nuclear submarines, and ensure that the supply chain remains resilient and able to cope with any change in the White House, whether positive or negative?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. It is why I was pleased to work with the Defence Secretary on the strategic defence review and why we are investing £270 billion over this Parliament in defence.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the Deputy Prime Minister takes a deep interest in Uganda. Two weeks ago, there was a sham election in which people were prevented from voting and Government officials stuffed ballot boxes. Now, the military is pursuing Bobi Wine, the leader of the opposition, with deadly intent. I am gravely concerned about Bobi, opposition activists and British citizens in Uganda. What can we do to safeguard those people and ensure that we do not see violence and bloodshed on the streets of Uganda?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I was very grateful to meet Bobi Wine with my hon. Friend when I was shadow Foreign Secretary. We call for peaceful and credible elections. This dispute must be resolved peacefully and legally. Opposition candidates must be able to campaign freely. We will, of course, continue to make representations forcefully.

Q15. [907529] **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): I join the Deputy Prime Minister in commemorating Holocaust Memorial Day. Unbelievably, the organisation Palestine Pulse planned a protest outside Parliament today entitled, “Confront Power at Parliament: Anti-Zionist Rally”. The Jewish population of our country have had to put up with weekly protests in our towns and cities since 7 October 2023. Now we have protests outside Jewish businesses and restaurants, trying to close them down. The chants are antisemitic, the meaning behind

them is antisemitic and we see where it leads: the massacre on Bondi Beach, what happened in the United States, and, unbelievably, two of our Jewish population murdered in Manchester. Lord Macdonald’s review will look at the issue, but the Jewish population of this country do not have two years to wait before this hatred is extinguished. Will the Deputy Prime Minister take concrete steps to ensure that antisemitism is driven out of our country?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He and I have worked cross-party on these issues over many years, particularly as I represent Stamford Hill, one of the historic homes of the Jewish community. He is quite right: the rising antisemitism we see and the nature of some forms of protest is intolerable and unacceptable. That is why the Home Secretary has set out her plans. I will continue to work with her closely to drive antisemitism out of this country.

BILLS PRESENTED

LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION (REQUIREMENT FOR REFERENDUM) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Peter Bedford presented a Bill to provide that any reorganisation of local government in England involving changes to electoral boundaries, the establishment of combined authorities, or other specified changes may not be undertaken unless such reorganisation has been approved by a simple majority of residents of any affected local government area voting in a referendum; to make provision about the organisation of such referendums; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 February, and to be printed (Bill 374).

ARMED FORCES COMPENSATION SCHEME AND WAR PENSION SCHEME (REPORT) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Josh Babarinde, supported by James MacCleary, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the potential merits of disregarding compensation received under the War Pension Scheme and Armed Forces Compensation Scheme for the purpose of calculating entitlement to Pension Credit and to other means-tested benefits for which such payments are not disregarded in full; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 February, and to be printed (Bill 375).

Flooding

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

12.43 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the responsibilities and duties of certain authorities and agencies in respect of inland flood prevention; to make provision about the powers of local flood authorities and Internal Drainage Boards; to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the funding of local flood authorities and Internal Drainage Boards; to provide for the designation of Internal Drainage Board pumps as critical national infrastructure; to require the Secretary of State to prepare and publish a report on the potential merits of establishing a Flood Compensation Fund to support homeowners whose primary residence has become unsaleable as a direct result of flooding; to make provision about flood reinsurance schemes; to make provision about the responsibilities of developers and water companies in respect of the provision of drainage for new housing developments; to make water companies statutory consultees for certain planning applications; to place a duty on fire and rescue services to respond to flood events; to make provision about national and local digital mapping of flood incidence and risk; and for connected purposes.

Mr Speaker, when you hear “Norfolk” and “floods”, I imagine that, like most, you think of coastal flooding, salt marsh flooding, storm tides eroding our cliffs, river flooding and the broads, but not inland flooding from surface water run-off overloading drains and sewers, which is all too often overlooked, and which is why I am introducing this Bill.

Like many, Mr Speaker, you are probably wondering why Mid Norfolk is flooding. It is Breckland; it is dry, sandy, and inland—the clue is in the name—and it should not be flooding, but over the last decade or so we have seen a spate of inland surface flooding in 23 of my 130 villages, and the problem is increasing every year. Why? Yes, climate change. In 2022-23, we had the wettest October, November, December, January, February and March on record, but there is also a lack of maintenance of council highway culverts, a lack of maintenance of farm ditches, inadequate funding of internal drainage boards—who, by the way, have been doing a really good job since about 1560, when they were created—and local flood authorities, and the relinquishing of riparian rights. I am sorry to say that I think the Environment Agency is rather more focused on rivers as habitats, than as channels for getting water off the land. However, these issues are happening in many areas. Why is there a problem in Mid Norfolk?

The big factor in Mid Norfolk is new housing. Along the A11 corridor, in the last 10 or 15 years, we have seen 5,000 houses built at Thetford, 5,000 at Attleborough, 3,000 at Wymondham, and 1,000 at Silfield. A 5,000-house new town is planned at Snetterton, and in commuter villages like Yaxham, Mattishall and Ellingham, big national developers and their agents like Gladman are using—or abusing—the five-year land supply to land-bank, and then to dump massive commuter housing estates on the outskirts of towns and villages without making proper infrastructure investment, against the wishes of the local council, the local plan and communities, who are too often powerless.

I want to make it clear that I am not against house building, or all developers. We have excellent local developers in Norfolk, like Abel Homes, which builds

excellent homes and estates in many of my towns and villages. They are not the problem. The problem is the rush to dump massive commuter estates on the outskirts of towns and villages, and the scale of new housing without adequate infrastructure investment.

In 2020, my eyes were fully opened to the scale of the issue. I spent Christmas week helping residents in my villages to clear out sewage water from their houses, and on the telephone lines to try to get Anglian Water to send tankers to pump out the villages. The problems continued, and in 2023, Mill Lane, Attleborough, was hit by a significant flooding event affecting 100 homes. Spare a thought, please, for Lynn and Hans Short, who live next to the culvert, which was, by the way, wrongly installed by Anglian Water before it handed over the riparian responsibilities. Lynn and Hans have been flooded in four out of the last five years. That is why I have set up the Mid Norfolk Flood Partnership, worked with the county council to set up the Norfolk Strategic Flood Alliance, ably led by Henry Cator and Fiona Johnston, convened our first Norfolk flood summit last year, and established and supported local flood action groups. My first instinct was not to come to Parliament or Government for help, but to lead locally.

Something has become very clear, not least through the case study of Mill Lane, Attleborough, where a culvert was built under the river, inappropriately blocked with a grille that was never properly checked, and is at the wrong angle, so that it piles up waste, flooding the houses next to it. We ended up having to put together a multi-agency taskforce. We removed 30 tonnes of debris from the whole river. There was an illegal housing development lower down the watercourse, inappropriate development, and a lack of catchment work all the way through. It was a huge multi-agency project, but this is happening all over the country. Norfolk is only sixth in the top 10 inland flood counties, and that is why there are, I think, four new flooding all-party parliamentary groups in this Parliament. MPs across the House recognise the issue, and given the new house building target of 1.5 million homes in the next three years, it will only get more serious.

I pay tribute to the new flood Minister, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), who is present, and Peter Bonfield for his flood review. I welcome the comprehensive spending review funding announcement of £2.6 billion for flood and coastal erosion management to protect 65,000 homes. The insurance sector tells us that 18 million homes will be at risk—one in four—over the next 10 to 15 years, and flooding is costing £66 billion a year to the economy.¹

We will not solve the problem unless we really deal with the fundamental, structural, systemic problems causing misery and chaos around the country. Inland flooding is often overlooked, as funding goes to the higher-profile coastal areas, rivers, towns and cities. There is a serious lack of clear responsibility; there are over 30 agencies in Norfolk alone that have responsibility for flooding. We must deal with the disempowering of local bodies, such as internal drainage boards. Local flood authorities have no power or funding. There is

continued building on floodplains without adequate infrastructure. There is no enforceable requirement to upgrade existing drainage, and no funding for drainage upgrades because most section 106 money goes on important local services. Residents in district council areas where there is an IDB are seeing funding for flood services cut.

There is tonnes of data, but no proper mapping of where and when floods are likely to happen. We have the technology and the data to do that mapping, but we do not use it. The vital Flood Re scheme is limited in time and scope, and is set to expire. There is also an insurance, mortgage and saleability time-bomb in our housing market. Sadly, there was nothing to deal with those issues in the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, despite multiple amendments being tabled, including in the other place.

The Bill that I am introducing has been designed with and around the advice of frontline bodies, and deals with the practical reality of flood prevention in four key areas: responsibilities, funding, planning, and national and local data and flood mapping. I developed it in a spirit of non-partisan, practical politics, to embolden the Minister to take this opportunity to make the key reforms that are essential if we are to avoid a growing crisis worsening to calamitous levels.

I thank the many agencies and organisations in the water sector that have helped—in particular, local residents Liz Witcher in Watton, Hans and Lynn in Attleborough, and others too numerous to mention. I thank my councillors, agencies such as the Norfolk Strategic Flooding Alliance, and Aviva, a great local Norfolk insurance business on the frontline of this crisis. Most of all, the Bill is shaped by and for those poor people, up and down this country, who, like Hans and Lynn Short at Mill Lane, Attleborough, live in fear of going through the hell of their homes being flooded, not through any fault of their own, but because the system has failed them.

The planning, drainage, sewerage, insurance and flood-prevention system has evolved without design. No single body or person is responsible; that is the problem. The system is not fit for purpose today, let alone for three years' time, when 1.5 million new homes are set to be built. We were all sent here to make the system work for the people who pay their taxes, pay our wages and expect us to deliver. We owe it to them and to the next generation to fix this. That is how we repair public trust in our politics and in this Parliament. The Bill is designed to help the Minister do just that. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That George Freeman, Nick Timothy, Jerome Mayhew, James Wild, Lee Pitcher, Helen Morgan, Dr Roz Savage, Steff Aquarone, Adrian Ramsay, Blake Stephenson and Dr Ben Spencer present the Bill.

George Freeman accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 10 July, and to be printed (Bill 368).

1.[Official Report, 29 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 10WC.](Correction)

Opposition Day

[16TH ALLOTTED DAY]

British Indian Ocean Territory

Mr Speaker: I advise the House that I have not selected the amendment.

12.53 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House is opposed to the United Kingdom ceding sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory; believes that the United Kingdom should not give £34.7 billion to Mauritius when that money could be spent on the armed forces; further believes that the Diego Garcia British Military Base and Indian Ocean Territory Bill breaches the Exchange of notes constituting an agreement concerning the availability for defence purposes of the British Indian Ocean Territory, London, 30 December 1966 with the United States, as does the UK/Mauritius: Agreement concerning the Chagos Archipelago including Diego Garcia, and therefore that the Government should not proceed with the Bill; and also believes that Parliament must approve any changes to the 1966 Exchange of notes through the process set out under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010.

Labour's £35 billion Chagos surrender deal is falling apart every single day. It is high time that the Prime Minister tore up this atrocious surrender treaty and put Britain's interests, security, and hard-pressed taxpayers first. The Opposition have made that clear from day one, and have taken every opportunity to expose the deceit, falsehoods and foolishness of the approach taken by Labour. Whether it is on arguments of international law, defence and security, self-determination, the importance of the Chagossian people standing up for their rights, or the environment, it is the Conservatives who have been standing up for Britain's national interests by unequivocally opposing this surrender treaty.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Building on what my right hon. Friend is saying, is she not shocked that most Labour MPs cannot be bothered to turn up for this debate?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I think it demonstrates their disdain and contempt for the British people, quite frankly. It is pretty obvious that as the Prime Minister and various other Ministers travel the globe, they go around waving the white flag of surrender. *[Interruption.]* Government Members can sit there chuntering, but the British public can see exactly what is going on with them: they are weak, feeble and giving away the public's money.

Had the Prime Minister—*[Interruption.]* The Minister is chuntering about the start of the negotiations, but this deal is on him, the Labour Government, their lefty friends and their international law agreements. *[Interruption.]* Perhaps the Minister would like to listen; he might learn a few things today. Had the Prime Minister and his dear friend the Attorney General—*[Interruption.]* Perhaps the hon. Member would like to contribute to the debate, and will put her name down to speak. If not, I suggest that she sits and listens.

Had the Prime Minister, the Attorney General, and the real Foreign Secretary, Jonathan Powell—along with those who are or were Foreign Secretary in name only—got their way, the Mauritian flag would already be flying

over the Chagos archipelago, and hundreds of millions of £35 billion of taxpayers' money would already be lining the coffers of a foreign Government.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I invite my right hon. Friend to challenge the Minister to deal with the issue of the treaty of Pelindaba, which I think came into force in 2009. It was designed to prevent African nuclear proliferation. If we breach that treaty by means of this deal, it would open up an opportunity for all kinds of hostile powers, including China, to site nuclear weapons in Africa. Do the Government realise that? I know that my right hon. Friend certainly does.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Again, it is the Opposition who have been raising the issue that this deal gives succour and strength to Britain's enemies. All the people who are working against us—China, Russia and Iran—will accelerate their plotting with their Mauritian friends on how to undermine the operationalisation of the military base on Diego Garcia, and on how to exert their influence in the Indo-Pacific at the expense of all our interests.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the shadow Secretary of State and the Conservatives for their consistent focus on this issue. Does the shadow Secretary of State share my concerns about the long-term guarantee for the UK, the right to extend the military lease, and the right of access under the treaty? This essential base can never have any ambiguity attached to it.

Priti Patel: The hon. Member is absolutely right, and he speaks to my fundamental point about capitulation, surrender and the way that the Government have worked against Britain's interests. We see that night and day, and it is unforgiveable.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an excellent start to this attack on the Government, but I will ask her a simple question. Should we not also dig a little deeper on the links between the Prime Minister and some of his earlier colleagues? That way, we would learn that Phillipe Sands, who was representing the Mauritian Government, had a deal done with the Russians over Crimea, in which he assured them, I understand, that the granting of independence and ownership for Mauritius would not impinge on their right to stay in Crimea. That was what brought their vote, and their support for this deal. Does that not look to my right hon. Friend as though it was absolute method treason?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend has made his point very clearly. This Government are not standing up for our values or interests. Nor are they making any effort to demonstrate that they are on the side of our national security. Fundamentally, that is what this debate is all about.

It is diligent work and scrutiny by Conservatives in this House and the other place that has led to the Government being forced to pause this surrender. That has been achieved by our diligent diplomatic engagement with the US Administration, by asking for over 400 parliamentary debates, by securing two Opposition

day debates, and thanks to you Mr Speaker, by asking urgent question after urgent question. We are here to demand answers that they never provide, but only hide, all thanks to their shameful outright contempt for Parliament and the British public.

The Opposition have proudly made representations on behalf of the Chagossian people, who have not only been betrayed but are being threatened in Britain. Their families are being intimidated by people associated with the Government of Mauritius, who seem to be learning how to conduct transnational repression from their friends in the Chinese Communist party. This Labour Government will go down in history for many terrible things, but they can now add to that list of shame the repression and betrayal of the Chagossian people. Labour must rethink its deeply corrosive policy, which is putting at risk our security and the safety of the Chagossian people. Instead, we have a weak and feeble Prime Minister, currently on his knees in Beijing, who will do anything possible to push through this deal—a deal that has been constructed and negotiated by his left-wing international lawyer friends, whose views he seems to value much more than the British people and the Chagossian community.

We all know how this has gone completely wrong, although the Prime Minister could still take a different course. It has gone wrong because this surrender is completely unnecessary—because, as the Opposition know, it is based on an advisory opinion. Ministers have failed to give a convincing answer as to why we should accept it, and there is no answer on what enforcement mechanisms would exist, other than some hypothetical comments about the electromagnetic spectrum and the International Telecommunication Union. So tell us today, please.

We have not only a Government of incompetent politicians, but a Government of incompetent lawyers. In the words of President Trump, Labour is surrendering sovereignty “for no reason whatsoever.” Given this Labour Government’s obsession with international law, it is surprising and shocking that they are not just misinterpreting it, but have overlooked essential detail in the 1966 UK-US exchange of notes. This is now the third time I have brought the exchange of notes to the Dispatch Box in just the last week, Mr Speaker. For the avoidance of any doubt in the House or any ignorance on the Government Benches, the 1966 treaty with the USA, which establishes the military base on Diego Garcia, states that the whole of the British Indian Ocean Territory

“shall remain under United Kingdom sovereignty.”

It goes on:

“Subject to the provisions set out below the islands”—
all the Chagos islands, not just Diego Garcia—

“shall be available to meet the needs of both Governments for defense”.

This is a legally binding treaty between the United Kingdom and the United States of America on the British Indian Ocean Territory, and any attempt by the UK to surrender sovereignty over BIOT violates international law. Yet when the Government signed and published their treaty on 22 May last year, and then published their surrender Bill, there was not a single mention in either the treaty or the Bill of the need for the exchange of notes.

On Monday, in response to our urgent question, the Minister for the Overseas Territories, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), said:

“we have been clear throughout that before the UK can ratify the treaty, we will need to do the following: pass primary and secondary legislation; update the UK-US agreement—the exchange of notes; and put in place arrangements on the environment, maritime security and migration”,—[*Official Report*, 26 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 599.]

but this was not mentioned in any of the documents accompanying the legislation, let alone the treaty. When we have questioned this in both Houses, Ministers have merely said:

“Talks are ongoing to update the UK-US Exchange of Letters”,
but the exchange of notes was not even referred to in any of the documents accompanying the legislation.

I think this House deserves an explanation. When did the talks begin? What is the status of the talks? What is the timescale for making changes? Have the Americans raised concerns that the exchange of notes were not part of the original discussions with the US Government last year, when the Prime Minister said that the US supported the treaty? Why did the Government try to force through their surrender Bill without confirming the future of the exchange of notes?

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Negotiations may well be ongoing, but the key question is whether the UK can make a unilateral decision to give away sovereignty without the blessing of the US. This question was posed three times on Monday, and the Minister simply said it is under discussion. Ministers need to answer directly today, so I pose this question now: can this be done unilaterally or not?

Priti Patel: Well, this is the perfect debate and opportunity for the Government to answer. Perhaps the Minister would like to intervene right now—I would be very happy for her to answer that question.

I have another question for the Minister: have the American Administration questioned why the British Government would want to give up sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory and, in doing so, violate international law? For once, the Minister needs to just be straightforward and give precise answers to the precise questions asked by those on the Opposition Benches, because the Government have continuously failed to do so.

British taxpayers, by the way, rightly want an explanation as to why their taxes should line the pockets of the Government of Mauritius without full and proper scrutiny and the disclosure and transparency that they deserve. Perhaps the Minister can tell us what exactly the National Security Adviser, Mr Powell, and the former ambassador, Lord Mandelson—remember him?—told the US Administration about the surrender treaty. It is well known that the Government are run by their friends and cronies, and it is also well known that Jonathan Powell, a friend of China, accelerated the negotiations when he was appointed envoy in September 2024. And can anyone in this House really trust anything that Lord Mandelson would have been involved in? That is definitely a question for the Government.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Will the right hon. Lady agree that we stand at a critical point for not just this nation but the United States of America, and that it too should have regard to the fact that up to this point, the islands have been under the control of a nuclear power with a navy, and that this treaty would hand them over to a country more than 1,000 miles away with no navy. Does that not create an obvious geopolitical vacuum to which we are all vulnerable? Should the Americans in particular not be very wary of that?

Priti Patel: As is often the case, the hon. and learned Gentleman is spot on. That is exactly why the Minister has this marvellous opportunity today to explain this to the House and the British public.

Let us not forget that President Trump, the commander-in-chief, said that the UK is giving away extremely important land in an “act of great stupidity”—I think the House would agree with that comment—and that:

“There is no doubt that China and Russia have noticed this act of total weakness.”

Has there been any Minister-to-Minister engagement with the US Administration on this? Had the Prime Minister spoken directly to the President on this matter before kowtowing to China? I asked this very question here on Monday, but the Minister for the Overseas Territories, who is not present, could not answer. There is a new opportunity today for the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), to tell us: yes or no?

On that point, it is also worth asking whether, should there be a change in the proposed US-UK treaty, it will come to Parliament through the 21-day Constitutional Reform and Governance Act process? Again, we asked this question on Monday, and the Minister refused to answer. What are the Government trying to hide? As Labour failed to provide the House with scrutiny under the previous CRaG process, it is clearly happy to give away this sovereign territory and billions in taxpayers’ money without being held to account.

Given the Labour Government’s abject failure to clarify these points, it took Conservatives in the other place to take action, leading to this pause of the treaty. Instead of showing some humility and transparency and commitment to engage in proper scrutiny, however, Labour has sought to gaslight its critics—and, by the way, the British public—with a Government spokesperson telling the media:

“This is irresponsible and reckless behaviour by peers”.

Blaming peers—Conservatives, Cross Benchers and others—for doing their job diligently is another new low from a Labour Government seeking to undermine accountability, democracy, scrutiny and accountability. When the junior Minister for the Indo-Pacific responds, I hope she will speak on behalf of this feeble Labour Government and apologise to the British people for their appalling and discredited conduct.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Like my right hon. Friend, I am proud of the role that Conservative peers have played in this, but can we also take a moment to pay credit to Back-Bench Labour MPs? I think it is important to note that they are not here. Practically the only Government Member present, scribbling away, is the hon. Member for Rugby (John Slinger), whom I admire a great deal, but who is loyalist

to his very core. If he is the only Member prepared to speak up, the truth is that Labour MPs have voted with their feet, and they now agree with my right hon. Friend that this deal has to go.

Priti Patel: I commend my right hon. Friend for his intervention. He has highlighted a lot of things there, which, in the interest of time, I am grateful for, because we have a lot of other colleagues who want to speak. It is worth pointing out that the Government will have a few of their Members who like to climb the greasy pole—there is one, who is not present today, who is now the trade envoy for Mauritius because he spoke up so frequently for the Government.

Ultimately, this is about the security and defence of our country. *[Interruption.]* No, no. The Government have a lot of questions to answer, because their feeble remarks in defence of this entire process have been absolutely shameful. That includes on China, with not just the Government’s relationship with China, but the relationship between the Governments of China and Russia. We have had completely misleading remarks about China and Mauritius, when it is the Opposition who have constantly called out that cosy relationship. I have even brought the Minister some press cuttings, but, as she has responsibility for the Indo-Pacific, she may have seen them already. None the less, I advise her to read the website of the Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry. It provides a weekly diary of its friendly relationship with the Government of Mauritius.

On the Pelindaba treaty, we have already heard the comments about what this now means. It is absolutely wrong to inhibit and restrict our ability when it comes to stationing a nuclear deterrent on Diego Garcia, and it is right that we on the Conservatives Benches continue to question this.

Before I conclude, let me discuss the money. It is an absolute disgrace that this House has not had full disclosure on the money. It is in the public interest for Ministers to tell the truth, to be held to account, and to stop hiding the true cost by misrepresenting the positions of the Office for Budget Responsibility and the Government Actuary’s Department. That is utterly shameful. Today, Labour MPs have an opportunity to join us—

Graham Stuart: Where are they?

Priti Patel: They are all in hiding, because they are embarrassed. They can join us and stop this surrender. They can tell their constituents that they voted to save a British territory from being lost, that they stood up for our defence and security, that they voted to save £35 billion from disgracefully being handed over to a foreign Government while their taxes at home go up and their public services are squeezed, and that they voted to defend the rights of the Chagossians. Alternatively, they can sleepwalk through the Division Lobby like sheep, defending the indefensible and backing another Labour weak policy and failure of their enfeebled Prime Minister. Conservatives have opposed this deal at every stage from day one and we will continue to do so. We will fight to kill this Bill to defend both British sovereignty and Britain’s pride and national interests.

1.11 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Seema Malhotra): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate.

Let me start by saying that the Government oppose the motion. The treaty guarantees full UK operational control of Diego Garcia for generations to come.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On that point—

Seema Malhotra: Let me make a few remarks before I give way.

The motion proposes a wildly exaggerated cost, in contrast to the actual costings published by this Government at the time of the treaty's introduction, which has been verified by the independent Government Actuary's Department. The motion invokes an exchange of notes, which the Government have publicly confirmed is being updated with our US partners. It also attempts to bind parliamentary procedure on that exchange despite that exchange not having been finalised. That is not patriotic. That is political point scoring at the expense of our national security. It is a sad indictment of what the Official Opposition have become.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The Minister refers to the cost, but does she agree that the Government have confirmed that it is over £34 billion?

Seema Malhotra: No. Furthermore, I will have no truck with Reform, which has no record on supporting the security of our country, especially given what has happened in Wales.

The Opposition may not want to hear this, but they backed negotiations over Chagos every step of the way. Some 85% of the Chagos negotiations took place under the Conservatives, and were led by the former Foreign Secretary. *[Interruption.]* They may not want to hear this, but it is important to share that, in November 2022, the former Foreign Secretary said that through negotiations—*[Interruption.]* I think a lot of people are interested in the past.

Mr Speaker: May I ask the two Front-Bench teams to make interventions rather than having this running battle?

Seema Malhotra: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: On that point, will the hon. Lady take an intervention?

Seema Malhotra: Let me make a little progress before giving way to the right hon. Gentleman.

In November 2022, the former Foreign Secretary said that

“taking into account relevant legal proceedings, it is our intention to secure an agreement on the basis of international law to resolve all outstanding issues”.—*[Official Report, 3 November 2022; Vol. 721, c. 27WS.]*

In February last year, a spokesperson for the Leader of the Opposition insisted that negotiations over the islands were needed due to the international legal position. *[Interruption.]* I am referring to the current Leader of the Opposition—some might not remember who she is, but she is still in post, I believe. She may have defected to Reform.

What I will say—this is a serious point—is that there has been ample time for debate on this topic. Indeed, the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and

Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), debated it for more than two hours last week and for 45 minutes on Monday in an urgent question. Baroness Chapman of Darlington has spent hours debating the topic in the other place, including during an urgent question on Monday. We have committed to this deal and to these hours of debate because it is important that we do so. Courts had already begun to make decisions that undermined our position in relation to the security of the base.

Sir Julian Lewis: I am a little worried that the Minister is confusing Ministers coming to the Dispatch Box and not answering questions with proper scrutiny of what is going on, so here is a very specific question for her. She has heard previously about the Pelindaba treaty. Mauritius is a signatory, and all signatories have to declare their territories to be nuclear-free zones, effectively. If in the future the Americans, with our agreement and approval, wish to have some nuclear weapons permanently or temporarily on the base at Diego Garcia, will they be able to do so if Mauritius has sovereignty over the islands?

Seema Malhotra: I thank the right hon. Member for his comments. The answer to that question has been set out by Lord Coaker, and I will be laying it out—*[Interruption.]* The answer is yes, and it has been set out by Lord Coaker in the other place. I will come on to that in my remarks.

There have been questions from the Opposition today about the legal matters behind this treaty. It is important to say that Mauritius's legal claim of sovereignty over the island of Diego Garcia is supported by a number of international institutions, including the UN General Assembly. The International Court of Justice considered this issue in the advisory opinion delivered in February.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Further to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), I understand that the Prime Minister of Mauritius made it clear yesterday that he would not allow or agree to the placing of any nuclear weapons on the islands. Can the Minister please answer the question of how the Government can reassure the USA?

Seema Malhotra: I will be coming on to that point in my remarks. That is important.

I want to finish my point on the legal matters that have been raised. What the International Court of Justice said in its advisory opinion carries significant weight and is likely to be influential on any subsequent court or tribunal that considers the issues arising out of disputed sovereignty and whose judgment would be binding in international law. The ICJ—

Several hon. Members rose—

Seema Malhotra: I will finish my remarks on this point. The ICJ concluded that

“the United Kingdom is under an obligation to bring to an end its administration of the Chagos Archipelago as rapidly as possible”.—*[Interruption.]*

The right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) may want to listen the next bit. The 2019 advisory opinion was followed in 2021 by a special chamber of the International Tribunal for the Law of

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the Sea in a case about delimitation of the boundary between Mauritius and the Maldives, which ruled that Mauritian sovereignty was inferred from the ICJ's determination.

Dr Luke Evans *rose—*

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con) *rose—*

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Order. Who are you giving way to, Minister? Three Members think it is them.

Seema Malhotra: I give way to the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans).

Dr Evans: Specifically on that point, the 2021 judgment did not have any British representation and rested on the UN's non-binding judgment. We also know from the 2015 ruling that that court cannot preside over sovereignty, so how does it stand up to scrutiny that the Minister is saying that there is a dire need to hand the islands over?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Member will know that these matters have been shared before with the House. Perhaps I may remind him what US Secretary Hegseth said:

"The UK's (very important) deal with Mauritius secures the operational capabilities of the base and key"—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. Dr Evans, do you have to keep chuntering? You have asked the question, and you are getting an answer. I do not need—[*Interruption.*] Order. I wouldn't bother giving me backchat. I do not need a running commentary. Let's calm it down a little. It does not look good on TV.

Seema Malhotra: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I remind the hon. Member of what US Secretary Hegseth said:

"The UK's (very important) deal with Mauritius secures the operational capabilities of the base and key US national security interests in the region.

We are confident the base is protected for many years ahead."

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Seema Malhotra: I will continue my remarks, but I will give way shortly.

It is, therefore, the UK's long-standing legal view that if Mauritius challenged us again in the courts, we would struggle to defend our position. Our Indo-Pacific foothold and the operation of the base could be put at risk within weeks. That is why the Government remain fully committed to the deal to secure the joint UK-US base on Diego Garcia, which is vital for our national security.

James Cartlidge: This is a fundamental point. The most sensitive part of our military is the nuclear deterrent; it is critical to the defence of ourselves and our allies. The United States is also nuclear armed. We are a naval nuclear nation, and the base at Diego Garcia is a critical

naval base in strategic terms. Yesterday, it was reported that the Deputy Prime Minister of Mauritius, Mr Bérenger, had declared that nuclear weapons could not be stored on Mauritius if sovereignty is restored to Mauritius. Does the Minister understand that to be the case?

Seema Malhotra: I thank the shadow Defence Secretary for his intervention. It is a long-standing policy, as he will know this from having been in government, that we do not comment on operational matters or the location of nuclear weapons.

The Opposition know—[*Interruption.*] Perhaps I may make some comments on the Pelindaba treaty—

Graham Stuart: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister said that she would address the issue of whether nuclear weapons could go to Diego Garcia, and now she says that she cannot comment. Is that—

Mr Speaker: Order. No, no, no. You are on the Panel of Chairs. You know that that is not a point of order—it's not even the start of one. You are trying to continue the debate. I am sure that you are on the list to speak, so you will get to make your points later.

Seema Malhotra: The right hon. Member could not have known it, but I was on the first line of a page of comments on that exact issue. I am sorry that he chose that moment to interrupt proceedings.

As I was saying, it is a matter of long-standing policy that we do not comment on operational procedures. The Conservatives know that and, of course, took the same approach in government. As the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, told the Foreign Affairs Committee:

"We are confident that nothing in this treaty conflicts with our abilities to uphold international law, and to continue to operate the base as we do today."

As Lord Coaker has—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On that point, will the Minister give way?

Seema Malhotra: I will continue my remarks. It is as if the Conservatives cannot decide who is speaking from the Front Bench today.

As Lord Coaker told the other place in November, the UK-Mauritius agreement

"enables the continued operation of the base to its full capability."

He said that we will continue to be able to

"deploy the full range of advanced military capabilities to Diego Garcia."—[*Official Report, House of Lords, 25 November 2025; Vol. 850, c. 1313.*]

It is not just us; the agreement has been tested at the highest levels of the US security establishment under not one but two Administrations. They too were satisfied that it protects the full operation of the base. We have agreed with the Mauritian Government that nothing in the treaty conflicts with our respective commitments, and we are absolutely clear that we can continue to operate the base as we have done and as we do now.

Mr Francois: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Seema Malhotra: No, I have been very generous in giving way. I will continue with my remarks. *[Interruption.]* Sorry, what was that comment?

Mr Francois: Frit.

Seema Malhotra: Is that in order, Mr Speaker?

Mr Speaker: Order. It is getting touchy in here. I want the debate to be tolerant and respectful. It is up to the Minister whether she wishes to give way. That word is in order. It has been used from the other side as well, so let us not forget our memories.

Seema Malhotra: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Given the security risk, this Government, like the Government before us, made the decision to negotiate with Mauritius to secure a deal to protect the base and the UK. Our agreement ensures full operational control of Diego Garcia; a 24 nautical mile buffer zone where nothing can be built or placed without UK consent; a rigorous process including joint decision making to prevent any activities on the wider islands—some over 100 nautical miles away—from disrupting base operations; full UK control over the presence of foreign security forces on the outer islands, whether civilian or military; and a binding obligation to ensure that the operation of the base is never undermined.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Seema Malhotra: I will continue with my remarks for the moment. As I have said, we are confident that nothing in this treaty conflicts with our ability to uphold international law and continue to operate the base as we do today.

Moving on to the UK-US relationship, we have been clear that before the UK can ratify the treaty, we will need to do the following: pass primary and secondary legislation; update the UK-US exchange of notes; and put in place arrangements on the environment, maritime security and migration. This Government consider it our duty to protect the public. Therefore, it is our duty to pursue this agreement with clarity and resolve, and we will not put party politics ahead of national security, as we see the Opposition doing today.

We have made strong progress towards finalising an updated UK-US agreement and will reach an agreement on it before the agreement between the United Kingdom and Mauritius concerning the Chagos archipelago, including Diego Garcia, is ratified. These matters are still under negotiation, so it remains to be determined whether any updated agreement will be subject to ratification. We will keep Parliament informed about that.

Lincoln Jopp: I listened to the criteria that the Minister expressed before ratification is possible. Is American agreement one of the criteria that she considers essential?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Member will have heard me say that before the UK can ratify the treaty, we will need to do the following: pass primary and secondary legislation; update the UK-US exchange of notes; and put in place arrangements on the environment, maritime security and migration. It is important—

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Seema Malhotra: I will continue with my remarks, because I want to finish shortly.

The strength of the deal and the protection of national security is exactly why the US endorsed the deal last year and why Secretary of State Rubio called it a “monumental achievement”. The agreement safeguards the interest of both the United Kingdom and the United States well into the next century.

I will briefly turn to costs. A financial contribution over 99 years was always necessary to safeguard the operation of such a vital base. We published comprehensive detail on the payment schedule alongside the treaty. That was laid in the House within minutes of the signature of the treaty. The figures used by the Government were verified by the independent Government Actuary’s Department, in line with standard accounting practices. Those who seek to imply that the Government have misled the public on that do so without the facts, so let me set those out.

First, the Office for Statistics Regulation welcomed the Government’s approach to setting out the methodology and confirmed that it is in line with the principles of intelligent transparency. Secondly, the Office for Budget Responsibility has confirmed that the discount rates used by the Government were the reasonable ones to use. Thirdly, the figures have been verified by the House of Commons Library and scrutinised by BBC Verify and *The Independent*. All those confirmed that the Government calculated the figures correctly.

Beyond the numbers, it is also important to debate, as this House has done, the challenges that have been raised in relation to the Chagossian community, and rightly so. It is a vibrant and diverse community that now sees the Conservatives’ political tactics. They are the same Conservatives who, after ruling our resettlement for the Chagossians and committing to a £40 million package of support in 2016—they may want to answer to those two things—succeeded in spending just £1.6 million by the time this Government came into power.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Seema Malhotra: I will conclude my remarks—I am sorry but I have taken a number of interventions today.

Since coming into power, this Government have been clear on our deep regret for the way in which Chagossians were removed from the islands and have sought to recognise the wide range of views within the Chagossian community. We remain committed to building a relationship with that community that is built on respect and an acknowledgment of the wrongs of the past.

We have established a contact group to give Chagossians a greater say in UK Government support to their communities and are in the process of enhancing that group, as Baroness Chapman committed to doing in the other place. Officials from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office have engaged with Chagossian individuals and groups more than 30 times and they are regularly in conversation with the Minister responsible for the overseas territories, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth.

In conclusion, doing this deal was right and essential. It protects our national interest, it defends our national security, it protects the Diego Garcia base from legal threat, it supports the Chagossian community and it

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preserves the unique environment in the archipelago. We know that the best way to do that is to pursue this deal. It is time that the Conservatives realised—or should I say, remembered—that too.

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

1.34 pm

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The process for negotiating this treaty with the Government of Mauritius has been utterly shambolic since it began under the last Government. One of the most striking aspects of this entire process has been the confected consternation of the Conservatives, despite them having accepted the need for negotiations in the first place while in government and continued those throughout their time in office.

It is clear that this Labour Government have also tied themselves in knots, first by failing to finalise negotiations with the United States linked to Diego Garcia, which has created new and fundamental problems with the Government's Bill. There are now serious questions about whether the treaty would undermine the UK's other international obligations. Will the Government take on board the Liberal Democrat amendment in the other place and commit to securing a firm assessment of the position of the US in relation to the Diego Garcia military base before any further attempts to progress their Bill?

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): My hon. Friend talks about some of the key issues in relation to the US and its agreement. On remarks from the US, I remember being contacted by my friend on the morning her brother was injured severely in an improvised explosive device explosion in Afghanistan. I have also had many constituents get in touch with me who are deeply angry at President Trump's remarks about our service personnel. Does my hon. Friend agree that the rowing back is not sufficient and that the President needs to give an apology to British service personnel?

Calum Miller: Donald Trump's remarks about NATO troops were untrue and deeply offensive, and I welcome the robust response from parties across this House. Yet there was no apology from the US President, which we deserve. Liberal Democrats have called on the Prime Minister to summon the US ambassador to offer an explanation for the remarks and an apology to the veterans affected and to the families of the 457 brave personnel who paid the ultimate sacrifice in fighting alongside US forces in Afghanistan.

Sir Julian Lewis: The hon. Gentleman is making a number of serious points. Does he see, as I do, a sort of parallel between President Trump's egregious suggestion that NATO troops were, allegedly, not on the frontline and this issue of Diego Garcia? The fact is that President Trump makes certain comments and then, when confronted with the truth, has to try to elaborate on them, even if he will not go so far as to say the dreaded words "I'm sorry." Is that not what is happening here? The Americans

did not realise the extent to which giving up sovereignty over the base would compromise their military situation, and we have not heard anything to say that Mauritius could not stop any nuclear weapons ever in future being on Diego Garcia.

Calum Miller: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I was in the Chamber on Monday when he remarked that it was a fine aspect of joint working between Reform and the Conservatives to bring in that view from Donald Trump. I do not think it is appropriate for the leader of Reform to be whispering in the ear of the US President to upset negotiations. The right hon. Member makes a brave point when he appears to suggest that the fact that the US President has moved in one direction recently means that it will be sustained in the future. That notwithstanding, it is the case that the US President has recently made those remarks about the Chagos islands, and we will have to take those into consideration during the progress of the Bill.

We need to reflect on the other outstanding problems with the Government's proposed legislation. Since the start of debates over the treaty, Liberal Democrats have been the only party consistently championing the rights of Chagossians. That stands in contrast with the Government's lack of substantive engagement with the Chagossian community. Chagossians have been denied a meaningful say in their future and the provisions of the treaty shamefully fail to affirm their rights. But that is not only a failing of the Government; indeed, despite the remarks of the shadow Foreign Secretary, the motion we are debating today in her name includes not a single reference to the Chagossian community. That is addressed in the amendment in my name on behalf of my party.

James Cartlidge: Did you hear her speech?

Calum Miller: I did indeed. My point is that when the Conservatives had the opportunity to provide the bases for their objection to the Bill, they did not once mention the rights of the Chagossian community.

It is clear that those rights are just as low a priority for the Conservatives as they are for the Government. When the Liberal Democrats proposed, in Committee of the whole House, an amendment to the Bill that would have provided for a referendum of the Chagossian people, the Conservatives failed to back it and the Government opposed it. Even at this late stage, however, I want to encourage the Government to reconsider their position. There remains a window of opportunity for the Government to support the rights of Chagossians and buck the historical trend of this community being left out of decisions about their future. Will the Government therefore support a second Liberal Democrat amendment in the other place that would require binding guarantees from the Government of Mauritius on the rights of Chagossians?

Another outstanding issue is the question of money. The Government are proposing to send billions of pounds to Mauritius, despite having what appears to be zero monitoring, evaluation or recall mechanisms built into the treaty. It is inconceivable that the Government would oppose the introduction of such measures or fail to support the principle that the UK should be able to cease future payments to Mauritius if the treaty were

deemed no longer to support the UK's security, so will the Government back a third Liberal Democrat amendment in the other place introducing meaningful and effective safeguards around the proposed vast sums of public funds due to be sent to Mauritius?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: This is a really important point, because the Government say that they have cleared this with the Office for Budget Responsibility, but the actuaries have been clear that we cannot calculate this on the basis of what happens in Mauritius, given its social issues and inflation—that would be ridiculous—and that we have to calculate it on the basis that the agreement we have made gives a total at the end, which is £34.7 billion. Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that dodging around that really is a low position for the Government to take?

Calum Miller: The way I think about it, the Government are proposing to write 99 years-worth of cheques to Mauritius that the Mauritians will be able to cash over that period. It only stands to reason that this Parliament should be able to scrutinise such large expenditure during the duration of the treaty, in order to have some accountability for these funds.

As things stand, this deal appears to be going the way of the dodo—another redundant creature that originated in Mauritius. I implore the Government to listen to the concerns raised across this House and recognise that the Bill in its current form is not fit for purpose.

1.41 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I feel I should put on record at the beginning that I am not the Government's trade envoy to Mauritius—[HON. MEMBERS: "Yet!"] *Hansard* can record a diplomatic silence at this point.

This debate ultimately turns on whether we understand the world as it is, not as we might wish it to be, much as some believe otherwise. We still live in an economically, militarily, politically and morally interconnected world, and that interconnectedness has not gone away. It has become more contested, more multipolar and certainly more strategic, but it has not ended. That matters, because this deal must be judged not on slogans or hyperbole but on whether it secures the United Kingdom's security interests in that interconnected world.

One of the central lessons of recent years is that uncertainty invites challenge. We see that every day in the South China sea. China has asserted expansive territorial claims that many countries do not recognise and that the international courts and tribunals do not recognise. What happens in response? Other states deliberately sail ships and fly aircraft through those waters and airspace to contest those claims and to test resolve. Uncertainty becomes a pressure point and ambiguity becomes an opportunity for interference. If we allow ambiguity to persist over the Chagos islands, and in particular over Diego Garcia, the same dynamic could apply.

Our claims may be strong historically, but they are being increasingly contested in international courts. That does not make the base more secure; it makes it more vulnerable. It creates exactly the kind of grey zone in which hostile actors thrive, including an ever-expanding Chinese navy. This treaty removes that uncertainty. It closes off the space for challenge, rather than leaving it open.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The mistake the hon. Member makes is in buying into China's narrative that there is a grey zone in the South China sea. There is no grey zone. China should not be there, but it could not care less. It goes there anyway. The idea that some agreement we make with Mauritius is going to stop China acting at a later date is complete nonsense, as China proves in the South China sea every day.

Tim Roca: I disagree with the hon. Member, because the two situations do have parallels. In the South China sea, people are challenging Chinese sovereignty, and it has been proved not to have standing in international courts. At the moment, ambiguity is starting to arrive in our position over the Chagos islands. This treaty would remove it and remove cause for the Chinese navy to take advantage.

Against this backdrop, I want to restate the tests that I set out in an earlier debate on this deal. Does the agreement protect our national security? Does it command the support of our allies and professional security community? Are the costs proportionate to the benefits? On each of these tests, the answer remains yes. Diego Garcia is a keystone of our joint security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. It is where UK and US forces operate together against terrorist threats. It is a logistics, communications and intelligence hub, and it is central to safeguarding the global trade routes on which our economy depends. Without a secure base, all of that is placed at risk.

Our Five Eyes allies in Canada, Australia and New Zealand support this deal, and our strategic partner India supports this deal. I want to address briefly the noise around President Trump's social media posts, which the Minister dealt with very well earlier. Social media is not statecraft. What matters is the settled position of the United States, its military leadership and its security agencies. On that, there has been clarity for some time. The Pentagon, the State Department and successive US Defence Secretaries—Republican and Democrat—have supported this agreement.

As I said at the beginning, interconnectedness is incredibly important and we cannot ignore the fact that international opinion matters. Yes, the world has changed. Power today is exercised through force—hard power has become incredibly important—but it is also still exercised through legitimacy, alliances and rules. If we expect others to respect international rules where it suits us, whether in Ukraine or the South China sea, we cannot be seen to apply them selectively elsewhere, except in the supreme national interest.

Sir Julian Lewis: I am a great admirer of the hon. Gentleman; he is courteous and thoughtful, and I always listen to what he says with great focus and attention. He is criticising the dangers of ambiguity, and I agree with that point. Does he accept, however, that we have not cleared up the ambiguity about whether nuclear weapons could ever be on Diego Garcia if the Americans and the British wanted them to be? It is no good saying, as the Minister did, "We never talk about deployments of nuclear weapons." We are not asking about deployments of nuclear weapons. We are asking about the legal position if the case was that the Americans or the British wanted to have nuclear weapons, temporarily or permanently, on Diego Garcia. If we transfer sovereignty

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

to a country that is signed up to be part of a nuclear-free zone, that is bound to call into doubt the ability to have nuclear weapons there in the future. Can he clear up that point?

Tim Roca: I cannot clear up that point for the right hon. Member, but I have great confidence that ministerial colleagues would be able to. We have been told at all points that this treaty would ensure the continued effectiveness of the base in the way that it is run now. There was an Ohio class submarine there in 2022, and I hope those arrangements continue under this treaty. From what I have heard from Ministers, there is no reason that they would not.

Let us turn to the costs of the deal. It will cost a fraction of the defence budget for an irreplaceable asset—

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Could the hon. Member clarify precisely how much of the cost of the Chagos islands deal will come from the Ministry of Defence budget?

Tim Roca: I am sure that has been set out already in several debates. The point that has not been set out adequately and cannot be set out in huge detail is that, in exchange for providing the United States with facilities on Diego Garcia, the in-kind support in terms of intelligence and other matters that we receive from the United States must run into the billions every single year. Although we cannot put a figure on that, it is a really important element in this debate.

There is no prosperity without security, and there is no security without certainty. In an interconnected world, those are not abstract principles; they are strategic necessities. That is why, in my view, this is a sensible, hard-headed deal, and a confident assertion of the United Kingdom's national interest.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Dr Andrew Murrison.

1.49 pm

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What a pleasure it is to be called so soon, Madam Deputy Speaker; I am very grateful.

My goodness me! I do feel sorry for the Minister, being wheeled out to defend the indefensible. I have to say, the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), has done a Trojan piece of work on behalf of the Government, and it is only fair that he should be given the day off.

Every day is a school day when it comes to Chagos, is it not? We learn something new every day of the week, it seems. Perhaps the Government might like to reflect on whether, in that wonderful Keynesian way, when the facts change, we change our mind—apparently not. The facts have changed. The ground truth has certainly changed, not least the attitude of the United States; that is clear beyond peradventure. In February last year, the then Foreign Secretary said that without US agreement, the deal would be dead. But in recent days, the US

commander-in-chief, no less, has said that the deal is “stupid” and “weak”. There cannot be any ambiguity in that. That is the contemporaneous view of our greatest partner and friend. Surely to goodness, that is justification for pausing the deal.

We have learned about the Pelindaba treaty. I have to say that I was not aware of it until very recently, but it is a showstopper. Paul Béranger, the Deputy Prime Minister of Mauritius, recently said that there will be no nuclear weapons on Diego Garcia. He has been very helpful to the Government by laying out exactly what things will look like when Mauritius takes control of Diego Garcia. The Minister says, “Well, we cannot comment on that because it is operational,” but that is precisely what it is not. We are not talking about precise B-52s or Ohio class submarines going into Diego Garcia—I do not want to know about that. What I want to know about is the legal structure within which it is possible for these things to be in Diego Garcia and Chagos in general.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I made this point to the Minister earlier, but perhaps my right hon. Friend might also explain it. The Deputy Prime Minister of Mauritius made it clear as recently as yesterday that—as the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) said—there is no ambiguity at all: no nuclear weapons on Chagos for any Government.

Dr Murrison: That is precisely the case; it is as plain as a pikestaff, yet the Government persist with the policy.

It is perfectly reasonable and respectable for the Government to say, “The facts have clearly changed, and all these things have come to light, so we will pause this. There is no hurry in this matter, nor any dishonour in saying that we need to consult on it more widely—potentially indefinitely. Nevertheless, we will continue the process and keep it open.” I appreciate that, to save the Government's blushes, we cannot simply can it, but we can pause it.

If the Minister wants more evidence that the Chagossians have been trampled all over during this process, she need only refer to the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, which said in December 2025 that we should pause the deal in order to ensure that the Chagossians' voices are properly heard. She is being attacked from all quarters, and the unifying message from all those quarters is, “For goodness sake, let's pause this—just think again.”

Lincoln Jopp: Does my right hon. and gallant Friend agree that this could well be a case of, “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs, it is possible that you have failed to appreciate the gravity of the situation”?

Dr Murrison: My hon. Friend, who is experienced in these matters, makes an extremely good point. We need to keep our heads in all this. The Conservative party has been consistent in its opposition to this terrible, terrible surrender deal. The people out there honestly cannot understand why the Government persist with it. It is plainly not a matter of national security. I fear that all this is underpinned by the Government's insistence on satisfying their post-colonial guilt. The Government need to get over that and understand that national security has primacy in this matter.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that, as a Labour Member, I have had zero conversations with other Labour Members about this deal being motivated by some kind of post-colonial guilt—that is absolutely not a motivation, and I want to dispel that impression once and for all. He talks about consistency. Why was it that the Conservatives started the negotiations? Why was it that 85% of the negotiations were concluded by them? Does he not agree that, now that they are out of office, the Conservatives have suddenly discovered that they do not need to be consistent?

Dr Murrison: I do not have any insight into the hon. Gentleman's conversations with Labour Members. As a former Foreign Office Minister, I would say that there are negotiations and then there are negotiations, and sometimes we can use negotiations as a tool to keep certain parties happy, while having no intention of agreeing to what they are demanding of us.

Furthermore, a lot of the pressure for all this comes from the advisory note by the ICJ. In this country, we think of judges as upstanding and impartial maintainers of our legal system and the rule of law. That is not necessarily the case when it comes to supranational judicial bodies. We know, for example, that Patrick Robinson—one of the judges involved with the 2019 ICJ decision—has been demanding that the UK pony up £19 trillion in slavery reparations. Those are not apolitical, independent judicial figures. Many of them have an agenda, and it is one that is hostile to this country—as hostile, I would say, as some of the parties, like Russia and China, that we are currently trying to prevent from getting a hold on those islands.

It is perfectly reasonable for the President of the United States, who I have to confess is not my cup of tea, to decide—belatedly, but nevertheless—that this is a disastrous measure and that he wants nothing to do with it. He has signalled that in his own inimitable fashion, and the Government should take note, pause the surrender treaty and come back with something better, if at all. This deal, surely, is as dead as the dodo.

1.56 pm

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Before I turn to the subject of the Opposition day debate, I must comment on the answer that the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), gave to the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart)—a Member I respect hugely. She mentioned climbing the greasy pole, possibly even in relation to me. It is always amusing when people who have served in the Cabinets of multiple Conservative Prime Ministers accuse Back-Bench Members of somehow being involved in climbing a greasy pole. It is just very, very amusing. *[Interruption.]* I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for his comment; I understand he also did pretty well in the past.

This motion is the Conservatives playing politics with national security—their friends in the other place using a wrecking amendment to block the Diego Garcia Military Base and British Indian Ocean Territory Bill being a prime example of that. Conservative Members have never been able to answer this question: if there

was no problem with British sovereignty and operation of the base, why did they begin the negotiations in the first place?

Lincoln Jopp: I thank the hon. and incredibly loyal Member for giving way. Does he realise that, as the result of a UN judgment in 1965, the United Kingdom was required to enter into negotiations with Argentina over the future of the Falkland Islands? Those negotiations continued until 1982, when they were concluded in a rather different way from that envisaged by the UN.

John Slinger: I thank the hon. and even-more-loyal-than-I Member for his intervention. We spar across the House—

Mr Francois: He is an hon. and gallant Member.

John Slinger: I thank the even more loyal hon. and gallant Member for his history lesson, but it does not change the fundamentals: 85% of the negotiations took place under the Conservatives.

In November 2022, the right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly), who was then Foreign Secretary, said:

“Through negotiations, taking into account relevant legal proceedings, it is our intention to secure an agreement on the basis of international law to resolve all outstanding issues”. —*[Official Report, 3 November 2022; Vol. 721, c. 354WS.]*

In February 2025, a spokesperson for the Leader of the Opposition insisted that she understood that negotiations over the islands were needed due to the international legal position. This motion is obvious political opportunism. These are hon. and right hon. Members of this House of Commons who raised no objections in Parliament, filed no critical questions and voiced no concerns on social media. Only after leaving government did they do so, but with no plan of their own.

On the matter of the sovereignty of the Chagossians, the Conservatives' view is logically inconsistent. They want the UK to retain sovereignty, but they attack the Government for not giving the Chagossians the right to self-determination. They ruled out resettlement. Some Chagossians want to return to Diego Garcia, so are Conservative Members calling for them to be returned to that island, with the inevitable issues that that would cause for the operation of the vital base? Opposition Members have gone rather silent on that point.

Dr Murrison: Does the hon. Gentleman see any parallel between the plight of Chagossians and the plight of Greenlanders? The Prime Minister has gone out of his way, correctly, to defend the rights of Greenlanders, but he is doing the complete reverse for Chagossians.

John Slinger: The sovereignty of the Chagossians is a sensitive and delicate issue which we are attempting to deal with, as my hon. Friend the Minister set out. We have established a contact group. Many meetings have taken place, and I strongly endorse those steps to give respect to the Chagossian people for what has happened to them. The Conservatives used only £1.6 million of the £40 million support fund for the Chagossian people, which hardly indicates that when they were in office the interests of the Chagossian people were their No. 1 priority.

[John Slinger]

In conclusion, this motion is political opportunism of the worst kind, because it concerns national security and the British national interest, and the Conservatives really should not be playing party political games with that. Nor should they be using words like “surrender” with such abandon, as the shadow Foreign Secretary does, because that implies things that are simply not true and it is whipping up public concern, which is totally unnecessary, particularly regarding British national interest. That is why I am very glad to oppose this opportunistic motion before the House. I commend the Minister on her speech.

2.3 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I welcome the opportunity to make clear my opposition to any proposal to give away this strategically important sovereign British territory. This is not merely a territorial concession; it is an act of strategic self-sabotage, a dereliction of duty and an unforgivable betrayal of our national security. At a time of growing global instability, when our adversaries are watching for any sign of weakness, Labour has chosen to send precisely the wrong signal: that Britain can be pressured into abandoning its own territory.

This decision is indefensible on every level. The Chagos islands, and specifically Diego Garcia, have been a vital strategic asset for the UK and our allies for decades. The military base on Diego Garcia has played a crucial role in global security operations, supporting counter-terrorism efforts, maritime security and regional stability. It has been instrumental in projecting western power in the Indo-Pacific, a region increasingly shaped by geopolitical competition, particularly with China. By ceding sovereignty over these islands, Labour has put at risk Britain's strategic interests and undermined our ability to operate in the region. What makes this decision even more staggering is that we are not just surrendering our sovereignty: we are paying Mauritius billions of pounds for the privilege.

My central concern is the serious strategic challenge we face in respect of China. China has a population of 1.4 billion people and by 2030 its GDP is projected to be \$26 trillion, second only to the US, and there are projections that it will potentially outstrip the US by 2050. China's increase in military spending this year alone is expected to be 7.2%, which is the third consecutive year in which its increase in military spending has been over 7%. China has become the world's largest shipbuilding nation, and its navy is expected to comprise 430 military grade ships by 2030, compared with the US navy's estimated decline to 294 ships. China is a growing military power and there are no indications that it is anywhere near a supposed peak.

Domestically and internationally, China conducts itself as an autocratic state. It has the most sophisticated domestic surveillance system in the world, Skynet, which as of 2023 has 700 million cameras—that is one lens for every two Chinese citizens. We must not be so naive as to assume that if we end up in even greater strategic competition with China it will care at all about what agreement we have reached with Mauritius. We saw with Hong Kong how easily agreements made with third countries can be ignored, as China did there.

If Mauritius seeks to align itself strategically with China, do we think China will hesitate and ask it not to break the treaty because of international law? China will not respect any Bill or pay any attention to diplomatic consequences for Mauritius if it thinks it is in its interest to get Mauritius to break that agreement. That is the difference between any form of agreement and sovereignty, because once sovereignty has been given away, it can never be bought back.

Sir Julian Lewis: This is why some people are concerned that if Mauritius allowed the Americans to have nuclear weapons on the base, although I do not think it would allow that, that would give China an excuse to break the same treaty to which Mauritius is already committed about a non-nuclear Africa, and China would not even get the odium that it otherwise would receive if it started deploying nuclear weapons all over the African continent.

Dr Mullan: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is extraordinary that Labour Members are prepared to defend the deal, while admitting that they do not even know if our accusations are correct. They could say that they do not agree with what we are proposing, but to admit that they do not know whether nuclear weapons will be allowed on the island and that they are happy to support the deal anyway is disgraceful.

We must address the wider consequences of this decision. If Labour is willing to abandon the Chagos islands so easily, what message does that send to our other overseas territories? The International Court of Justice may have issued an advisory opinion in 2019—[*Interruption.*] What I say is true; the world is watching. We have had pressure put on us in relation to a sovereign territory and we have collapsed, but Labour Members want us to think that the rest of the world will not interpret our standing from that.

Tim Roca: We have heard from chief Ministers and leaders of the other British overseas territories how disappointed they have been in the rhetoric used by the Conservatives in trying to drag them into the situation. There is no question about our commitment to the British overseas territories. This deal is a completely separate matter.

Dr Mullan: The people who we should be worried about are not the people in charge of the British overseas territories—we should be worried about the people who are watching what we do and making decisions about how they will act, as we saw with previous attempts to take control of those territories. Does the hon. Gentleman think that Argentina will observe this situation and not draw a lesson from it? Of course it will.

Mr Francois: My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Will he confirm to the House that very shortly after the deal was announced, the Argentine Government announced that they wished to renew their claim to the Falkland Islands? That is a fact, is it not?

Dr Mullan: That is a fact. My right hon. Friend will know that other UN bodies have supported Argentina for decades, and are pressuring us to continue negotiations around that issue. The Government rely on what the UN says, but the UN's position on the Falklands is completely contrary to the interests of this country.

Sir Julian Lewis: Ministers keep saying “How dare you compare this with the Falkland Islands?”, but Labour’s manifesto at the last election gave a commitment to defend the sovereignty of the British overseas territories—not some of them, all of them. If they cannot be trusted on this one, they cannot be trusted on any of them.

Dr Mullan: My right hon. Friend highlights the lessons that the rest of the world will be drawing from this decision.

A submissive approach to third party calls on these issues displays an incredible naïveté about the world we live in and the direction we are travelling. Our previous positive disposition towards the role that these institutions could play was in a different era, when we expected a converging uniformity of basic values and democracy. That convergence is not happening; instead, our enemies are using our desire to stick to it as a weakness to exploit. They do not even recognise basic legal norms and institutions in their own countries; their own citizens do not benefit from legal protections and rights, and they do not believe in the rule of law full stop.

Do the Government really think that our enemies will put international legal obligations ahead of pursuing their own strategic interests? Of course not, yet we are expected to undertake a strategic surrender in the name of the rule of law in a way that advantages them, and on what basis—that they might look at what we have done and change their ways in the future, as they failed to do in Hong Kong? That is incredible naïveté.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Does it not prove my hon. Friend’s point that despite being signatories to the World Trade Organisation, the Chinese continue to steal intellectual property?

Dr Mullan: It is not just the WTO; the Chinese are supposed to follow the jurisdiction of international maritime courts, for example. The Government point to that as a reason why we should comply with them, but the Chinese break those rulings all the time, as we discussed in relation to the South China sea. They could not care less; they are restrained only by their strict self-interest. They pretend and play up the idea that they might follow the rules—when it does not suit, they do not follow them—yet we are supposed to follow the rules, because the aim is to get the Chinese on side. That is never going to happen.

Let us look at the membership of the ICJ and the people who made the ruling. The vice-president was Xue Hanqin, who ruled that the UK should give the islands over to Mauritius. She is a former Chinese Communist party official who served as the director-general of the department of treaty and law in China’s foreign ministry—the same ministry that is overseeing the violation of the agreement in Hong Kong. It makes absolutely no sense to see it as a neutral arbiter. In 2022, she was one of two judges who voted against an ICJ ruling that Russia should suspend its invasion of Ukraine.

Would our country slavishly adhering to those rulings, against our own national interest, bring onside wavering countries that are making their own strategic calculations about who they want to support when it comes to challenges such as Ukraine and, if it happens, Taiwan? Of course it will not. The historical argument for that

approach has been to suggest that we will bring other countries over to our way of doing things—the rules-based order—but I am afraid that that is not happening. Countries across the world are actually looking at which bloc and which sphere of influence would be best at defending their interests if they seek to align with it. This surrender deal will make it very clear that they should think twice about supporting the western democracies and instead point their finger towards the autocratic states that will benefit so enormously from the deal.

Surrendering the Chagos islands will simply strengthen those countries that want a more disorderly world. We should seek to use the rules-based order—we should not abandon that long-term goal, and we should continue to make it clear that that is our preference for how we run the world—but not with our eyes and ears closed to what is actually happening, and not at huge cost to our own interests. This is not diplomacy or pragmatism; it is weakness, and weakness has consequences. Britain is not just losing a territory; we are losing credibility. Our allies are watching as Labour surrenders key strategic ground without so much as a fight. Our adversaries are taking note and seeing a Government who lack the resolve to defend their own interests.

This deal is a sell-out and a catastrophic misjudgment, and it must not go ahead. I urge every Member of this House to stand firm for Britain’s interests, our national security and our place in the world. We must reject this reckless agreement and demand that our Government defend British sovereign territory, rather than bargaining it away behind closed doors.

2.13 pm

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): It is worth reflecting on the entire geopolitical situation that the world faces. Many treaties simply are not worth the paper that they are written on; if it suits our adversaries to ignore them, they will. Is not the old maxim, “To stop a war, be ready to fight a war”, more true today than it has ever been? If we decide that we are going to rely on pieces of paper, rather than the ability to say, “We will defend, at war if need be”, we weaken our position.

Let us consider the whole Indo-Pacific region. The NATO Parliamentary Assembly made a visit to Pacific command back in August. The admiral of the base made it crystal clear that in a very short space of time, the Americans would be outnumbered in the Pacific arena. Limiting what weapons can be used, when those weapons currently can be used, simply will not work. There has not been a satisfactory answer on whether nuclear weapons can be stored on Diego Garcia when it is under the authority of the Mauritians.

Despite the conversations about what Pete Hegseth said and what other treaties may have been negotiated along the way, we have the commander in chief, who outranks the US Secretary of State for Defence, saying, “I do not want to do this deal.” We have the deputy Prime Minister of Mauritius saying, “You will not be able to hold nuclear weapons there.” What makes Ministers so convinced that those leaders are wrong, and that they are right? That is the greatest and deepest concern.

We live in a world that is rapidly changing, not just in its disregard for the rules-based order, but in its energy demands. Those energy demands are shifting the

[Sir Alec Shelbrooke]

geopolitical situation. Given where a lot of the materials that we need for renewables are, the focus is shifting more towards that hemisphere and away from the Gulf. The geopolitical positioning of the Chagos islands is therefore becoming more and more important.

It is absolutely right to say that our Government started negotiations, which went on and on, but that does not mean that there is a victory in ending them overnight by just giving way on the red lines that we would not cross. That is a very important point, because we should recognise the situation that we face, rather than crowing about some diplomatic “victory”.

Time and again, we see the Government kowtowing to Beijing, rather than standing up to it. We see that today. Where is the strategic plan? My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) was exceptionally critical of the golden era of relations with China under David Cameron. The criticisms coming forward are not new; my right hon. Friend warned at the time of the security risks that China posed. The Prime Minister has signed off on the super-embassy, despite all the things we know about, and the things that we have seen in its blueprints, and for what reason? This seems to be almost—

Sir Julian Lewis: Pathological.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Yes, pathological. There is this belief that the Chinese will always act in good faith, that we can trust them, and that they would not dare invade, because we signed a piece of paper. The world is changing, and there is no shame in pausing negotiations when changes come to light. The Minister should reflect on what is said today about how the situation has changed since his Government came to power, getting on for two years ago. The situation has changed incredibly.

Tom Hayes *rose—*

Sir Julian Lewis *rose—*

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: I give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East.

Sir Julian Lewis: I have a helpful suggestion. I know that I cannot commit my party as a whole, but let me speak personally. If the Government change their position, I—and, I am sure, my right hon. Friend—will give a personal pledge never to accuse them of having done a U-turn on this matter. We will praise them to the skies, and we will not seek to take party political advantage of their belated acceptance of reality.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: That is a really important point. When the Government act in the national interest, changes in position should be welcomed.

We do not have the defence capability that we need, and it is worrying in the extreme to hear that the money for the Diego Garcia deal will come out of the defence budget. We hear people saying, “The defence budget went down under you; it was hollowed out,” and so on. It did go down, but the bit that is often missed is that that started during the cold war, and it continued through 13 years of Labour Government and across Europe. The Americans halved their defence budget over that

time. However, the world is a different place now; Ukraine was invaded, and at that point, the world changed direction.

Let us consider for a moment two countries that have made incredibly significant U-turns, if you will: Germany, which has a new defence posture and will spend hundreds of billions on defence, and Japan. Both countries have very much drawn a line under the events of the second world war, and have recognised that the world has changed into a much more dangerous place and needs a much bigger posture.

Tom Hayes: The right hon. Gentleman has slightly taken forward the point that I was going to make. I take the point that we live in a more insecure time, and that this country has to respond to that. He has given the example of Germany; it is able to do what it is doing because its indebtedness has not risen as extraordinarily in recent years as ours. We are in deficit to the tune of £2.7 trillion, and we pay £105 million in debt interest repayments every year before we pay for anything else, so we are in a particularly difficult situation as a Government, and that is due to our inheritance.

However, the right hon. Gentleman’s thoughtful contribution is moving this debate into a more strategic conversation about the relationship of the UK to China. In my hand, I have an iPhone, designed in California and assembled in China. I assume that he has an iPhone, too—most people in this Chamber do. The point that I am making is that we have to figure out the relationship between our two countries. Economically decoupling so significantly could harm our quality of living, our trade balance and our investment opportunities, but we must also be mindful of the threat that China poses. What is the Conservative party’s posture on China?

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: The hon. Gentleman may have been tied up this morning trying to decide whether he backs Andy Burnham, but our leader has made our posture crystal clear today. When asked whether she would be going to Beijing now, she said that she would not, because there was no point in doing so until there was a proper plan about which strategic interests we would work on with colleagues in Beijing. I am afraid that I do not believe that there is much to celebrate in a trade deal with the Chinese worth £600 million; it barely seems worth the trip.

On debt, the hon. Gentleman has slightly forgotten something called a pandemic, which cost half a trillion pounds. He has forgotten Gordon Brown’s banking crisis, which also cost a half a trillion pounds, and he has forgotten that we have gone into a war in Europe that caused 11% inflation. We get a very interesting dichotomy from Government Members; they say, “Inflation was 11% under your Government, but it’s not our fault that inflation is going up; it’s because of the war in Ukraine.” They might want to marry those two sentences up.

Dr Mullan: Does my right hon. Friend agree that at every single point from 2010 onwards, all the Labour party has ever done is encourage us to spend more?

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: And it has put what it said into practice. It has raised £77 billion in taxes, but I cannot see great investments being made in defence. May I say

that I do not like the idea of expressing the amount of GDP being spent on defence as a percentage? Somewhere along the line, NATO and its allies fell into the trap of thinking that we had to spend x% on defence; they say, "Well, we spent 5% of GDP on defence in the 1980s." Yes, we did, because that was what it cost. That was not a target to get to. We should identify what we need, and then fund it, and see what that comes out as. If we do not properly defend ourselves, it may well not be possible to deliver the things that we say we want to fund.

That brings me back, before I go too far outside the lines, to the point of today's debate. This is about a geopolitical situation, and about removing a key capability without a guarantee that we can have our nuclear deterrents. We have shown over decades that those nuclear deterrents help keep the peace. There are no SNP Members in the Chamber, but when they say, "We would never use Trident. We would never use a nuclear weapon," they miss the point. It is not a nuclear weapon, but a nuclear deterrent. We have used it every single day since the day that the Resolution class was launched, and that has kept a semblance of peace and moved us away from war. I am deeply concerned that this debate seems to be more about what may be written on a piece of paper than what we actually have the capability to do today.

2.24 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I have actually enjoyed seeing what the Foreign Office has been doing over the past few weeks. I was trying to determine why I have been getting so much more enjoyment out of it, and I think it is because it has been taking advice from "Monty Python and the Holy Grail". Every time we have a Foreign Office question, the Black Knight comes in front of us. They are honourable, brave and doughty; they will not answer a question; they are torn limb from limb, and their arguments are struck down one by one; but they still want to have the fight.

Mr Francois: It's a flesh wound!

Dr Evans: It is indeed. I applaud the Government and their Ministers for doing that.

We hear time and again from Government Members that we have had ample time to debate these issues. I entirely agree, but that is exactly the problem. These debates have been going on for so long because we are not getting the answers that we need to do our job and scrutinise this deal. Anyone making a good argument should be able to justify their point and evidence it. I will summarise some of the key questions that I want answered, and will say why we seem stuck. I will then explain why that matters, and, finally, will give the context of this debate.

First, we ask about the legal position. The Government say that there is legal jeopardy, but the Conservatives contend that what the International Court of Justice says is non-binding, that there is no court that could pass judgment, and that there is a Commonwealth opt-out. The Government say that the cost is £3.4 billion; the Government Actuary says that the figure is £34 billion, and the Conservatives contend that the Government are using the wrong tool to make a judgment on cost, because net present value does not count. When it

comes to the environment, the Government say that safeguards are in place, but the Conservatives contend that Mauritius does not have a navy that would enable it to hold up its side of the bargain and prevent damage to fishing.

Turning to the nuclear aspect, we Conservatives recognise that the Pelindaba treaty creates a conflict, and the Government have not explained why it does not. As for the US's involvement and whether it has a veto, we believe that the 1966 agreement would need to be taken into account. Finally, although it has not been mentioned today or over the past few weeks, there is the long-term security of this base. At the end of 99 years, there is only an option for us to buy and continue, so what happens at that point? We have not secured the long-term security of the base at all.

Lincoln Jopp: My hon. Friend will have heard the Minister for the Indo-Pacific, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), list the preconditions before treaty ratification can take place. I am pretty sure that I asked about America, and she said that there needed to be an exchange of letters. The position of the American Administration is that the Chagos deal as proposed by His Majesty's Government would be

"an act of GREAT STUPIDITY".

We seem quite a long way from getting American agreement and acquiescence. Does my hon. Friend, like me, foresee that we would need a protracted period of negotiation with the United States of America to get its acquiescence to this deal?

Dr Evans: Fundamentally, the US should express its concerns publicly, and it has now done so. We have asked Ministers, both in this debate and on Monday, whether the UK Government can make a unilateral decision without amending the notes. The Government have said that they have to amend the notes, but they have not set out what happens if the US does not agree. That is the key part of this, but the Government keep reading out the same answer that I got on Monday when I asked that question, the same answer that I got when I intervened on the Minister, and the same answer that my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) got. They say that they have set out the process, which is primary legislation, secondary legislation, and then amendments to the notes. The question is: what happens if the Americans do not agree to that amendment of the 1966 notes? I will take an intervention if the Minister can tell us, because the fundamental point about US involvement is this: if they say no, but we say yes, where do the islands go? What happens to the agreement? What happens if they say yes and we say no? Those fundamental questions are why we keep coming back to this issue. If there was clarity and simple answers to simple questions, the Opposition would understand that and be able to make a balanced judgement. Instead, we have gaps in our understanding from the Government.

Sir Julian Lewis: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, but I think he knows the answers to those simple questions. The answer to the question whether Mauritius could stop us having nuclear weapons stored on Diego Garcia is clearly that it would be able to do so.

[*Sir Julian Lewis*]

It is clear that the answer to what happens if the Americans say no to changing the 1966 agreement is that this deal to get rid of our sovereignty over the Chagos islands would be dead in the water. The reason that Ministers will not say those things, even though they know them to be true, is that they are afraid of a headline saying, “Minister admits that Chagos surrender can’t go ahead without American agreement”.

Dr Evans: My right hon. Friend is entirely right in pinpointing some of the issues, and I will reverse my speech and deal with some of those first. On the 1996 Pelindaba treaty, formally ratified in 2009, although the whole treaty is about where countries can research and what they can do with nuclear weapons, the key part, article 4, is about the prevention of parking of nuclear explosives. Paragraph 1 states:

“Each Party undertakes to prohibit...the stationing of any nuclear explosive device”

on its territory. By definition, if the base goes across to Mauritius, it will be under the treaty, because Mauritius is a signatory. There is a slight misconstruing, because there is a specific carve-out. Paragraph 2 states:

“Without prejudice to the purposes and objectives of the treaty, each party in the exercise of its sovereign rights remains free to decide for itself whether to allow visits by foreign ships and aircraft to its ports and airfields”,

and it goes on.

What the treaty implies, and what it states specifically, is that Mauritius would have to be consulted and provide explicit permission for nuclear craft, whether submarine, boat or aircraft, to be there. Only yesterday we heard that that permission would not be granted. This question on the security of the nuclear aspect is unanswered, and I look forward to the Government trying to rectify that position, because they have not explained the interaction with the treaty. This is not operational; it is purely about legal text.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, which contains more detail than the Government’s contribution. In a nutshell, is the fundamental problem not that when we give away British sovereign territory to another nation, we are vulnerable in perpetuity—whatever agreement we have sitting around it—to that agreement being torn up, disagreed with and not implemented?

Dr Evans: Absolutely. On a technicality, the Minister is right to say that the treaty in front of us has no problems, but at the end of the day it is about the interaction with other treaties once we have signed it and sovereignty has been given away. My hon. Friend is right that things would not be covered once Diego Garcia no longer belonged to us, and the Government are struggling to explain that difficulty.

Sir Julian Lewis: I must tweak what my hon. Friend just said. Although there is discretion for the Mauritian Government to give permission for a nuclear-armed vessel to visit temporarily, for example, there is no discretion for nuclear weapons to be stored permanently on Diego Garcia.

Dr Evans: My right hon. Friend is right. From memory, I think he is referring to article 3 of the 1996 treaty, which explicitly talks about researching and so on. The Government need to set out the implications and how that treaty interacts with this treaty that they are signing or want us to ratify.

Let us step back a bit further. We are in this position, the Government argue, because of a non-binding ICJ judgment. I will ask the Minister again: with which court does he believe there would be a problem? The Government have said time and again that we could be brought into conflict with several courts. The Defence Secretary was worried about the United Nations convention on the law of the sea and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, but we already know from a 2015 ruling against the UK over Mauritius that they cannot judge sovereignty, so that one is out the window.

Earlier, I asked the Minister, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) about this issue, and she mentioned the 2021 special chamber of the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea. As she will know, the UK was not party to give information to that, and it rested on the non-binding judgment of the ICJ, which is already contested. There is an opt-out, because it is a Commonwealth interaction. Months on, the Government still cannot answer these simple questions.

Another body that is often referred to—we will go over this again—is the International Telecommunication Union. We know from the Government’s own written answers that article 48 of the ITU constitution states that it cannot judge sovereignty. The Government know that, and I do not understand why they will not just stand here and say that.

On finances, the figures and what they are made up of is contested. The Government are right on their figure, and the Opposition are right on our figure, but how can that be? It is because of the mechanism being used to judge that value. The Opposition contest that the best way to work out the figure is the nominal value used by the Government actuaries. The deal is over 100 years, and we have to take into account what things will look like and other factors. The Government actuaries say that the cost is £34 billion, yet the Government are using net present value, which gives us £3.4 billion. I am glad that the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry is here, because I posed this question to him in the last debate, and his answer was that the figure is in the Green Book. I retorted:

“Can the Minister point to any other country in the world that has used NPV to give away sovereignty?”—[*Official Report*, 9 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 748.]

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I ran the Department for Work and Pensions, which spent the whole time looking at net present value. The key problem is that we do not use net present value when dealing with a foreign country for a very simple reason: we have no idea what social issues will erupt or change. While we have control in the UK, we do not have control of a foreign country. That immediately distorts the payment amount, plus net present value strips out relevant inflation, which makes it much cheaper, officially. The real cost that we have to bear is the £34.7 billion that the actuaries have stated, not this nonsense of net present value.

Dr Evans: I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend, who has experience of running a Department. I find it all the more frustrating that Ministers cannot simply set out the difference between the two values when I as a Back Bencher can spot it and explain it. The question is which is the better tool and why.

Net present value has domestic use, and that is why the Office for National Statistics will not come out and say that there is a problem with it. It is a legitimate tool to use, but it is being used inappropriately when we are dealing with sovereignty. The assumptions that the Government are building their figure on are 3.5% for the first 30 years, but this is a 99-year lease. We do not even know what will happen with the other 70 years. If we compare with other countries, we see that the US uses a 7% social discount rate.

We are posing simple questions, doing our job on the Opposition Benches, trying to get answers from Ministers as to why we would use this net present value. When we take everything into account, if we use simply an inflation-adjusted amount, it is £10 billion. There are three figures out there that are all correct, but all stand to be used in a different way. The fact that a Minister repeatedly cannot answer those questions is of due concern to Opposition Members.

I will turn to the size of the environmental aspect. It has been pointed out multiple times that Mauritius does not have a navy or a force to protect the blue planet programme that is in place. Why am I concerned about that? We know that the 2015 UNCLOS tribunal was all about the fact that the UK wanted to put more protections in, but the Mauritians wanted fishing rights in the area—we already have history there—yet we would not have the Navy to enforce protections. It is a simple question for the Government to answer: how will they resolve that problem?

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Does my hon. Friend share my concern that were this deal to go ahead, there will be a need for more Navy, which is expensive? At the end of the day, the increases to the defence budget that we are being told about will be used to pay for this ridiculous deal.

Dr Evans: Quite possibly. We already know that the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has its blue planet programme to help to protect environmental areas that were, or are, under British control. Does this come under the FCDO budget as well? We still do not know the answers to these questions—very simple questions, which we have been asking for the past year.

On the matter of the Chagossians, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) raised a very simple principle. Again, I am confused by what the Government are saying. The Prime Minister himself has said that Greenlanders will decide for Greenland, yet Chagossians cannot decide for Chagos. I understand that there could be an argument one way or the other, but the Government apparently will not make it. They do not seem to see the illogical nature of what they are putting forward when they make a statement referring to sovereignty in one area, but make no statement that would apply to the case that we are discussing today.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that British Chagossians will be given no say in how a trust fund is to be spent,

and that it is simply wrong that they are being given no opportunity to have any personal say in the matters that will affect them and their futures?

Dr Evans: Absolutely. That is another perfectly sensible question to pose to the Government, and for them to answer and to set out the reasons and the rationale.

I am still concerned, when we are dealing with the detail, about the long-term nature of the deal and whether it is bomb-proof. When we come to the end of 99 years, what will happen? The only protection we have is that we have first say on taking it on. We have already heard, from Members on both sides of the House, how much China's economy will grow. Will we even have the finances to buy that deal? Will we be outbid by the United States, by China, or by some other BRIC power? We are held over a barrel by the Mauritians, or, worse still, the Mauritians can simply say, "We don't want it any more", and the base is gone and we can do nothing about it.

Why does all this matter? Those are all technical questions that I want the Government to answer, but overall we must see the wider context, which has been explained here numerous times before. The United States is changing its foreign policy, China is changing its foreign policy, yet the UK does not appear to have an approach in either direction. It appears that we are looking towards a sphere of influence, with America having one side and China and Russia having another. So the question for the House is, "Why rush this through?" Why not think about it? Why not answer these simple questions, to get this side of the House on board, so that we could then say, "We think this is the right thing for the country?"

The saddest aspect of this whole debate is the way in which the Government have turned it into a scapegoating of the Opposition as if we were playing political games, rather than seeing that the simple technical questions that need to be answered are the key to unlocking our understanding. If we as parliamentarians cannot get answers to these questions and do not understand the rationale, how can we explain it to our constituents, how can we explain it to the nation, and how can we explain it to the world? If the Government want us to stop—supposedly—playing politics, I ask them to give simple answers to simple questions, back them up and give evidence for them. Otherwise, we are left fighting the Black Knight, who is brave, who is forthright, who is keen to stand in the way of any progress, but who simply will not answer a question and is cut down, limb by limb, in a pool of blood.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I will now announce the result of today's deferred Division on the Draft Medical Devices (Fees Amendment) Regulations 2026. The Ayes were 294 and the Noes were 108, so the Ayes have it.

2.43 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I will try to keep my words brief, because so much of this has already been laid out by my colleagues, although I see no reason why I cannot repeat it.

In essence, this whole thing falls on to a couple of stools, but there is an intervening issue. The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) and I have been to Ukraine

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

together, and I have a very high regard for him. The Government ought to put him on their Front Bench as soon as possible, because he will make less of a mess of it than the others. [*Interruption.*] It was a compliment. Having been in government, I have to tell him that it was quite a compliment.

The hon. Gentleman talked, quite rightly, about ambiguity—sometimes determined ambiguity, and sometimes inadvertent ambiguity. What China is doing in the South China seas is against international law and has been condemned by the United Nations, absolutely and clearly. China has no right to that area, historic or otherwise, but the Chinese have ignored that, and are now putting defensive forts in the area. We have seen them threaten the Philippines, barge their boats out of the way and fire shots over them. The same goes for Vietnam. They are threatening Taiwan as well. All those countries lay a certain amount of claim to the area, but the Chinese have ignored that.

The one thing that the Chinese want to do is extend their position to the trade routes. If the Chinese Government could gain control of the east-west trade routes—which, strangely enough, flow right past the Chagos islands—that would be an absolute win for them. They would be able to choke the trade going from east to west whenever they wished to do so. People might say, “Well, they wouldn’t do that, would they?” Oh yes, they would. They are now talking about blockading Taiwan as part of that process.

I know that the hon. Gentleman is a realist, and on that basis I simply say that we need to look at the Chagos islands, and to look at this treaty, in the light of the threat to the free world from this unbelievably brutal but enormously growing power—a threat that is itself growing in plain sight. It is worth our reminding ourselves that the Chinese are building a navy that, as even United States experts accept, will outgrow US naval forces within two years. That is really important. Any one shipyard in China today builds more naval ships than the whole of the United States of America and probably Europe as well, and China has many naval shipyards.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: I spoke earlier about the naval problem, but China has also built an incredible number of intercontinental ballistic missile silos. It is hugely increasing its nuclear arsenal and refuses to come to the table for negotiations on non-proliferation treaties. Is this not the most ridiculous time to give up the certainty of being able to house nuclear weapons at a strategic site?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I will come on to that, but my right hon. Friend is right. I just wanted to provide the background information on what the problem is. The problem is China. Remember that China supports Russia, so the very idea that a British citizen—Philippe Sands in this case, representing Mauritius—should actually negotiate with and talk to the Russians about how this would not make it difficult for them to hold on to Crimea strikes me as astounding. It is astonishing that a British citizen should even engage with them on this. That tells us that the nature of some of the people who are involved in this is questionable indeed.

The background, then, is “What is the threat?” It could be argued, I think, that the threat is now greater than it has been at any time since the second world war, and certainly since the end of the cold war. We are in a new environment, and that new environment requires us to understand the nature of our assets and how we would maximise those assets, not minimise them. My argument here is slightly different: we have taken the wrong decision over Chagos for the wrong reasons. If we had stepped back and then asked ourselves about this in 10, five or even two years’ time, when China is estimated to have a more powerful fleet in the Pacific than the United States can muster at any stage, would we really say that we ought to let the Chagos islands go and put them in the hands of Mauritius, which China lauds in almost every announcement that it makes and with which it has a very good relationship?

Dr Mullan: Even if we accept the Government’s position that Mauritius does not get on particularly well with China, are we really leaving in the hands of fate the question of whether the Mauritians might change their minds 50 years from now and seek to line up with China’s sphere of influence? It is a huge gamble to take.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I fundamentally agree with him. In a way, I am sorry that the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) is not here—that is not to say that I have a detrimental view of the Minister now on the Front Bench, the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard)—and I worry about why he is not here. I hope he is not suffering from “long Chagos.” Maybe we should send him a “get well” card very soon. We miss him, because we are definitely seeing studied ambivalence at the Dispatch Box as a master strategic plan.

I will repeat what has been said by a number of colleagues: we know from yesterday, if we needed to know it at all, that the Deputy Prime Minister of Mauritius has made it categorically clear that there will be no allowance for nuclear weapons, either parked or landed, on the Chagos islands while the treaty exists. The hon. Member for Macclesfield rightly spoke about studied ambivalence, but there was no ambivalence in the statement from the Deputy Prime Minister of Mauritius. He is completely clear, yet we are ambivalent. For us, ambivalence is a mistake, because it allows the statements of fact to be presented by those who will take control of Chagos. That is not just a mistake, but a disastrous mistake.

Sir Julian Lewis: I think there is a further twist, because the Pelindaba treaty not only prohibits the storing of nuclear weapons on the territory of Mauritius, which the Chagos islands would become, but requires an inspection regime. I understand that the country that would carry out the inspection is South Africa, which is somewhat closer to China and Russia—particularly where naval co-operation is concerned—than it is to America or the United Kingdom.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, as he normally is. The reality is that the treaty to which he refers is very clear that its signatories cannot modify it; they must categorically agree not to

have nuclear weapons on their territory. We are in the business of giving that territorial right to Mauritius, so there is no question but that the treaty will apply to Chagos.

That brings me to the other thing that the Government simply do not want to face up to: the 1966 treaty between the USA and the UK is absolutely clear. The Government obfuscate by calling it an “exchange of letters”, but it is actually a treaty. When we talk about an exchange of letters, it sounds like a “get well” card or something that one puts in the post. The Government say that this is not a big problem and that we can just exchange a few letters to each other:

“How are you getting on?”

“Fine. What about you?”

“We’re just going to give the islands away. Are you okay with that?”

“We’re okay with that—no problems. Can you give us a bit more detail?”

“We will when it is all passed. Don’t worry about it. We’ll be with you on this.”

No, it is a treaty. It has the substance of being a treaty, and that substance states categorically:

“The Territory shall remain under United Kingdom sovereignty.”

We cannot arbitrarily change that; we have to have full agreement from the USA. I do not believe that the United States really understood that it would not have sovereign rights over the base. I do not think the Government ever bothered to explain that, because I seem to recall that when this whole debate began, it was never mentioned. The Government did not come forward and say, “Yes, we’re going to get this Bill through. It’s not in the Bill, but we’ll exchange letters with you afterwards, because although it’s relevant and it’s completely sovereign, we don’t want to talk about it.”

The Government have to explain why they have never made any significant mention of that at all, because it now has a massive bearing on what happens to this really poor treaty, which is badly drafted, hurriedly written and only a few pages long. I sat through the debates on the Maastricht treaty—rebellious, of course—and the reality was that it was huge. Every aspect of our arrangements was in there and was debatable and amendable. It has been horrific to see how quickly the Government want to get the Bill through. I honestly think that it is madness.

I come to the cost. The other bit that is completely wrong is the Government’s desire to show how little they have had to pay under the treaty to get what they consider to be a reasonable lease. Is it not ironic that the Government are now moving against leaseholders here in the UK? They do not like leases. Apparently, people do have enough power over their leases. I simply say that the Government should learn from their own views about what is happening domestically. The lease is a terrible thing at times, because it gives people so little control. This is going to be a lease.

Mr Francois: My right hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and if he was not already sanctioned by the Chinese, he would be by the end of it. Does he recall that Disraeli said in opposition, “We may not win the vote tonight, but we can win the argument?”

Does my right hon. Friend agree that not only are we winning the argument, but the Government are failing by not answering any questions or making any argument at all?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Indeed. In fact, rather than us winning the argument, the Government have simply lost the argument. That is even more powerful, because they are making no effort to explain it. I honestly feel sorry for Ministers. I have sat in government, and I know that Ministers are sent out to bat and to defend the indefensible, which they have to do well. I have a high regard for the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport, as he knows, but good luck to him on this one—he will need to make his speech brief, because we will intervene.

I simply say that the cost is nonsense. My hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) brilliantly laid it out, so I will not repeat the specifics. As I said to him, having sat in government, I know how these figures are put together. There is no way on earth that a Government should use net present value for a foreign treaty that covers a period of over 90 years—it is an absurdity. We have no control over the social obligations in Mauritius, which may shift and change. We have no control over what the Mauritians’ economic policy will be and the impact of inflation. The treaty can only really be used for domestic issues, and I think this is a shimmy by the Government to try to get the cost down, absurdly, to £3.4 billion, when in fact it is £34.7 billion. That figure is probably wrong, because I think it will be more than that over the long term. This is another absurdity and an excuse to be got rid of.

All the other points have been made, so I will not dwell on them, but I do want to dwell on this point. It was wrong to have chucked the Chagossians off their islands in 1966—it was a bad decision and an immoral one, and we need to own up to that fact. My Government should have done so, and we should own up to the fact that we owe the Chagossians something better. The hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, has talked about a referendum, and that is one of the possibilities, but I will tell the House what I would do if I was in government. I would say to the Chagossians, “Listen, we’re not going to do the deal with Mauritius; we’ll do the deal with you. You’ll be allowed back to the islands, with full rights, and we’ll negotiate with you on how we will work together, with British control overall but with you being paid.” I would rather pay the money to them, so that they can live their lives better, than to Mauritius. We know that many of the Chagossians have had terrible problems in Mauritius and have been treated like second-class citizens. For that reason, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has come out and said that the treaty should not go ahead, and I agree with that.

There is both a factual problem and a human rights problem with the treaty, and there is an overarching threat to our freedom and to the freedom of those elsewhere in the free world. If we give way, let the treaty go through and do not end this nonsense, we will forever have it over our heads that we lost control of the most critical area in the world.

2.58 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): I am very pleased to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith). I only wish that, when he was the leader of the Conservative party, he had gone on to become Prime Minister, because then we would not be sitting here debating this issue today. The last words of his speech said everything that needed to be said.

All Governments of all political parties have failed to do the right and moral thing over many decades. The Chagos islands were depopulated—cruelly depopulated—and the people of the Chagos islands were never given any say or any right of self-determination. Had that happened, decolonisation would have taken place, and there would never have been an International Court ruling. The Chagos islands would have stayed British and, as the Falkland Islanders and the Gibraltarians have done, they would have proudly voted in any referendum to exercise their right of self-determination and stayed British. However, all Governments of all parties ignored the whole issue for decades, despite all the appeals of a small number of us who tried again and again and again, but were ignored. That is why we are in the position we are in today.

I cannot disagree with almost anything my former colleagues have been saying about this issue. They have analysed it correctly, and I only wish that we had done something about it during our 14 years in government.

Mr Francois: Will the hon. Member give way?

Andrew Rosindell: I will not give way at this stage.

As I think all Members on both sides of the House will know, few issues have consumed so much of the 25 years of my parliamentary life as the British Indian Ocean Territory, the Chagos islands and, more importantly, the Chagossian people. For more than two decades, I have fought for the Chagossian right of self-determination, as with all overseas territories and former colonies. I chaired the Chagos Islands (British Indian Ocean Territory) all-party parliamentary group. In fact, I was previously the deputy chairman to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), so trying to get cross-party consensus on where we were heading was a bit of a juggling act.

The one thing that united that all-party group was the belief that the Chagossians should have the right of resettlement. I argued strongly for self-determination and that ultimately, whatever the options are and whatever happens, the Chagossians should have the final say. The right hon. Member had a different view, but members of that group—representing seven political parties—came to the view that the first thing needed was resettlement. However, the Conservative Government, over 14 years, absolutely refused even to consider any option for the resettlement of those islands.

I also dealt with this issue as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee over 15 years. Unlike the many who now speak with great certainty but remained silent during that period, I did not remain silent. I have also been to the British Indian Ocean Territory. I have walked around those islands, and seen the abandoned churches and schools. I have walked around the ancestral graves of the Chagossian people and the derelict homes.

I have seen the visible traces of a community expelled from its homeland and denied the right to return. I have raised this with every Foreign Office Minister in every Government over and over again, and I have been ignored. A small number of us were ignored; I pay tribute to Daniel Kawczynski, the former Member for Shrewsbury, and Henry Smith, the former Member for Crawley, for raising this matter. We all raised it, but, sadly, over 14 years the last Government just dismissed it and refused even to consider it.

I went to Peros Banhos, the outer islands, which are 160 miles away from Diego Garcia. There is no security threat there. It took me four different boats to get to the outer islands. People could live there with no issues whatsoever, because they would be a long way from Diego Garcia. Despite the line from the Foreign Office, when I went to the State Department and raised this matter directly with the Americans, they said, “We have no objections to the Chagossians living in the outer islands.” Our Foreign Office has been puppeteering this policy for years, and our Ministers just went along with it. They did nothing and they ignored the facts.

I went to Mauritius in 2002, accompanied by the then leader of the Conservative party, my right hon. Friend Michael Howard—Lord Howard of Lympne. It was not part of the official programme, but I asked, “Please can we go and visit the Chagossians in Port Louis?” After a bit of a flurry from officials, in the end we insisted, and we went to meet the leaders of the Chagossian community. That was in 2002, which was pretty much my first year as a Member of Parliament.

So when I speak about the Chagos islands, I do so from long experience, having visited Diego Garcia and the outer islands, and I conclude that the current position represents—sadly, by all parties—a shameful betrayal of the loyal British Chagossian people. The Government’s Bill is nothing short of a surrender. It hands away British sovereignty over a territory that we have administered for more than two centuries. It binds generations of British taxpayers to a grotesque financial settlement, with tens of billions of pounds paid to a foreign Government simply so we may lease back the military base that we already own. It is vital to our security and that of one of our closest allies, yet we are prepared to risk that vital military and security base for the next century because of this shabby deal.

Ministers justify this capitulation by sheltering behind so-called international law. They insist that a non-binding advisory opinion of a Court, whose jurisdiction is explicitly excluded from intra-Commonwealth disputes, is somehow beyond negotiation, yet at the same time they are content to ignore the 1966 agreement between the United States and the United Kingdom—an actual binding international treaty—which states plainly in its very first clause:

“The Territory shall remain under United Kingdom sovereignty.”

That consideration tells us everything we need to know: this was never really about international law. An act of “total weakness” is how this has been described by the President of the United States of America, and does that not just say everything about this Government’s approach? All this is being done without the consent of or a genuine consultation with—and even without the courtesy, which every other territory has been afforded, of a democratic vote for—the Chagossian people themselves.

As disgraceful as the Bill is, it did not emerge from a vacuum. For over two decades and, as I have mentioned, for 14 years from the Government Back Benches, I urged Foreign Secretary after Foreign Secretary and Minister after Minister—speaking to them in the Lobbies, going to the Foreign Office and talking to officials; and discussing it over and over again by calling them into all-party group meetings and raising it at the Foreign Affairs Committee—to consider the Chagossians' right of resettlement and self-determination, but I was ignored all the way through.

Sir Julian Lewis: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend—as I will always regard him, having known him for the past 40 years and knowing that his patriotism is beyond question—for giving way. Does he agree with me that there is a bit of a pattern here? The Government clearly want to do this surrender deal or giveaway, yet try to shelter behind inconclusive legalistic analysis. Is that not exactly the same as the betrayal of our Northern Ireland veterans, as the Government, when pressed, admit that they wanted to remove the immunity for our veterans anyway, but still seek to shelter behind questionable legal considerations that have not been fully tested? Why, when the Government want to do these terrible things, will they not at least have the guts to stand up and admit that that is what they want to do, and that they are not being forced to do it by lawyers whose credentials and jurisdiction are in question, to put it at its mildest?

Andrew Rosindell: I agree with every word my very dear and long-standing friend has said. I sit on a different Bench now, but as I look around the Chamber, I see colleagues on the Conservative Benches who I still agree with on most things, but I see some people on the Labour Benches—and certainly some of those in the Government—who seem to hate everything about this country and want to undermine this country, including when it comes to Northern Ireland veterans, and this particular issue, of the surrender of one of His Majesty's territories against the wishes of the people, is exactly what I am talking about.

Mr Francois: Both the hon. Gentleman and I have visited the Falkland Islands, although on different occasions. There is a strategic runway and base there at RAF Mount Pleasant. Would he agree that what the Government are doing is analogous to paying Argentina £35 billion to rent back that base and the Falkland Islands, which also belong to us and wish to be British?

Andrew Rosindell: My right hon. Friend is completely right. There is a precedent here. The Falkland Islands could have gone the same way. Gibraltar could have gone the same way—indeed, the Government tried to make that happen. In 2002, one of the biggest campaigns I have ever fought was against the joint sovereignty plan by Tony Blair, which was against the wishes of the Gibraltarian people. I commend Mr Speaker, who at the time I worked with very closely in order to keep Gibraltar British, as happened in 1982 in order to keep the Falkland Islands British—but always on the basis of self-determination.

Tom Hayes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Rosindell: I will make some progress.

With assurances from the United States, and given precedents around the world where indigenous people live alongside military installations, in 2016 I tabled an urgent question calling for self-determination. The response from the then Conservative Foreign Office Minister, Sir Alan Duncan, was this:

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

What a colossal disgrace. Sir Alan compared Chagossian resettlement to Pitcairn—another British community that the then Conservative Government were willing to discard to another nation, even though Pitcairn later proved strategically vital for our accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership.

I am sad to say that the Government are correct that it was my Government—the Conservative Government at the time—that began this scandal, conducting 11 rounds of negotiations with Port Louis. I commend Lord Cameron, who rightly ended those talks, but they should never have begun in the first place. Why did my former party not repudiate that whole policy entirely afterwards? Why did they not say, “That’s the end of it. Never again.” and repudiate the failure of Sir Alan Duncan to give self-determination? Why did we not jettison that entire policy? We did not do so.

Even from within the shadow foreign affairs team, I argued very strongly that the policy was fundamentally and morally wrong, and that self-determination must be central to our response, but I was shut down. The Conservatives' opposition to this Bill, I am afraid, does come not from principle but from convenience. The cost of this surrender is indeed eye-watering and has been the focus of the Opposition for the last year, but no amount of money compares to the dishonour of selling out British people.

Self-determination is fundamental to everything I believe in—so fundamental that it rendered my position as shadow Minister untenable. I was pleased to hear the words of self-determination used earlier by the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), because when I asked we take that position in the past, I was told it was not party policy. I am thrilled if now, at long last, self-determination for the Chagossian people is official Conservative party policy. I hope that is the case—if it is, then everything that I have been fighting for over the last 25 years has been worth it—but the Bill and its origins, under both this Labour Government and the previous Conservative Government, represents the moment that I had enough over this issue and needed to say clearly that country has to come before party; and I believe that the Chagossians deserve the same democratic rights as every other British citizen.

A few weeks ago, I was genuinely horrified and upset to be prevented, on Conservative Whips' instruction, from voting for the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton), who is a fine addition to the House and has campaigned wonderfully for the rights of the Chagossian people. His amendment sought to guarantee a referendum for the Chagossian people. I went to the doorway of the Lobby, but was told that I could not go in and vote for it. I apologise to my Chagossian friends that I let them down on that, but

[*Andrew Rosindell*]

I was told not to and I felt deeply upset that I did not. I made it clear to the hon. Member for Surrey Heath that he had, and still has, my support.

Meanwhile, genuine opposition on the Benches from which I speak now has put aside party squabbles, because national interest must always come before party—there is not really much in common usually between the Reform and Liberal Democrat Benches, but this is a matter of principle. Colleagues in my new party voted for the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Surrey Heath, and I commend them for doing so. It asked simply to give a displaced people the right of consent before their homeland is gift-wrapped and donated to a foreign country. That is all we are asking: let the people decide. Who can seriously disagree with that principle? We rightly insist on self-determination for the Falkland Islanders, we strongly uphold it for Gibraltar, and we defend it for every other British overseas territory and former colony. The Government are happy to support that principle over Greenland, it seems, but not for their own British Chagossian people. It makes no sense and it is morally reprehensible.

What took place in the House of Lords on Third Reading was shameful. Peers repeatedly called for a Division, shouts of “Not content” were heard again and again, yet the House was denied the opportunity to vote. A Bill of immense constitutional, financial and strategic consequence—one of the most important pieces of legislation of this Parliament—was nodded through on a procedural manoeuvre, squandering a chance to kill it.

I was further disturbed to learn from many very angry Conservative peers who contacted me that they had been instructed not to vote the Bill down, not because the arguments were weak or because the numbers were lacking, but because of a quiet understanding that sovereignty should not be defended too robustly today, lest it cause inconvenience for tomorrow. Many Members of the House of Lords contacted me absolutely in despair at the instructions that they were given by their Whips. This is not coming from me, because I am not in the Lords, but from those who were there who were deeply upset by that. That crossed the line. A Conservative Government denied the principle of self-determination.

This Labour Government have gone much further, surrendering the homeland entirely without the consent of the Chagossian people. This is a bipartisan failure. The legislation sells out the King’s islands, binds future generations to vast financial liabilities and ignores the rights of an exiled people. I could not in good conscience remain silent and complicit, disarmed of any meaningful say in the deliberations of my former party and ashamed that the party of Margaret Thatcher—the party that took back the Falkland Islands in defence of the principle of self-determination—would be implicated in this betrayal.

Perhaps the Prime Minister will keep to the word of his own Deputy Prime Minister, who stated on ITV last February:

“If President Trump doesn’t like the deal, the deal will not go forward.”

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is aware of pressures of time, and that he will bringing his remarks to a conclusion shortly.

Andrew Rosindell: Given that the President believes this deal to be

“an act of GREAT STUPIDITY”,

perhaps the Prime Minister should show some courage, withdraw this legislation and scrap this atrocious deal altogether.

In conclusion, this deal should be cast into the dustbin of history where it belongs, mark an end to the Government’s policy of managed decline, and prove that when it comes to the sovereignty of people over their homeland, whether it be Chagos—the British Indian Ocean Territory—or any other territory that is being decolonised around the world, it is the people themselves who must decide, have the final say and be given the right of self-determination.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Members should be aware that I am planning to start Front-Bench contributions at 3.40 pm.

3.19 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell). With his final words on self-determination echoing in my ears, I have no doubt he will be reflecting on whether he is going to afford the people of Romford the same rights that he is demanding for the Chagossian people.

Tom Hayes: The Conservatives have argued against the Government’s position and have done so believing that that is what is right. They have never impugned the patriotism or the loyalty of the Labour party to this country, unlike the hon. Member for Romford. Does the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) agree that we should take no lessons from Reform, who take their line from either Musk or Moscow?

Lincoln Jopp: I thank the hon. and gallant Member for his intervention. If he wants to do so, I suggest that he takes it outside, as they say.

I am very time-constrained, but I want to pay tribute to my hon. Friends on the Conservative Benches who have informed the debate with incredibly detailed research and knowledge. I have been delighted to see the Minister’s PPS running backwards and forwards from the officials’ Box, because I was rather hoping that the summing up would not simply be a reheating of the opening remarks made by the Minister with responsibility for the Indo-Pacific, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra). There have been substantive points made from these Benches, which I hope will be answered in the summing up.

I am very time-constrained and a lot of points have already been covered. In search of inspiration I was wondering what I might add to the debate, so I will read out a piece of casework which, although not relevant to the Chagos islands, is an interesting comparator. It comes from a member of the public who had written to his bank manager. I suppose I owe it to him to anonymise him, so I need to come up with some sort of pseudonym. I will call him Mr Powell.

Mr Powell wrote to his bank manager: “Dear Sir, a number of years ago, I inherited a large seven-storey home in Mayfair. I am incredibly lucky and I acknowledge

that fact. It is far too big for me to live in. I live solely in half of the ground floor. For as long as I can remember, I have had Americans living on the other floors. I like these Americans, so they live there rent-free. What I am proposing, sir, is that I give you, the bank, this house. I then propose to pay you, the bank, rent above the market rate not only for me, but for all the Americans who live upstairs. I would be very grateful for your advice on this issue.”

The bank manager wrote back to Mr Powell: “Dear Mr Powell, are you okay? I am concerned for your mental state, because what you are proposing would appear to be an act of GREAT STUPIDITY.” [Laughter.] The bank manager went on to make the following four points: “First, you do not need to do this at all. Secondly, it will cost you a fortune. Thirdly, you do realise that at the end of all this you will have given away your house? Fourthly, on a personal note, were these arrangements ever to become public, I fear that your neighbours would laugh at you. Yours, the Bank Manager.”

I simply leave that analogue there, to let my colleagues in so that we may wrap this debate up.

3.23 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): On every level, this is a bad deal. From the absurdity of paying £34.7 billion for the privilege of ceding our own territory to the implications for defence, from putting at risk one of the most pristine marine environments in the world to the complete disregard shown to the British Chagossians themselves, there is so much I could focus my remarks on today, but I want to highlight two issues in particular: perception and national security.

Perception matters in geopolitics. The messages we send, intentionally or otherwise, are read closely by our allies and by our adversaries. They carry very real consequences. I need not remind the Minister of the comments made by the President of the United States just last week. Those remarks materially change the context in which this House is considering the deal.

The 1966 treaty between the UK and the US agreed to retain sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory. It is clear that any attempt to surrender sovereignty violates international law and I commend my Conservative colleagues in both Houses for delaying the Bill’s passage. But delay is not enough. The surrender Bill should be pulled in its entirety. The UK-US relationship is built on trust, particularly in defence and security. When the President states publicly that a deal will damage that relationship and should not proceed, that this deal is an “act of great stupidity”, the Government should listen and act. I am not suggesting that the United States sees the UK as an unreliable partner—we have stood shoulder to shoulder for decades—but this deal is different. If it proceeds, it will reduce the operability of UK and US forces in the region, diminish our strategic reach, and weaken our influence. Responsibility for that lies squarely with this Government.

The Prime Minister is in China today. Beijing will also be watching closely. China will welcome any increase in autonomy in the region and, with it, the opportunity to decimate the marine protected areas surrounding the Chagos islands with its fishing fleet. We know that those vessels will not simply be there to fish. They will be there to gather intelligence, probe our defences and gain strategic advantage near Diego Garcia. The message

this deal sends to our adversaries is clear: the UK is retreating, diminishing and weakening. That is not the message we should be sending in an increasingly hostile and unpredictable world.

I want to make one brief point on national security, which I have raised in previous debates and on which we have heard from many Members today. Under the Pelindaba treaty, neither the UK nor the US will be able to store nuclear weapons on Diego Garcia. We now have confirmation of that from the Deputy Prime Minister of Mauritius. That restriction significantly reduces our capability in a critical region, and weakens the security of both ourselves and our allies.

Ultimately, the deal is not in the interests of the United Kingdom. It is not in the interests of protecting one of the most important marine environments on the planet, it is not in the interests of the British Chagossians, who have been ignored throughout this process, and it is certainly not in the interests of the British taxpayer. Those on the Labour Benches know that another U-turn is looming. The deal is indefensible. Today, Members have an opportunity to do the right thing, support this motion and bring this surrender deal to an end.

3.27 pm

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): So wrote the President of the United States only a week ago:

“The UK giving away extremely important land is an act of GREAT STUPIDITY.”

For once, he is not wrong. I have lost track of the number of times I have spoken about the Chagos deal in this House, but each time brings a new stick with which to beat the Government. It is genuinely difficult to see how the Government have got to this point, but their kamikaze negotiating tactics have led them to a situation where they can no longer even muster the collective energy of their Back Benchers to defend it. The dogged determination of the Government to capitulate to a 2019 advisory ruling by the International Court of Justice would be commendable, were it not so timid. The UN General Assembly adopted resolutions urging the UK to comply with the ICJ’s advisory opinion, but crucially, the US voted in support of the UK, clearly not fearing the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, of which it is not a member.

As I am sure everybody here already knows, the United States’s support is significant because of the presence of the naval support facility, Diego Garcia. It is a strategically important location that is effectively a persistent aircraft carrier in the Indian ocean, critical for force projection in the southern hemisphere and across INDOPACOM—the United States Indo-Pacific Command. On Monday, the Minister of State responsible for the overseas territories, the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth responsible (Stephen Doughty) was quick to imply that discussions regarding the deal with the United States were an almost daily occurrence. With that in mind, perhaps the Minister in his summing up could outline to the House what discussions the Government have had with their US counterparts regarding the limitations placed on operations by compliance with the Pelindaba treaty.

This was the answer I received to a recent written question:

“Both the UK and Mauritius are satisfied that our existing international obligations are fully compatible with the Agreement”,

[Ben Obese-Jecty]

but what precisely does that exclude going forward? The African nuclear weapon-free zone treaty was signed by Mauritius in 1996 and prohibits myriad functions relating to nuclear weapons, including possession or control of nuclear weapons. There are obviously no intercontinental ballistic missiles based at Diego Garcia, but the US nuclear triad is designed to provide a second-strike capability that includes air-launched warheads.

Naval support facility Diego Garcia is a strategic waypoint for the US air force bomber fleet, the B-1, B-2 and B-52 bombers. Following 9/11, the US used Diego Garcia for operations in Afghanistan, and subsequently during the start of the Iraq war. As recently as last May, the US air force had B-2 bombers stationed on the island. This is critical because the B-2 Spirit is the delivery method for the Mod 11 B61-12 thermonuclear gravity bomb, the primary weapon for the ground-penetrating mission. This capability matters, and while it will likely never be used, we cannot afford to let enemies in the region know that that will never be on the table.

We should bear in mind that the Prime Minister is in China this week. Strategic posture across the Pacific, particularly in Taiwan and the second island chain, will surely come up in conversation. Ceding the Chagos islands to a country within China's orbit is yet another strategic mis-step in the Prime Minister's inability to deal with China robustly.

On the ongoing issue of sovereignty, in note No. 25 between the ambassador of the United States of America and the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, written on 30 December 1966, point (1) states very clearly:

"The Territory shall remain under United Kingdom sovereignty."

This time last year, I asked the Government whether the 1966 exchange of notes would require amendment as a result of the change in sovereignty, and they answered:

"The 1966 Exchange of Notes between the UK and US regarding the joint UK-US base on Diego Garcia has been subject to routine amendments and supplementation since signature. Any amendments resulting from the proposed agreement with Mauritius will be factored into this existing process."

Can the Minister outline what progress the Government have made? I asked that question on 5 February last year, and here we are, a year later, with the treaty on the brink and no update from the Government, other than through a slightly churlish appearance from the Minister at the Dispatch Box in Monday's urgent question. Crucially, the legislation was pulled from the other place that afternoon.

Throughout the passage of the Bill, the Government have deflected, obfuscated, been dragged to the Chamber, given us the run-around on detail, gaslit us, and generally tried to force this deal through. The lack of speakers on the Government Benches is testament to the fact that Labour MPs simply do not want to put their name to this legislation. All it achieves is a weakening of our military options in the southern hemisphere, and the exemption of 80% of Mauritian workers from income tax. Kudos to Mauritian Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam, clearly a savvier negotiator than our dear Prime Minister.

"There is no doubt that China and Russia have noticed this act of total weakness",

said President Trump. Perhaps the Prime Minister could ask Xi Jinping about it before he offers him a state visit.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the Front Benchers. I call shadow Secretary of State James Cartledge.

3.31 pm

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): May I begin by offering the Opposition's condolences to the family of Captain Philip Muldowney of the Royal Artillery, who tragically lost his life training with the British Army this week?

It is a pleasure to close today's debate on the Chagos islands, and to hold the Government to account for the total meltdown of their attempt to surrender sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory without opposition. Well, today they are getting that opposition, and they are getting it from the Conservatives, because it is we who have exposed the total fallacy of the legal argument used to justify this crazy deal. And let us be clear: it is a truly crazy deal—one of the worst ever proposed to this Parliament. As every single one of my colleagues said in their excellent speeches, this deal involves our hard-pressed taxpayers, struggling as they are with an ever-growing tax burden since Labour came to power, handing over another £35 billion to lease back land that we already own freehold. It is our land, over which we have sovereignty, the ultimate guarantor of legal security in a dangerous world. Given that we need that money for our own armed forces; that billions of pounds is to be given to Mauritius, and will be used to cut taxes for its people; that Labour knows that the threats that we face are growing, and that we need Diego Garcia more than ever; and that the policy treats the Chagossian people with contempt, the public will be scratching their heads, and will ask a simple question: why are the Government doing this?

To be fair to the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry, last September, he tried to spell out the reasons, and I will quote exactly what he said to justify this crazy deal:

"Had we not signed the treaty, we could have faced further legal rulings against us within weeks...Further legal rulings might have included arbitrary proceedings against the UK under annex 7 of the UN convention on the law of the sea, known as UNCLOS."

He went on to say that such a judgment would ultimately threaten operations on the base, because it would

"impact on our ability to protect the electromagnetic spectrum from interference"—[*Official Report*, 9 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 741.]

It is bad enough that the Government's case rests entirely on rulings that "could" and "might" be made; worse still, the Government are failing to take into account our clearcut ability to reject any such hypothetical ruling.

We understand that the Government are afraid of legal action relating to the United Nations convention on the law of the sea, but article 298 of UNCLOS states very clearly:

"When signing, ratifying or acceding to this Convention or at any time thereafter, a State may, without prejudice to the obligations arising under section 1, declare in writing that it does not accept any one or more of the procedures provided for in section 2 with respect to one or more of the following categories of disputes", including, under (b),

"disputes concerning military activities".

On operational threats to the base, the Government's argument is that hypothetical action by UNCLOS might lead to further hypothetical action by the International

Telecommunications Union, leading, hypothetically, to a threat to the electromagnetic spectrum on the base at Diego Garcia. Well, article 48 of the “Constitution of the International Telecommunications Union”, which is entitled “Installations for National Defence Services”, states, under section 1:

“Member States retain their entire freedom with regard to military radio installations.”

To clarify further, the telecoms Minister, the hon. Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), who is always a helpful soul, confirmed, in a written answer from last February to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), that

“Individual countries have the sovereign right to manage and use the radio spectrum, within their borders, the way they wish, subject to not causing interference with other countries...The ITU cannot challenge the UK’s use of civilian or military spectrum.”

A slam dunk! Now we have it: we can challenge UNCLOS, where military bases are concerned, and the ITU cannot challenge our use of electromagnetic spectrum.

Is it not therefore the truth that there is no threat to this country if we maintain our sovereignty over Diego Garcia, but there is a massive threat if we surrender it? There are, for ourselves and the United States, clear and unambiguous threats to the most sensitive and critical things relating to our military operations—those that relate to our ability to use nuclear weapons and deter the most serious threats to our nation.

Yesterday, it was confirmed that the Deputy Prime Minister of Mauritius, Paul Bérenger, has stated that nuclear weapons could not be stored on Diego Garcia if Labour’s deal went through. That is crystal clear. That is because Mauritius is a signatory to the Pelindaba treaty, prohibiting the stationing of nuclear weapons across Africa, including all the territory of Mauritius. We repeatedly warned Ministers of the threat arising from the Pelindaba treaty, but they dismissed our concerns, and today they could not answer the questions at all.

Can the Minister tell us if anyone in Government has discussed the storage of nuclear weapons on Diego Garcia with the US Administration? In particular, has the Prime Minister at any point discussed this matter with President Trump? Is it not another example of the total madness of Labour’s crazy Chagos deal that we, who rely on a naval nuclear deterrent to keep us safe in a dangerous world, are surrendering sovereignty of one of the most vital naval bases in the world to a nation that has signed up to a treaty outlawing the stationing of nuclear weapons on that territory?

We have had some absolutely fantastic speeches today. I have to pay tribute to the hon. Members for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), and for Rugby (John Slinger), for answering the distress flare from their Whips Office. Labour had two more contributions today than it did in the urgent question the other day, when not a single Labour MP stood up in support of the Government. We Conservative Members, however, showed real passion, because none of us supports this deal; we have consistently opposed it. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) said, what does it say about our strategic priorities? As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) said, this is a Government without a strategic policy on China, so what message does the deal send, especially when we have agreed the Chinese super-embassy?

I have to give special mention to my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), who gave an absolutely brilliant speech that totally demolished the Government’s case around the financial position—not a flesh wound in sight after that. He referred to the sketch with the Black Knight, but increasingly we think of another Monty Python sketch. The Government think that this treaty has been paused—that it is merely resting—but we increasingly suspect that this treaty is pushing up the daisies, and I can assure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that we will campaign with every bit of fight we have to ensure that it is an ex-treaty.

Tom Hayes: On the question of cost, can the hon. Member tell the House how much the Conservative Government were offering for such a deal? Was it higher or lower than Labour’s offer? If he does not know, will he table a written parliamentary question or make a freedom of information request to the Foreign Office to find out?

James Cartlidge: I do not think the hon. Gentleman quite understands. We did not sign a deal; we would not sign a deal, because the terms were totally unacceptable, and they have got an awful lot worse since then—35 billion times worse. The cost is £35 billion—that comes from a freedom of information release from the Government themselves. That is an absolute disgrace, and it is why we will vote against the deal.

Andrew Rosindell: I have one simple question for the hon. Member. Is it now Conservative party policy to give self-determination and the right of resettlement to the Chagossian people?

James Cartlidge: The hon. Member knows that we have opposed this deal, but on self-determination, I would like him to ask his party leader, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), if he believes in the self-determination of the people of Ukraine, who have been invaded and brutally bombed by Russia. His leader still says that that was provoked by NATO. The hon. Member should be ashamed of that, if he believes in self-determination.

To conclude, I asked why the Government were surrendering land that we own freehold, only to lease it back for £35 billion. Is it not the same reason why they are surrendering our brave veterans to a new era of lawfare? Is it not the same reason why Labour gave up our fishing grounds, the most critical possession of an island nation, to access an EU defence fund from which it has not had a penny? We have a weak Prime Minister who always fails to put Britain’s national interests first. If Labour was strong enough to put our national interests first, surely it would stand up to Mauritius and reject this deal. After all, if the Government did that, they could spend the money that they saved on our armed forces, at a time when rearmament at home is on hold, precisely because Labour has failed to fund defence properly.

If there is one silver lining to having such a weak Prime Minister, it is his habit of constant U-turns. We have had 13 U-turns to date from this Government. Would the best thing for our national security not be for Labour to recognise that the game is up, to turn the pause on the Chagos Bill into a permanent full stop, and to scrap this terrible deal?

3.42 pm

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): What a terrible example of collective amnesia. In the entire debate, not a single Tory MP could say why they started the negotiations.

Dr Evans: Will the Minister give way?

Luke Pollard: I am happy to take interventions if Conservative MPs can start their intervention with the reason why their Government started the negotiations. If it is true, as the shadow Defence Secretary says, that this is a crazy deal, why did the Conservatives start it? If it is true that it damages our national security, why did they start it? There has not been an answer from a single one of them, but let us see if the hon. Member can give it a go.

Dr Evans: I am surprised that a party that represents trade unionists does not understand that when there is a dispute between one party and another, it is a good thing to try to talk about it. *[Interruption.]* Why did we start negotiations? Because there is a dispute, and we need to talk to other people to understand what is going on. That is exactly what any responsible country should do. There is a difference between signing off a treaty and entering into talks with someone. Trade unionists should know that.

Luke Pollard: It is a curious position to hold: the previous Conservative Government started negotiations because they wanted to act like a trade union. I think that is a poor example.

I was asked a number of important questions in the debate, and I am happy to reply to some of them, but I will start with some context. It is staggering that the Conservatives in government held 11 rounds of negotiations—85% of the negotiations were conducted with them—and yet seem to have collective amnesia. They seem to think that they stopped the deal, but according to a statement on gov.uk on 29 April 2024, the then Prime Minister and the Mauritian Prime Minister

“discussed the progress made in negotiations between the UK and Mauritius on the exercise of sovereignty”

over BIOT. It went on to say:

“Both leaders...instructed their teams to continue to work at pace.”

A general election was called less than a month later. It is staggering that the Conservatives are doing this.

Let me be absolutely clear: when we came into office, we inherited negotiations on this matter that had already had 11 rounds. We reinforced our terms, adding a 24-nautical mile buffer zone, so that no activity can take place there without our say so, and an effective veto on all development in the Chagos archipelago.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I completely and utterly opposed my Government when they started this, categorically—*[Interruption.]* Oh, I did. I have been in opposition no matter who is in government. I have to say to the Minister, though, that it is not what you start; it is what you finish. Even though I was opposed to the negotiations, when I spoke to Lord Cameron and said that he had to stop it, he took the decision to finish it. Why will this Government not see the evidence and stop this now?

Luke Pollard: The right hon. Gentleman nearly got to why the Conservatives started the negotiations. It did not quite hit my bar for an intervention, but I appreciate him giving it a good go.

Ben Obese-Jecty *rose*—

Luke Pollard: Let me see if the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) can do any better.

Ben Obese-Jecty: Could the Minister explain why the previous Labour Government entered into negotiations in 2009, when the first talks took place with the Mauritian Government, which were ultimately ruled out after being criticised for being a unilateral decision around the marine protected area?

Luke Pollard: Again, the hon. Gentleman did not quite hit my bar, but I am sure I will get a parliamentary question from him about it.

The Conservatives started the negotiations, I am afraid, and they want everyone to forget it. They want the public to forget it; they want their own MPs to forget it. If they cannot do deals, they are in the wrong place.

Some interesting questions were asked today, and I want to try to deal with some of them.

Dr Evans: Will the Minister give way?

Luke Pollard: Madam Deputy Speaker, I have been asked to finish early so that the shadow Cabinet can sit. I do want to ensure that I can get through as many questions as I can before those on the shadow Front Bench need to go and busy themselves in a meeting.

I will try to answer a few of the questions. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller), asked a sensible question about the amendment that his party tabled in the other place. He will appreciate that it is a wrecking amendment, so we could not support it; he will also be clear, though, that we take the issues behind it very seriously. I am glad that he continues to raise the issues of the Chagossians, which are important.

The hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), who now sits on a different Opposition Bench, raised the issue of resettlement on the outer islands. He made the case that resettlement on the outer islands will help to restore some dignity to the Chagossians, who have been treated appallingly for many decades. He will know that the deal we have signed with Mauritius includes the right to resettle on the outer islands and for visits to take place to Diego Garcia. It might not satisfy all his concerns on the matter, but I hope he can understand that that is a step forward.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) for his speech, in which he talked about uncertainty. As a Defence Minister, I am most concerned about uncertainty around the operation of the base and continuation of disruption. That is what this deal seeks to close off. He was right to raise the matter.

The right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), a former Defence Minister, said that he learns something new every day. Every day can indeed

be a school day, and what I have learned today is that when the right hon. Gentleman swapped from the Government Benches to the Opposition Benches, his opinion on the deal miraculously changed, too. He backed it when he was a Minister, and now, on the Opposition Back Benches, he opposes it. That does say something.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (John Slinger) asked the very same question that I started with: why did the Conservatives start these negotiations? It is a question they still cannot answer.

I note that the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) has found his voice, but only after completing his chicken run from the seat he thought he was going to lose to his new one. Let me be absolutely clear on this point: it is shameful that the Conservatives are trying to drag other overseas territories into the mess they are arguing over here. In their speeches, Conservatives have tried to create the impression that the sovereignty of the Falklands is not secure. The Falkland Islands Government have noted that the agreement has

“no impact on the self-determination of the Falkland Islands people, and the existing and future relationship between the Falkland Islands and United Kingdom”.

Let us not hear any more Conservative MPs raising questions over the future of the Falkland Islands.

James Cartlidge: Will the Minister give way?

Luke Pollard: No, I will not. The hon. Gentleman has a meeting to get to and I am trying to help him get there. *[Interruption.]* I think he should sit down and prepare for his next meeting.

The right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) was a good voice in this debate. In an important and sound contribution, he talked about the change in the geostrategic picture. His work on the NATO Parliamentary Assembly gives him an added insight into the importance not only of the base and the UK-US relationship, but of making sure that we have a strong defence. We will continue to invest in our national security. I am proud of my country and proud of our armed forces. I am proud that we are increasing defence spending under this Government to the highest level since the end of the cold war, but there is more that needs to be done.

The hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) spoke for a good 20 minutes, but I am afraid that he seems to have read everything but the treaty itself. He was asking questions about what can be stored on the base. Annex 1 of the treaty says that there will be

“unrestricted access, basing and overflight for United Kingdom and United States of America aircraft and vessels to enter into the sea and airspace of Diego Garcia.”

It says that unrestricted ability means

“to control the conduct and deployment of our armed operations and lethal capabilities; and to control the storage of all goods, including but not limited to fuels, weapons and hazardous materials”

The shadow Defence Secretary forgets that we do not talk about the location of nuclear weapons, but the protections were designed and tested at the highest level of the US security establishment, who supported the UK proceeding with the deal. We continue to work closely with the US to ensure that the necessary arrangements are put in place.

Dr Luke Evans: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Minister specifically directed some comments at me, opening up an opportunity for me to speak. How can I respond to those comments when I cannot intervene?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The hon. Member will know that it is entirely at the Minister's discretion, as it would be for any other speaker, if he chooses to give way or not. It is not a matter for the Chair. I am sure the Minister has heard his comments.

Luke Pollard: I am very pro-Lukes generally speaking, but the hon. Member had 20 minutes in which to speak, and a few more interventions will not correct the quality of his speech.

Sir Julian Lewis: Very specifically, the Minister has read out something about what can be stored on the island. Can that include, and does it include, nuclear weapons? And on the earlier point about a deal, may I remind him of a saying from an earlier context—a different context—which is that no deal is better than a bad deal?

Luke Pollard: To help the Front-Bench team get to their shadow Cabinet meeting, I will not read out the same points again. *[Interruption.]* The shadow Minister invites me to do that, so I will. We are talking about the unrestricted ability to

“control the storage of all goods, including but not limited to fuels, weapons and other hazardous materials”;

I am very clear on this, but there are a few other questions that I want to get to.

The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) spoke about value in his good, characteristic style. I liked his approach. When he spoke about comparison of value, it is worth noting that securing the continued operation of the base is roughly about £100 million a year. That compares favourably with the base that the French rent in Djibouti, which is next to a Chinese naval base. Our base secures a 24-hour nautical exclusion zone around it. Full control of the electromagnetic spectrum is something the shadow Defence Secretary does not seem to understand, but it is actually quite important.

James Cartlidge: On that point—

Luke Pollard: Oh, go on then. The shadow Defence Secretary can be late for his meeting.

James Cartlidge: The Minister is very kind. I have a very specific question. That annex does not mention nuclear weapons. We have asked about this repeatedly throughout the debate today. It is a matter of critical national security. The Deputy Prime Minister of Mauritius has clearly stated that nuclear weapons cannot be stored on the base. Is that correct—yes or no?

Luke Pollard: I feel like I have to read out the point for a third time. It is no wonder the Conservatives could not conclude the deal. Annex 1 says that it is unrestricted ability to

“control the storage of all goods, including but not limited to fuels, weapons and other hazardous materials.”

[Luke Pollard]

We do not comment on the location of nuclear weapons. The shadow Defence Secretary might remember that from when he was a Defence Minister.

Despite the boisterous amnesia we heard from the Conservatives in this debate, I hope that the voices of the Chagossians have truly been heard. There were some very good remarks about the Chagossians, including from the hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller) and the recently Reform-ed hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell).

It is important that the Chagossians have greater involvement. That is why we have set up a Chagossian trust fund. The hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) asked earlier whether the Chagossians will have a say in the trust fund. Mauritius has confirmed, on 12 December, that it is putting in place legislation to enact the Chagossian trust fund. It will be run by Chagossians for Chagossians, and it will include UK-based Chagossians. I hope that goes some way to providing the clarity that the hon. Member was seeking.

I said that I would finish at five minutes to 4 so that the Opposition Front Bench can get to their shadow Cabinet meeting, so I will finish at five minutes to 4, because I am a man of my word.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 103, Noes 284.

Division No. 422]

[3.55 pm

AYES

Allister, Jim	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Anderson, Lee	Garnier, Mark
Andrew, rh Stuart	Glen, rh John
Argar, rh Edward	Griffith, Andrew
Atkins, rh Victoria	Harris, Rebecca
Bacon, Gareth	Hayes, rh Sir John
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi	Hinds, rh Damian
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Hoare, Simon
Bedford, Mr Peter	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Bhatti, Saqib	Hollinrake, Kevin
Blackman, Bob	Huddleston, Nigel
Bool, Sarah	Hudson, Dr Neil
Bowie, Andrew	Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Brandreth, Aphra	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Burghart, Alex	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Cartledge, James	Jopp, Lincoln
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Kruger, Danny
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Lamont, John
Cocking, Lewis	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Costa, Alberto	Lopez, Julia
Coutinho, rh Claire	Mak, Alan
Cross, Harriet	Malthouse, rh Kit
Davies, Gareth	Mayhew, Jerome
Davies, Mims	McVey, rh Esther
Davis, rh David	Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Dewhurst, Charlie	Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Morrissey, Joy (<i>Proxy vote</i>
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	<i>cast by Mr Mohindra)</i>
Evans, Dr Luke	Morton, rh Wendy
Fortune, Peter	Mullan, Dr Kieran
Fox, Sir Ashley	Mundell, rh David
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Freeman, George	Norman, rh Jesse
French, Mr Louie	Obese-Jecty, Ben
Fuller, Richard	O'Brien, Neil

Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Pochin, Sarah
Raja, Shivani
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Rosindell, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mr Mohindra)
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake

Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
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, Jack	Charters, Mr Luke
Abrahams, Debbie	Clark, Feryal
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Coleman, Ben
Akehurst, Luke	Collier, Jacob
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Collinge, Lizzi
Alexander, rh Heidi	Collins, Tom
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Conlon, Liam
Ali, Rushanara	Coombes, Sarah
Ali, Tahir	Cooper, Andrew
Anderson, Callum	Cooper, Dr Beccy
Arthur, Dr Scott	Cooper, rh Yvette
Asato, Jess	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Asser, James	Cox, Pam
Athwal, Jas	Coyle, Neil
Atkinson, Catherine	Craft, Jen
Baines, David	Creasy, Ms Stella
Bance, Antonia	Crichton, Torcuil
Barker, Paula	Curtis, Chris
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Daby, Janet
Baxter, Johanna	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Beales, Danny	Darlington, Emily
Beavers, Lorraine	Davies, Jonathan
Begum, Apsana	Davies, Paul
Benn, rh Hilary	Davies, Shaun
Betts, Mr Clive	De Cordova, Marsha
Billington, Ms Polly	Dean, Josh
Bishop, Matt	Dickson, Jim
Blake, Olivia	Dixon, Anna
Blake, Rachel	Dodds, rh Anneliese
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Dollimore, Helena
Bonavia, Kevin	Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Botterill, Jade	Eastwood, Colum
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Efford, Clive
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Ellis, Maya
Brickell, Phil	Esterson, Bill
Buckley, Julia	Evans, Chris
Burgon, Richard	Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Burke, Maureen	Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Burton-Sampson, David	Ferguson, Patricia
Butler, Dawn	Fleet, Natalie
Byrne, Ian	Foody, Emma
Caliskan, Nesil	Fookes, Catherine
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Foster, Mr Paul
Campbell, Irene	Foxcroft, Vicky
Campbell, Juliet	Foy, Mary Kelly
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Francis, Daniel
Carling, Sam	Frith, Mr James
Carns, Al	Furniss, Gill
Champion, Sarah	Gardiner, Barry
Charalambous, Bambos	Gelder, Anna

Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hendrick, Sir Mark
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Irons, Natasha
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Ayoub
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Macdonald, Alice
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas

McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDougall, Blair
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Russell, Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy

Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stewart, Elaine
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Swallow, Peter
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna

Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Deirdre Costigan and
 Mark Ferguson

Question accordingly negated.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an embarrassment that a Foreign Office Minister was unable to vote during this crucial debate on the Chagos islands. I wonder if you could have a word with the Speaker and see if it would be possible to extend the time limit to allow people to get to the Chamber?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the right hon. Member for that point of order, which he will know full well is not a point of order.

Calum Miller: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your guidance. We have spent the last three and a half hours debating the UK-US base on Diego Garcia. Just before we began that debate, President Trump announced on social media that a US armada was positioned to attack Iran. Can I seek your advice on whether it would be appropriate for a Minister to come urgently to the Chamber to update the House and to clarify the Government's position on the use of UK assets and personnel in any such attack?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for his point of order and for having given notice of it. Mr Speaker has received no notice from Ministers that they intend to make a statement on this matter. Ministers on the Front Bench will, however, have heard the hon. Member's point of order.

Youth Unemployment

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment tabled in the name of the Prime Minister.

4.9 pm

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House regrets that both youth unemployment and the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training are rising as a result of the Government's policies, such as increasing the rate of employer's National Insurance contributions, reducing business rates relief for 2025-26 for retail, leisure and hospitality businesses, and passing the Employment Rights Act 2025; notes that these policies have heavily impacted the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors where young people often have their first job; further regrets that the Government's inability to reform the welfare system will mean that young people struggling to find work are more likely to become trapped in welfare benefits dependency; and calls on the Government to back business, scrap business rates for pubs and high street shops, and back job opportunities for young people.

This afternoon we are here to talk about young people—the young people who wake up every morning with nowhere to go: no classroom, no workplace, no sense that today will be different from yesterday. It is part of our job to put ourselves in other people's shoes. Today, those are the shoes of a young man or woman who has just left school, college or university, and is setting out on real life in the world of work. That should be a moment of liberation, trepidation and excitement because the world is at their feet, but right now, for hundreds of thousands of young people, it is not.

Just a few days ago, I was with a constituent who has just finished school. She is great; she has GCSEs and A-levels, she has done work experience, and she is charming and presentable. She has been applying for jobs day after day, but can she get one? Not a squeak—and that is in the bustling and vibrant economy of the south-east of England. She told me that it can be lonely being stuck at home all day applying for jobs, but she is not alone; she is in the company of many thousands of young people. Over 700,000 young people are unemployed—more than the entire population of Sheffield—and the figures are getting worse. Our youth unemployment rate is rising faster than that of any other G7 country. Nearly 1 million young people are not in education, employment or training, and over 700,000 university graduates are on out-of-work benefits.

Those are not just statistics; they are lives knocked off course—young women and men putting in hundreds of job applications and getting hundreds of rejections. They are getting knocked back again and again, and signing on to benefits because they see no other way. They are missing out on the chance to have money in their pockets that they have earned themselves, on the first step towards independence, and on the experience gained in the early years in work, on which future working lives are built. Forget saving to buy a first car or home; dreams and ambitions are being shot to pieces. These people are becoming Britain's lost generation.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): I have a lot of sympathy for the situation that the hon. Lady describes. The number of people who are NEET is very

high, but that trend started in 2021, when her party was in government—the election was not until two years ago. Why did the Conservatives not do anything about the situation then?

Helen Whately: I am glad that the hon. Lady has some sympathy with the position of young people who are struggling to get jobs. My party halved unemployment; her party's record is of unemployment going up and up. Since Labour has been in power, unemployment has gone up every single month.

What is going on? What is going on is them: the Labour Government. Same old Labour—in they come and up go taxes and up goes unemployment, every single time. They put taxes up by £36 billion in their first Budget, and not just any old taxes. Their national insurance hike was specifically a tax on employment—literally a jobs tax. If you tax it, you will get less of it. That is not rocket science; it is basic economics.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): UKHospitality says that we could be seeing the death of the great British summer job, and even Labour's own Alan Milburn has warned that there is a long-standing decline in the number of 16 and 17-year-olds getting Saturday jobs. Previous Labour Governments always shoved up youth unemployment, but never before has Labour threatened to destroy the great British summer job. That is much to be regretted, and it is about time that the Government turned around their jobs tax and Employment Rights Bill policies.

Helen Whately: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Summer and holiday jobs are important ways for young people to gain experience before they leave education and seek full-time jobs, but there has been a shocking decline in the availability of such jobs because of this Government, who have increased regulation and the cost of employment—that is exactly the problem.

On exactly the point about regulation and red tape, the Employment Rights Bill is making it harder for businesses to employ people. Labour says that it wants to achieve growth, but its policies are obviously going to achieve the exact opposite. The problem is that Labour Members do not understand business. Have they any idea how hard it is to break even, let alone to make a profit; any idea how hard it is for people who have started a business to bring in enough to cover the payroll each month, never mind pay themselves; or any idea how hard it is for business owners to make their staff redundant because they cannot afford to keep paying them? Of course they do not, because how many Labour Front Benchers have worked in a business—I am not counting union officials—let alone run one?

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): As my previous career was in advising businesses up and down the country, I take some issue with the hon. Lady's point that there is no experience among Labour Members. She says that taxes, particularly the rise in national insurance, are causing the rise in youth unemployment, but does she know at what level of income young people, specifically those under 21, start to attract national insurance contributions?

Helen Whately: I am perfectly well aware of the policy on national insurance. I take the hon. Gentleman's point that some Labour MPs do have business experience,

but if we look at Labour Front Benchers, particularly those in the Cabinet, we will see that they are few and far between. If he has been talking to businesses—he clearly knows some—he will hear them say, as they have said directly to me and many of my hon. Friends, that it is the Labour Government's policies that are making it so hard and so expensive to employ people, particularly young people. Even if Government Members do not have business experience, they could and should listen to what businesses have been telling them.

For instance, Kate Nicholls of UKHospitality said that Labour's 2024 Budget did "unthinkable damage" to the sector. She was backed up by her colleague, Allen Simpson, who said recently that if the Government continue their approach,

"we will only see job losses and business closures accelerate."

That sector has shed over 100,000 jobs under this Government.

Jane Gratton, from the British Chambers of Commerce, said that Labour's policies are

"deeply worrying for employers. They will increase employment costs, complexity and risk for firms, particularly SMEs...Government needs to help not hinder businesses".

That is the crux of the matter: Labour sees businesses as a cash cow, not as the engine of the economy, and young people in particular are suffering as a result.

Before businesses start letting people go, they generally stop hiring, and that is what they are doing. And when they stop hiring, who gets hit hardest? Young people. By hitting hospitality—all those pubs and cafés where people get their first jobs—the Government are hitting young people again. The simple fact is that there are fewer jobs for young people under this Government. This unemployment disaster for young people is not something that has just happened on this Labour Government's watch—it is a disaster of their making.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): My hon. Friend makes the point so well. It is deeply worrying that in the Walsall borough, in my constituency, youth unemployment is higher than the national average. The truth is that youth unemployment has skyrocketed under Labour's watch. Does my hon. Friend agree that a big part of the problem is that we have a Labour Government who do not understand that the more they squeeze business, the more they squeeze job opportunities for young people?

Helen Whately: My right hon. Friend makes the point so clearly. It is so obvious to the Conservatives, as the party of business, that if the Government keep taxing business, there will be fewer jobs—but they just do not seem to get it.

Labour Members do know that they are in trouble, though. That is why they are talking up their youth programmes, youth hubs and youth guarantees—[*Laughter.*] Labour Members are laughing, but they should listen. The hon. Member for Exeter (Steve Race) says from a sedentary position that it was our programme—exactly that! Most of these things are just rebrands of programmes that the Conservatives started. We started youth hubs. Changing the name of the youth offer to the "youth guarantee" does not solve the problem. Of course there is part to play for training programmes and work placements in helping people to bridge the gap

between school and work, but Government programmes are not the answer to the fundamental problem. Young people want jobs, and this Government are killing jobs.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): The shadow Secretary of State is obviously well known for speaking clearly and candidly, which is refreshing. Can she clearly and candidly answer these questions? Which rights does she think young people should be denied in order to get into work? By how much would she cut the minimum wage to facilitate those young people getting back into work? Unfortunately, she cannot have it both ways. She has just made the point that those rights are hindering business, so what would she do to cut them? Will she make a clear commitment at the Dispatch Box?

Helen Whately: I enjoyed the way in which the hon. Gentleman led into his question with a bit of flattery, but I will not be drawn on his attempt to make me talk about the minimum wage or down the routes that he asks me to take, as much as he may love me to do so.

However, I will talk about our record in government. We halved unemployment. We got record numbers of people into work. We backed businesses to create 800 jobs for every day that we were in government. We reformed welfare to make work pay. We brought down the benefits bill. None of those things are on the cards under this Labour Government. They are crushing businesses with taxes and red tape, destroying jobs and driving up unemployment. They U-turned on welfare savings and put up taxes on working people by £26 billion at the last Budget to pay for the ballooning benefits bill.

I will not argue that we got everything right. Some of the graduates struggling to get jobs have degrees that are not actually of any help to them, and they took those degrees when we were in government. Under us, through the pandemic and afterwards, the number of young people dropping out of work and on to benefits because of their mental health went up. We wanted to end the stigma around mental illness, but the consequences have been far-reaching. Our welfare system was not designed to support people with milder mental health problems or milder neurodiversity, or for a time when a quarter of people report themselves as disabled.

The system is not working; instead, it is funnelling people off work and on to benefits. Now, with the Government's failure to reform welfare, young people are stuck in a benefits trap—they are better off on benefits and fearful of losing them if they get a job. Let us add to that the stress and misery of trying and failing again and again to get a job, because jobs are fewer and farther between. Most young people I have spoken to do not want to be on benefits, but that is where they are ending up.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady at least welcome the job guarantee for 18 to 21-year-olds? Does she think that that represents this Government working with employers such as the Premier League and the FA to create opportunities? Is that not in stark contrast with her Government, who watched opportunities disappear while they did FA?

Helen Whately: If the hon. Gentleman had been listening, he would have heard me say that there is a place for programmes that support young people into work,

[Helen Whately]

particularly if they find that they do not have the skills needed to do the jobs in their area. When we were in government, we had programmes like that, and those programmes are being continued under this Government.

However, there is a fundamental problem with the idea and concept of a youth guarantee, which has wobbled a bit at different announcements and different times. The problem is that the Government are trying to guarantee somebody a job, but destroying the jobs that businesses are creating. The right way to solve the problem is to back businesses to create jobs, not take some kind of socialist, communist or even Marxist approach and create a job with taxpayers' money so that somebody is in work.

The situation is looking pretty bleak. That is a disaster for a generation of young people and our economy, but it does not have to be like this. Even in a world of artificial intelligence, there is another way. It starts with backing businesses, because they are the ones that create jobs, and cutting taxes, cutting red tape, scrapping the swathes of regulation that stop businesses giving young people a summer job or a Saturday shift, and getting government out of the way so that young people can get on.

I welcome the Government's U-turn on probation periods—many businesses told me that that policy would have deterred them from taking a chance on a young person. I also welcome the Government's latest U-turn on business rates for pubs. How many U-turns are we on? Is it 13? What about the rest of hospitality? Why not adopt our policy and scrap business rates, not just for pubs, but for high street shops too? I ask the Minister not just to send young people off on more training courses or work experience schemes. What young people want now is jobs. Why not adopt our policy to double the number of apprenticeships and end debt-trap degrees, too?

We do not have to have a lost generation, but we need a Government who will make different choices—who will back businesses to create jobs, scrap degrees that do not pay back, reform welfare so that it pays to work, help this generation make their way in life, and get our country working again.

4.25 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions (Dame Diana Johnson): I beg to move an amendment, to leave out from "House" to end and insert:

"welcomes the Government's commitment to invest in young people's futures; notes that the UK has the second highest youth employment rate in the G7; recognises that the Government announced more than £1.5 billion of investment over the next three years, consisting of £820 million of funding for the Youth Guarantee to support young people to earn or learn, and £725 million for the Growth and Skills Levy; further welcomes that the expanded Youth Guarantee will reach almost 900,000 young people, including through Youth Hubs in every area in Great Britain and a new Youth Guarantee Gateway; further notes that this investment will also create around 300,000 more opportunities to gain workplace experience and training; and further recognises that, as part of the Youth Guarantee, the Government is breaking the cycle of unemployment by guaranteeing paid work to around 55,000 young people aged 18 to 21 who have been on Universal Credit and looking for work for 18 months."

In the north, we would say that the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) has some brass neck to make the speech she has just delivered. As an MP who has been in the House for some time, it might be helpful to us all if I remind the hon. Lady about her party's record over the past 14 years. Her party fumbled the handling of the pandemic, setting back a whole generation of kids. It failed to deal with the growing mental health crisis among young people, left school buildings to crumble, and decimated youth centres.

Let us just look at the facts about youth employment specifically. Under the last Conservative Government, the number of young people not in education, employment or training grew by 45% in just three years. Scarily, that left almost 1 million young people—one in eight—on the sidelines when the Conservatives were chucked out of office.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dame Diana Johnson: I am just going to complete the Conservatives' record, because I think it would be beneficial for us all to hear it. When the Conservatives were chucked out, the youth unemployment rate stood at 13%, compared with just over 9% two years earlier, and the number of young people economically inactive due to long-term sickness had more than doubled in five years to over a quarter of a million on the Conservatives' watch. They also failed to support young people in the face of the changing retail sector, for example. Many young people start their careers in that sector—I certainly started with a Saturday job—but retail job opportunities have fallen since 2017 as new technology changes how people shop and how shops employ people. The Conservatives took no action on that, so their legacy for young people looks pretty dismal from virtually every angle.

Graham Stuart: Will the Minister give way?

Dame Diana Johnson: I will give way to my near neighbour.

Graham Stuart: In my experience, my neighbour is always a fair and credible person, so will she confirm that youth unemployment reduced over the 14 years that the Conservatives were in government, rather than focusing on some selective period over covid in order to give an entirely partisan and biased view of the statistics? The numbers went down, did they not? The only Government who put up youth unemployment by 45% were the last Labour Government.

Dame Diana Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman, who is a close neighbour in East Yorkshire, says that I am being partial and only giving part of the picture. I think I have been setting out a very full explanation of what the Conservatives delivered for young people over 14 years.

To expand on that point a little, the Conservatives are now talking about the need to increase apprenticeships, for example. On their watch, there was a collapse in youth apprenticeships—starts were down by almost 40% under the Conservative Government over the past decade, leaving this Labour Government to reverse that decline. They have also been critical of the welfare system for trapping people out of work; they seem to have forgotten that they presided over it for 14 years. The Conservatives introduced that system, and it has now been left to us to

address the disincentive to work that they built into it. We started to deal with that task through the Universal Credit Act last year.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Dame Diana Johnson: No, I will make some progress. Put simply, the Conservatives cut off opportunity for young people. They wrote them off, and then they blamed young people for the position they were in. On the Government Benches, we know that young people are this country's future and that their success is Britain's success. We are not prepared to sit on our hands and let all that talent and potential go unused. That is not good enough for those young people, and it is not good enough for this country, which needs the contribution they can offer more than ever and not just now, but for the next 40 years.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Dame Diana Johnson: No, I am going to make some progress. We are investing in young people to turn around the dire legacy that the Conservatives left behind. We are supporting young people so that they can fulfil their potential, breaking the cycle of wasted talent cascading down generations. We are starting already to see some signs of progress. We have got record levels of employment and youth employment is up by 153,000 in the past year, but the scale of the crisis brewed up by the Conservatives requires much more than that. The number of young people neither learning nor earning is equivalent to three cities the size of Hull, so we know that there is more to do.

Dr Evans: Will the Minister give way?

Dame Diana Johnson: I will later on, but I want to get this on the record. We know that if someone falls out of the workforce—[*Interruption.*] The Conservative MPs chuntering from a sedentary position might just want to listen to this, because it is about the future of our country. We know that if someone falls out of the workforce when they are young, they can lose out on £1 million in earnings, and it costs the state a similar amount to support them, but if we can ensure that they get the right opportunities and support early on, we can change their life stories for the better. That is why we are helping more young people into work, and it is why youth employment is a priority for us in the DWP.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): In my constituency and across Kent we are pleased to be one of the trailblazer areas for the Connect to Work programme, which started under this Government, not the last Government. It gives people personalised support to stay in work and to get jobs in the first place, ensuring that they have a long-term future in the workplace. Is that not the sort of serious intervention we need to deal with unemployment among young people?

Dame Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That is the kind of initiative that will help deliver for these young people who are out of work, particularly with health problems, health conditions and disabilities.

I think all of us in the House would recognise how disheartening it can be for young people who are looking for work who cannot find that opportunity. They may not have the confidence or knowledge to apply for the jobs that are out there. Let us put ourselves in the shoes of an 18-year-old who has perhaps lost their way a little bit and does not have the confidence; it can be difficult for them to go into a jobcentre to find out what opportunities are available. That is why, as part of the youth guarantee, we are expanding the DWP youth hubs located in places such as football clubs and other sports facilities to more than 350 areas across Great Britain. I accept that youth hubs were part of the previous Government's plans to deal with youth unemployment, but they were small in number. We are expanding them to 350.

Youth hubs are helping people such as Erin, a young woman who was unemployed for two years and struggling with her motivation. After visiting a youth hub based at Crystal Palace football club, she was able to complete a work placement before being offered a permanent job. That came off the back of joining a hospitality programme, which gave her valuable experience and confidence. It goes to show what young people can achieve when they are motivated, confident and have that self-belief. That is why the expansion of youth hubs forms just one part of our wider youth guarantee, which is designed to make sure that no young person is left behind.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): In East Kent, there is a company called HatHats, which runs coffee bars. The proprietor philanthropically employs hard-to-employ young people. In the last 12 months for which figures are available, the profit on all 25 of its outlets was £12. As a direct result of this Government's policies, those young people are losing out on the opportunities that the Minister is describing.

Dame Diana Johnson: I will come on to talk a little about some of the accusations levelled at the Government in relation to national insurance contributions, so I shall deal with that point later in my speech, if I may.

The youth hubs will offer a helping hand, whether with writing a CV or with obtaining a work placement to include on a CV. We have announced that over the next three years, we will invest £820 million to support almost 900,000 young people who are on universal credit and looking for work. There will be new dedicated work support sessions, followed by intensive, tailored assistance to help those young people secure the right job, training or learning opportunity. We are backing that up by funding about 300,000 more opportunities for people to gain work experience and training in sectors such as construction and hospitality.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her great explanation of youth hubs. We have just opened one at the Peterborough United—Posh—stadium, bringing together all sorts of partnerships. A number of issues are raised by the young people I speak to there, which the youth hub addresses. One of those issues is an element of the Opposition's record that they have not talked about, namely the decimation of in-work support, and of career services in schools to give young people advice and help. Opposition Members talked a lot about apprentices and undergraduates, but

[*Andrew Pakes*]

they did not talk about levels 2 and 3, and the engine-room apprentices we need. The youth hub will start getting us back to that in Peterborough.

Dame Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend has made his point very well indeed.

Let me return to the subject of the youth guarantee. There will be guaranteed jobs for about 55,000 people over the three years. Companies have already shown an interest in taking on such employees, including E.ON, JD Sports, Tesco and Tui, and we are grateful for the offers that they are making. We Labour Members have tackled these challenges before, under the last Labour Government, through the new deal for young people, and we will do it again now.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): Along with the youth hubs and the youth guarantee, there is the £725 million investment in apprenticeships. With its new technical excellence college status, Exeter college in my constituency is becoming one of the biggest providers of apprenticeships in the country. Does the Minister agree that that stands in stark contrast to the 50% increase in youth unemployment under the last Government?

Dame Diana Johnson: My hon. Friend has made his case very well. He referred to the £725 million for the growth and skills levy, which is part of the more than £1.5 billion that has been made available for employment and skills support in the Budget. That is very much needed after the dramatic decline in the number of young people starting apprenticeships under the last Government, which we will reverse. At the same time, we are strengthening our world-leading universities.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Dame Diana Johnson: I will make some progress, because many Back Benchers want to speak.

The skills White Paper sets out our plan to build a more specialised and more efficient higher education sector that will better meet the needs of the economy. The graduate economic inactivity rate is now at its lowest on record, and we want to build on that. We recognise the need for modern technical skills, and not just the old academic subjects. I saw that for myself at the Ron Dearing university technical college in Hull only last week—young people honing their skills and getting a brilliant education.

No matter what path young people choose, we want them to have the skills to succeed. Skills are vital in the world of work today, but more than a quarter of all vacancies are skills shortage vacancies. That is why, last year, the Prime Minister set out our bold ambition for two thirds of young people to enter higher-level education or training. We have added adult skills to the Department for Work and Pension's brief, to help us join up employment support and skills more closely, so that young people have genuine pathways into good jobs. We are significantly expanding sector-based work academy programmes—SWAPs—in England and Scotland; there will be more than 145,000 additional places over the next three years. Just today, our colleagues at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology announced a new package to give people the skills that will enable them to seize the opportunities that artificial intelligence will bring. That

includes an expansion of free AI foundation training for all workers, to upskill 10 million people by 2030. All this is about opening up opportunities for young people.

However, we want to make sure that no stone is left unturned. Last month, the Government unveiled our national youth strategy, which is backed by £500 million. It will rebuild the youth services that the Conservative party decimated, and help more young people transition into adulthood. The Secretary of State has commissioned Alan Milburn to complete a wide-ranging investigation into the causes of youth inactivity, and to come up with policy solutions across the piece. As a former Health Secretary, he is well placed to give particular focus to the role of health in all this. That is needed, because over a quarter of young people not in employment, education or training now cite long-term sickness or disability as a barrier—more than double the figure in 2013-14.

Too many people are shut out of the labour market by disability or ill health. This has worsened, especially since covid, so we are rolling out a £1 billion Pathways to Work offer, which brings together programmes such as Connect to Work, which my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson) referred to and which I have seen in action in Lewisham, where I met a neurodiverse young man who told me that the personalised support that he was receiving from the team was helping him to stay in work; and WorkWell, which is providing really impressive integrated work and health support that I recently had a chance to see in Cambridge. Pathways to Work will ultimately guarantee access to work, health and skills support for disabled people and those with long-term health conditions who are claiming out-of-work benefits. We already have 1,000 Pathways to Work advisers on hand to provide better one-to-one support. We know that prevention is better than cure, so we want to avoid people falling out of work due to ill health wherever possible, and employers have a unique role to play.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that while it is easy to debate who is getting it right and who is getting it wrong, fundamentally, we require a systemic shift in how we look at the problem, which is generational and intergenerational? Everything that she is outlining shows that we are taking a systemic view, to get to the cause of these problems, so that we can finally move forward for the generations that have been let down. We did not have that approach from the previous Government.

Dame Diana Johnson: Those are very wise words from my hon. Friend.

I want to say something about employers, because they have a vital role to play in all this. On keeping people in work when they develop an illness or a disability, we are really pleased that we are working with over 100 Vanguard employers to take forward the recommendations in Sir Charlie Mayfield's "Keep Britain Working" review, and helping to create a picture of what best practice looks like when it comes to building healthy and inclusive workplaces. We have had an outstanding response from businesses, because they know that when their workers win, they win too. Contrary to what some people say and believe, the interests of employees and employers are not diametrically opposed. Everybody wins when workers are secure, happy and healthy.

That leads me on to the Employment Rights Act 2025, which includes reforms such as the extension of statutory sick pay, so that more people can take the time they need to recover, instead of risking longer-term absences. That is not just good for workers; it is good for businesses, too.

I want to address the issue of national insurance contributions and business rates. Let us be clear: employers generally do not have to pay any employer national insurance contributions for employees under the age of 21 or for apprentices under 25. Yesterday we announced that every pub and live music venue will get 15% off its new business rates bill. That is on top of the support announced at the Budget. Bills will then be frozen, in real terms, for a further two years. This Government will always support businesses, giving them the stability that they need to grow, and to create good jobs.

Before I finish, there is one other thing I want to talk about. What happens at the start of people's working lives can have many consequences for their future, and the same is true of what happens in our childhood. When a young person ends up out of work or training, it is no use pretending that that has suddenly come about in a bubble. Someone who grows up poor is less likely to do well at school and more likely to be a NEET. Poverty, low attainment and low aspiration can not only waste the potential of a young life, but cascade on to the next generation. Shockingly, the number of children in poverty increased by over 900,000 under the Conservatives, which is shameful, and they now come to this House to ask why a generation is struggling.

We are very proud to be lifting the two-child limit. That will have benefits for hundreds of thousands of children, who will be less likely to experience mental health issues, less likely to be unemployed, and more likely to be in work and earning more, yet the Conservatives oppose it. As ever, they seem determined to pull the rug out from under the next generation, and does that not sum them up? They blame; we support. They complain; we fix. They cut; we build.

We will never forget the neglect that left our young people without the hope and opportunity that every generation deserves, but this Government are doing things differently. We are laying the foundations for young people to succeed, and giving them the opportunities that they need and the skills and support to seize them. These opportunities are of course accompanied by obligations to take them up, but that is so much better than a life that is just written off. We are breaking down barriers to opportunity, so that every young person, in every part of our United Kingdom, can fulfil their potential.

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

4.45 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Youth unemployment has risen since Labour took power. The rate is now above 15%, which means that more than one in seven 18 to 24-year-olds are not in employment. That is a really troubling statistic, but it has its roots in the Conservatives' dismal economic record. The economic challenges we face did not develop overnight. The previous Government's economic chaos and mismanagement damaged jobs

and young people's employment prospects. The Conservative party failed to invest in skills and workforce planning, which is contributing to the shortage of quality entry-level jobs available to people leaving college or university.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I have carefully read the Opposition motion on this hugely important issue, and I am rather concerned that transport is not mentioned once. Transport is a massive barrier to employment and training for young people in North Norfolk, but the Conservatives do not seem to realise that it is an issue. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that poor rural public transport is trapping young people in my area in unemployment, and that the Conservatives should apologise to those young people for the state that they have left us in?

Sarah Olney: My hon. Friend is right. Young people face so many barriers to accessing both education and employment, and that is very much a legacy of the last Conservative Government and their mismanagement.

Young people are increasingly concerned about the fact that the links between education and employment have become weaker and weaker.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Does the hon. Member agree that, under the Conservatives, career advice in schools was absolutely decimated and hollowed out, pushing young people to the margins? On top of that, does she agree that young people are unable to do the gold-standard apprenticeships that my dad and my brother did, as those apprenticeships were neglected by the Conservatives, in favour of more academic routes?

Sarah Olney: The hon. Lady is absolutely right about apprenticeships, and I will say more about them in due course.

In years past, those who went to university and attained a good degree could reasonably expect an entry-level job in the field in which they wanted to work, but now the experience for so many young people is that they enter a job market that is not open to hiring inexperienced people; employers are less willing or able to take a risk on training individuals just out of university. When I spoke to business students from Roehampton University earlier this month, they explained to me their fears that they will be unable to work in the field of their choosing. One student told me that they had even seen an advertisement for a volunteering position that required three years of experience. The job market is so crowded and competitive that the reality for more and more graduates is that they must return to living with their parents after university, with no serious prospect of gaining even an entry-level job.

Dr Luke Evans: Does the hon. Member share my concern about the graduate market? We are talking about youth unemployment, but we know from the Office for National Statistics that 257,000 Brits have emigrated, of whom 70% were under the age of 35. We are losing a lot of talent, but that is not being picked up in the figures for youth unemployment, so it is likely that youth unemployment is actually significantly worse, and that is because of the Government's changes.

Sarah Olney: One of my big concerns is that, for our economy, we are not getting that pipeline of young people into those entry-level jobs. That threatens our future sustainability and growth, as well as imperilling the prospects of those young people who cannot gain a role.

Those students also expressed their concerns about artificial intelligence replacing many professional jobs, making the skills that they are learning surplus to requirements for many employers. As the Government look to promote public sector efficiency through using AI, many young people are worried that that will mean even fewer jobs for them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I always try to be constructive with my interventions and comments. In Northern Ireland, youth unemployment is at 7.3%, but here it is more than double that at, I think, 15.4%. Does the hon. Lady agree that we should look at success stories in this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland where youth unemployment has reduced by so much? In Northern Ireland, we focused on young Protestant males from 12 to 18 who could not get jobs, and reduced the unemployment rate. If we can do that in Northern Ireland, I am quite sure that we could do the same on the mainland. Does the hon. Lady agree that we should look at that?

Sarah Olney: The hon. Gentleman always makes constructive interventions. He is absolutely right that we need to look at what works. We need to focus on this issue not just for the health and benefit of our young people but for the economy as a whole.

Although we should continue to invest in technological breakthroughs, I am concerned that the Government do not have a strategy for our young people who could be pushed out of the job market by automation. I would be grateful if the Minister responded to that.

There is also a lack of alternatives for young people who wish to upskill, as the apprenticeship pathway is so limited. Businesses tell me that the apprenticeship levy does not work, despite the Government's attempts at reform. The Liberal Democrats have long called for reform to replace it with a wider skills and training levy, which would give businesses real flexibility about how they spend the money to train their staff and, consequently, provide young people with a better avenue to enter the workforce. The decision taken to defund level 7 apprenticeships for over-22s risks limiting those opportunities. In 2024-25, 51% of all apprenticeship starts were for those aged 25 and over. That is a critical skills pipeline in areas that are key to economic growth, and while the economy is changing so rapidly, we need to provide opportunities for older workers to retrain so that they can continue to find meaningful work later in life.

The Liberal Democrats would fix the skills and recruitment crisis by investing in education and training, including the availability of apprenticeships and career advice for young people. The current system needs to be reformed. That would include boosting the take-off of apprenticeships by guaranteeing that they are paid at least the national minimum wage from the first year, creating new lifelong skills grants for adults to spend on education and training throughout their lives, and expanding vocational training. Although the Liberal Democrats

welcomed discussions in the Budget regarding a wider youth guarantee and a growth and skills levy package, I have yet to understand the timeline for implementation. With youth unemployment rising, I encourage the Government to take quick and active steps to deliver that package.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): In Torbay, we have an incredible organisation called Sound Communities. Some young people are not in the position to take up an apprenticeship because, having suffered significant trauma in their lives, they need to build up their confidence. Sound Communities helps these youngsters get themselves in the right position to take up their place in this world. Does my hon. Friend agree that what we need is long-term funding to support these youngsters, so that they can have the opportunities and futures that they deserve?

Sarah Olney: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There are groups of young people who are facing specific barriers to entering employment, and we need to do all we can to provide them with sustained support to get into and stay in the workplace.

Much of the UK's current workforce challenges are due to the mistakes made by the current Government, with perhaps no bigger own goal than the surprise increase in employer national insurance contributions in the Chancellor's first Budget. Almost every business that I, and I am sure many other Members, speak to tells me that the NICs rise blindsided it and has since seriously damaged its cash flow and ability to hire and retain staff. That policy alone has been so damaging to the business sector and has created an environment in which companies are discouraged from hiring young people.

Recent Government decisions include the devastating business rates hike in the Chancellor's most recent Budget. This is causing huge damage to hospitality firms, with many now considering whether their business remains viable. Our hospitality businesses, which so frequently provide young people with their first jobs, are now on their knees. They need support from the Government. The Government's statement yesterday on cutting business rates for pubs was a good first step, but we need wholesale reform of our business rates system. That is one more reason why the business community felt so betrayed by the previous Conservative Government, who promised reform but did nothing to help our struggling businesses.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): My hon. Friend is highlighting two important things. The increases in on-costs for businesses mean that they are not taking on young people. More importantly, they are not then able to support the supervisory roles that give those young people the development they need, because they cannot make the differentiation in terms of salary. I am standing here as a Scottish MP. The Scottish Government did not pass on the business rate relief the last time. They have confirmed that they will do so for Barnett consequentials, but does she agree that the Scottish Government are simply not doing enough in this area and that, in fact, we are in a worse position than what is being debated today?

Sarah Olney: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her intervention. She speaks very passionately about businesses in Scotland and the situation they are facing. I am sure she is correct to say that it is even more challenging in Scotland.

I am concerned that the Government's sole focus on pubs and live music venues ignores the other retail, hospitality and leisure sectors which also need support. I therefore urge the Government to adopt Liberal Democrat proposals to cut the rate of VAT on hospitality, accommodation and attractions to 15% until April 2027, which would give our businesses the boost they so desperately need. Our high streets and town centres are in need of urgent help, and I urge the Government to act with all swiftness.

With the hospitality sector struggling to employ new workers, damage is being done to the prospects of our young people who are struggling with unemployment levels, and that will be detrimental to the broader economy. At the heart of this debate is that regular people are finding it incredibly difficult to find a job to support themselves, their partners, their children and their families, and to pay rent, pay for groceries and pay for essentials. That is what must not get lost in this debate.

While the Government seem to be weighing up their options on the EU re-set, they should be reminded that negotiating a new UK-EU customs union is the single biggest step that the UK could take to boost our economy, our businesses and our young people's job prospects. The appalling agreement negotiated by the Conservative party has been a complete disaster for our country, particularly for small businesses who are held back by reams of red tape and new barriers to trade. So many young people I talk to are simply frustrated that they are the first generation who have to start their career while reaping the consequences of the Conservatives' botched deal.

It seems evident from the Liberal Democrat Benches that the Government know that the UK must rectify the dismal trade deal negotiated by the Conservatives, and I am yet to hear a compelling reason from the Government as to why Ministers keep refusing to negotiate a new customs agreement with Europe. The steps the Government are taking to rebuild our relationship with the EU are welcomed by the Liberal Democrats, but I urge the Government to be bolder. This House voted in favour of joining a bespoke UK-EU customs union just last month. I urge the Government to seize that momentum, reach out to our European allies and negotiate a deal that would be mutually beneficial, creating countless new jobs for our young people here in the UK.

The Government cannot ignore the difficulties facing our young people anymore. Our young people need to be provided with a pathway for success and fewer barriers to getting on to the career ladder, but I am afraid the Government are failing to facilitate that. I urge Ministers to listen and adopt a joined-up strategy to tackle youth unemployment, invest in young people's skills, boost apprenticeships and work-based training, and support businesses to create quality jobs.

4.58 pm

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on such an important subject.

When I think of youth unemployment, what immediately comes to mind is the young woman I met on the doorstep during the election campaign who told me how she had been looking for work for a long time and just did not know how she was going to get a job. The hopelessness

she felt was clear. Like her, far too many young people were left stuck at home and let down under the previous Government. As we have heard, it was during their last term in power that the number of young people not in education, employment or training shot up, growing by almost 50% between 2021 and 2024. They left a situation for young people where doors appeared to only close and never open.

The Government are determined to change that and so am I. From speaking to young people in Norwich, I know that they want that change, too. That is why opportunity has been one of my key priorities since day one, with a focus on opportunity for children and young people. Young people in Norfolk have spoken to me about some of the specific challenges they face—this has been alluded to—such as poor transport infrastructure, so it can be difficult to get to work, and, of course, the challenge of mental health.

But we need to better understand why so many young people have been left behind, which is why I welcome the Alan Milburn review, which will do exactly that. The causes of youth inactivity are not simple; we cannot put them down to one single factor. They are complex, they are not one size fits all, and we have to look at the structural causes as well. It is crucial that in that review the voices of young people themselves are heard. I know there has been a call for evidence, but I hope the Minister can expand on how young people in Norwich and across the country can get involved in this consultation.

I also want to mention the specific challenges faced by young people with special educational needs and disabilities. There is a theme that parents and young people have raised with me time and again in Norwich North. They felt that too often there was a cliff edge at 16 where young people were at risk of being left without adequate support to continue into education or to find a job that met their needs. There is much we disagree on in this House, as we have heard today, but I hope that we can all agree that we want a country where young people are supported into good jobs, work and employment and are able to fulfil their potential.

I welcome the Government's approach and want to touch on some of the programmes being rolled out so far. There will be 360 youth hubs, and I am pleased that there will be three in Norfolk, including one in Norwich, and thousands more training and workplace opportunities in sectors from construction to health and social care for young people on universal credit, and of course there is the jobs guarantee that means that 18 to 21-year-olds on UC who have been looking for work for more than 18 months will be provided with six months of paid employment.

We must also focus on early intervention. This is key. As Youth Futures has identified, key factors that increase the risk of a young person being not in education, employment or training include poor school attendance, low attainment at GCSE and exclusion. That is why the schools White Paper will also be so important, and why it is vital that this is a whole-of-Government approach. I also welcome that the Government are investing in a new preventive tool that will help share data between councils and schools so that we can identify and support young people most at risk.

I want to turn to the local. I am working closely with the Department for Work and Pensions jobcentre in Norwich, city college and my hon. Friend the Member

[Alice Macdonald]

for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) to identify more work that can be done locally on this important agenda. Indeed, we met yesterday to discuss how we can help match young people with employment opportunities locally. I also regularly meet with local employers and apprenticeship providers to hear their perspectives, and there is much good work already under way. Last year, I was pleased to welcome the Minister for Social Security and Disability to visit Mind in Norwich. We learned about its excellent local routes into employment project, which helps people living with mental health conditions to find and keep paid employment that suits their individual needs. We spoke to a young person who had benefited from that support and a local employer who had given that young person a chance but had also felt many benefits. I am pleased that the Minister was looking at this project as it is exactly the kind of thing we should be supporting. I also welcome the Government's investment in the connect to work scheme in Norfolk, working with Norfolk county council, which will support over 4,000 Norfolk residents facing extra barriers into work. That will benefit many young people.

Finally, I visited a local sixth form late last year. One of the many questions I was asked was about how we can equalise the minimum wage, because those present told me that they often felt underpaid and undervalued, and I was pleased to be able to tell them that this Government are listening and that paying young people a decent wage does matter. Just a few days later, we raised the national minimum wage for young people. For any Opposition Members who challenged this—and it felt like they were doing so a little bit—I challenge them to look young people in the eye and tell them why they do not deserve to be paid fairly, why their futures should not be invested in, and why they do not deserve that support.

My message to all young people today is that under this Government they will not find false promises or quick solutions that fail to materialise, but they will find a proper plan backed by investment that puts our money where our mouth is and invests in young people's future.

5.3 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): There are many ways that we can express it, but none of them are good: youth unemployment is at 15.9%; it is up 10%; it is up 1.5 percentage points; it is up over 100,000 in the last year; it is at a 10-year high—higher than in the covid era.

Let us be clear: this is not economic inactivity we are talking about; it is unemployment. The definition of unemployment is not about who is claiming benefits; it is about having had no income whatever—not having worked for a paid hour—in the reference week. It is about being available for work and actively looking for work. That is the number that has gone up. The increasing number of people who are both studying and seeking to work—for whom, by the way, zero-hours contracts are especially relevant—is a particular issue, and I will come back to that point.

Unemployment overall has gone up, but it is young people who have borne the brunt; the rate of increase has been almost twice as high for young people as it has overall. To be fair, that is usually the case—when there

is rising unemployment, it is always young people who feel it first and hardest. Why? Well, as the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), said, the first thing that employers do when things look uncertain or difficult is to stop hiring. A hiring freeze is the quickest way to cut down the payroll.

Secondly, if companies have to let people go, I am afraid that redundancy is cheaper when it comes to younger people, so they sometimes deploy a LIFO rule—last in, first out. There is then the secondary effect that the more experienced workers can fill the vacancies. On top of that, we have the situation at the moment whereby sectors that disproportionately employ young people—in shops, restaurants, hotels and throughout retail, hospitality and leisure—have been particularly hard hit by the national insurance and business rates hikes.

I said that youth unemployment usually tends to rise faster and be higher than overall unemployment. That is true, but historically it is not as true in this country as it is in the rest of Europe. There are exceptions—in Germany and the Netherlands, for example—but it is the case in southern Europe. After the crash under the previous Labour Government in 2007-08, there was talk of a lost generation in southern Europe as youth unemployment rates soared so high.

Why should the situation in those countries be different from the situation in countries like ours? There is a fancy economics term for it: insider-outsider theory. That theory basically says that when there are economic troubles in a system that has very heavily regulated labour markets, very high levels of employment protection and the very heavy involvement of trade unions, all the help tends to go to the people in work, and it is those trying to get into work—the outsiders—who suffer as a result. Historically, our country has had more liberalised—although not totally liberalised—labour markets, which has meant that we have not had those problems with youth unemployment to the same extent as some of our near neighbours in Europe, and we have tended to recover more quickly when they do occur.

Right now, we have the historical rarity—I am not sure it is unique, but it is certainly a rarity—that the ratio of youth unemployment to total unemployment in the UK is higher than it is in the EU. That is before we feel all the effects of the Employment Rights Act 2025; I am sure that some effects were there already, but we have yet to feel the full effect. That Act will discourage taking on new workers, especially new untested workers, and that is of course what youth unemployment is.

Let me talk about one aspect of the 2025 Act: zero-hours contracts. These contracts have a special place in Labour mythology, which comes from the time when the last leader of the party, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), used to bring them up every week at Prime Minister's questions, saying that they were an epidemic, ripping apart our country. At the time, the Conservatives researched how big a deal zero-hours contracts were, and it turned out that fewer than 3% of workers had a zero-hours contract for their main job. There were others who had one for a second job, including many working as bank staff in the NHS. There were also lots of students on them. It turned out that the average number of hours on a zero-hours contract was 25, and—here's the bit that nobody could

accept—the average job satisfaction of people on a zero-hours contract was higher than it was for workers overall.

Those on the Government Benches have been grimacing a little, but I do not know how many of them know that the proportion of people on zero-hours contracts has gone up since the general election of 2024. They are just a part of our economy. They are also heavily skewed towards young people, such as students working in sectors like hospitality and other seasonal occupations. About 40% of people with a zero-hours contract job are under 25.

I myself was once a young person with a zero-hours contract—I just did not know it was called that. If colleagues across the House think back to their first job, perhaps washing up in a restaurant or working shifts in a shop, they probably did not know at the start if they would be working exactly the same number of hours every week and so on; it turns out that a lot of us probably had our first opportunity in the world of work through a zero-hours contract. It will be true for people even after the Employment Rights Act—those with such a contract will have some extra guarantees included in it. However, it will also be a bigger deal, from an employer's point of view, and it will add some risk to taking on young people. What will be the balance for employers and employees? It is, for Ministers, a leap of faith.

Andrew Pakes: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman's knowledge and his passion for this subject. I would just suggest that he perhaps underestimates the impact that insecure work can have. In one of my brother's last jobs, he had to get in the car and start driving to work each morning before he would get a phone call telling him whether or not he had a shift that day. Does the right hon. Gentleman not think it is reasonable that people like my brother should know their shift a day in advance? That is the issue we are really talking about with insecure work. I understand that he is making a political point, but we are talking about real people's lives.

Damian Hinds: I am not making a political point. I think it is right and reasonable to give employees visibility, and all good employers who want to keep their employees will of course do the right thing and try to do so. The Employment Rights Act, however, does an awful lot more than just let people know some time in advance about the hours of their next shift.

The effects we see from the Employment Rights Act, taxation changes and other measures will not be mass lay-offs; it will be people—young people—not being taken on in the first place. Why does that matter? The Minister said it herself: it matters because of the scarring effect of youth unemployment. We know from studies that if someone is out of work in their early 20s, they can still be suffering the effects 20 or 30 years later.

There are things the Government could do to mitigate some of what is happening, including on the regulations coming out of the Employment Rights Act. However, I just wonder why they are doing it overall. I think it is because, in a world where there have been enough U-turns from this Government—actually, I do not think there have been enough yet, but there have been a lot—that legislation is something that Labour MPs can bring home and say, “This is a proper left-wing policy

that we have enacted.” But do they really want to bring home higher levels of youth unemployment in their constituencies? That is what will happen.

The Government have introduced a number of schemes to try to mitigate what is going on, some of which are welcome. All Governments introduce somewhat similar schemes. However, the 55,000 people who will be eligible for the jobs guarantee should be seen in the context of the more than 900,000 young people who are not in education, employment or training. The scheme is limited in the areas it covers and, I think, people are eligible only after they have been searching for a job for 18 months or more, which would obviously count out many young people.

I welcome Connect to Work, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for Dartford (Jim Dickson), although I do not think it is meant particularly for young people; it might nevertheless be helpful for people who have been off on long-term sick. I thought the timings sounded ambitious when the Government first announced it, though, so I would welcome the Minister telling us what they expect the numbers to be at the end of this financial year, including in my county of Hampshire.

I know that I have already spoken for 10 minutes, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I just want to set the record straight on apprenticeships, which have come up a number of times. I hope I can help the House with a non-partisan description of what has happened in relation to apprenticeships over the past 20 or more years. The truth is that under the previous Labour Government, and under the first few years of the coalition Government, many tens of thousands of young people were doing an apprenticeship without even knowing they were doing so, so thin and flimsy were those apprenticeships. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) may screw up his face, but that is true; the research evidence is available.

The previous Government therefore reformed apprenticeships to be a minimum of one year, with a minimum of 20% time off the job, end-point assessments and qualifications designed by employers themselves, overseen by an independent Institute for Apprenticeships. Yes, when we did that, the number of apprenticeships went down, and the numbers that the Minister was quoting were all from after that change. Making the specifications of a qualification considerably more exacting will of course have an effect on the numbers. But guess what the new Government are doing? The minimum length for an apprenticeship will now be eight months. Try telling a German captain of industry that it is possible to do an apprenticeship in eight months. Will the numbers go up? Of course they will!

I recently met hairdressers in my constituency and was reminded of how all this comes together. Hairdressers, like hospitality businesses and others, bring people into our town centres. They are more than just employers, and their businesses cannot just move online. They are now facing seriously higher employment costs, including national insurance contributions and, in many cases, much higher business rates, and that is before we get to the looming impact of the employment regulations. Hairdressers also have a very strong tradition of taking on large numbers of young people and apprenticeships. My worry is that, with the increase in costs, it will be

[*Damian Hinds*]

simply unaffordable for them to take on young people in nearly the same numbers. The same is true for pubs and many other employers.

We are seeing the early effects of Government policy in today's youth unemployment numbers, and I take no pleasure whatsoever in saying this, but I am afraid that they are going to get materially worse. I ask the Government to take that seriously and to act, not by delivering some short-term programmes but by rethinking their approach in order to make it easier and less costly for companies to take on young people so that they can start their careers and build their futures.

5.16 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): I am pleased to have an opportunity to talk about young people, how we invest in their future, extend opportunities and do all in our power to leave nobody behind, but in order to have a serious debate about the prospects of young people in work, we need to look back at the unique set of circumstances that people in their late teens and early 20s have faced growing up. They are the first generation to grow up in Brexit Britain. They had no say in the decision to leave and to devastate the trading relationship with our single largest trading partner. Their opportunities to work, study and travel in the EU were taken away by the Conservative party at great cost to them and to the economy.

This is a cohort of young people who were teenagers during the pandemic, patiently abiding by lockdown to protect their families, but with months, if not years, outside of the classroom. To be clear, I supported the public health measures, but the chaotic way that school closures were overseen was indefensible. The most fateful days were 4 and 5 January 2021. On 4 January, these young people were marched back into school, and on 5 January, they were sent home again—here today and gone tomorrow, much like the Conservative MPs that we have seen defecting to Reform.

Brexit, the chaotic Conservative management of the pandemic and Liz Truss blowing up the economy: that was the legacy left for young people by the previous Government. This Government are resolved to turning that around, and we understand that good prospects for young people must start with a strong economic foundation.

Since Labour came to office, the Bank of England has made the decision to cut interest rates six times. GDP growth last year was ahead of forecasts, and there are 500,000 more people in the labour market today than there were in July 2024. There are good reasons to be positive about the economy in 2026, but I absolutely recognise that we cannot be complacent. I know how difficult it can be for young people. Yes, that is because of the Conservative inheritance, but it is also because of the structural changes we are seeing: there can be intense competition for entry-level jobs; there is anxiety about the impact of artificial intelligence; and there are still too many people in insecure work.

If a strong economy is the first pillar of success, the second is to have a Government who are willing to intervene to help young people. This comes through investment in skills, access to training and, where needed, support so that young people can be placed in their first role. It is vital to invest in further education and higher education. In the community I represent, I am proud

that Welwyn Garden City is home to Oaklands college and that Hatfield is home to the University of Hertfordshire. Our ambition should be for at least two thirds of young people to go to college, start an apprenticeship or attend university, and across Welwyn Hatfield I believe that that number could be higher still.

The vast majority of young people still move quickly into work after education, but the jobs guarantee is a serious intervention to provide some people with the additional support that they need. The offer from the Government is clear: if a person is aged 18 to 21, is in receipt of universal credit and has been searching for work for 18 months or more, they will be offered paid employment for six months. The full scheme will cost the Government £820 million, but this is an active choice we are making to invest in young people, and it is a down payment on their future success.

It is also right that we passed the Employment Rights Act 2025. Thanks to the actions of this Labour Government, this generation of young people will no longer have to endure exploitative zero-hours contracts and will have the right to guaranteed shifts. They will also have day one rights to paternity leave, and no longer will people be excluded from statutory sick pay because their pay is too low.

The last Conservative Government were not prepared to intervene to support young people. The Conservatives and their friends in Reform voted against stronger rights at work for young people, and the Liberal Democrats bravely abstained. Only Labour understands that for young people to succeed we need a strong economy, continued investment in education and a willingness to intervene when the market alone does not provide the right opportunities. Young people backed Labour at the last election, and with the Employment Rights Act, the jobs guarantee and a rise in the living wage, we are backing them to succeed in the economy that we are turning around.

5.21 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): I appreciate that all Members across the House care about youth unemployment, but the way it is tackled is very different depending on from which party a Member hails.

We have rising youth unemployment, and the issue is taxation. Our businesses are facing an increased national insurance rate, and business rates on the high street are high. Hospitality and retail businesses are being taxed to the point where they cannot take on another employee, and usually that employee is a young person who is being given their first opportunity. The Government are making the job market so rigid and protecting workers' rights to the point where there will be no jobs available by the time young people are looking to get into employment. The Government are making it so restrictive that businesses do not want to take on new employees. First, they are not able to afford to and, secondly, there is so much restriction when they go to hire a new employee that they just will not do it. That will not be dealt with, and youth unemployment will continue to rise.

I have had a young person come to me who has just finished a degree in mathematics from Cambridge but cannot find a job. Someone else's son did a law degree but cannot find a job. I have people from every sector coming to me with their concerns: businesses are saying

that they cannot take on a new employee because they simply cannot afford it, and parents are desperate to get their child into any job.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) said, apprenticeships and zero-hours contracts were an opportunity for a young person to get their first job, for example in hospitality or retail. Working in those environments, with other people, teaches young people lessons that they can take forward in life to other jobs and opportunities. That is what young people need.

I would like to provide some historical context to the Minister's speech. In 2010, the Conservatives inherited from Labour youth unemployment at 20%, and nearly a million young people were out of work. Before the pandemic hit in 2020, the Conservatives had nearly halved it to just 12%. When we left office in 2024, despite the pandemic's effects, the level was just 13%. That was the result of our fixing the economy, driving up education standards and making work pay.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I am really impressed by how the hon. Lady is representing her constituents and businesses. I loved her summary of recent youth unemployment levels, but the reality is that when we came into power in 2024 youth unemployment was rising. We cannot blame the problems we are facing now on the current Government. One could argue that we are not making it better and that we could do more, but youth unemployment was rising at the time that we came into power and had been for many years.

Joy Morrissey: That intervention leads me to the statistics that we have today. Nearly 16% of young people—that is 729,000—are out of work. That figure is a staggering 103,000 higher than a year ago, and a further 2.88 million young people are economically inactive. Just to point out: that is more than when Labour took over from us. That is statistically accurate.

Dr Arthur: I accept that youth unemployment is higher now than when we took office. I regret that and it is great to see that the Government are doing more on it. The point I was making was that when we took office, youth unemployment was rising and it was rising fast. It has continued to rise, but it was rising then. That is my point.

Joy Morrissey: This is a youth unemployment crisis of Labour's own making. It is because of the national insurance tax hikes and the restrictions on business—

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Joy Morrissey: I will make some progress. The crisis will continue to be a problem that this Government face—mark my words.

Turning to my constituency of Beaconsfield, Marlow and the South Bucks villages, we have an incredible restaurant in Beaconsfield called The Greyhound. I strongly urge everyone to go to eat there. It has a wonderful apprenticeship programme that helps young people get their first job in hospitality, providing them with an incredible opportunity. I went to speak to them and they said, "This is great. I wasn't enjoying school and I now have an opportunity for a career in hospitality.

I am trained in every level of hospitality." They gave me a tour of the wine cellar and everything in between. They love it and are passionate about it.

The Greyhound tells me, however, that many businesses, and not just The Greyhound, cannot continue their apprenticeship programme because of the backdrop of the national insurance tax raid and an eye-watering hike in their business rates. They simply cannot continue the very successful programme that has changed young people's lives.

This is a Government who failed to listen to the urgent calls of businesses to stop their Employment Rights Act, which will destroy jobs while creating rights for jobs that will no longer exist. Young people need businesses to be able to create jobs for them and not be hamstrung by tax and employment policies that force employers to curtail opportunity. This is also a Government who sow utter chaos in our apprenticeship system at every turn.

With Labour Governments, rising youth unemployment—indeed, all unemployment—becomes a sad inevitability. Yet different choices can change that course for our young people and create a better future. Lowering business taxes to enable businesses to create jobs will help tackle the problem, as will putting evidence before ideology in education so that standards rise and do not collapse, and scrapping business rates on the high street. We will see many people coming back, many businesses coming back and many young people being employed. It will be a tremendous win for this Government if they try that.

The Government should also try reducing the tax burden for anybody under the age of 25. If they scrap the national insurance contribution for under-25s, this Government will see a tremendous rise in young people taking their first job with a business, because the risk is reduced for that business. Instead, we are forcing over-regulation on to businesses, crippling and closing them, and curtailing opportunities for young people. We should create an apprenticeship system built on aspiration that is about employment choice and stability, so that we continue to build on the great work that had already started and give young people an opportunity to get their first job and start their career. That is the future our young people deserve.

5.29 pm

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): This debate lays bare the sheer hypocrisy of the Conservative party. Although I certainly do not welcome the numbers we are seeing on youth unemployment and recognise the challenge, this is not an issue that was created today. It was overseen by 14 years of their Government, as young people were steadily pushed into the margins. After leaving nearly a million young people not in education, employment or training on their watch, it is convenient for them to come to the House to point fingers at those who are tasked with fixing the damage they caused.

Graham Stuart: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Naushabah Khan: No, I will continue.

Let us not forget the damage that the Conservatives caused by cutting youth services by 70% in real terms since 2010. A Government who presided over the rise in

[Naushabah Khan]

NEET numbers year after year cannot claim surprise at the consequences of hollowing out the skills system that once gave young people a route into meaningful work while more and more young people are falling out of the labour market due to ill health. The Leader of the Opposition said in a speech today, when referring to the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), that Britain needed an engineer, not a used car salesman. That is quite funny, because 14 years of Conservative government have left a generation of young people who might not have the opportunity to be either.

When the last Labour Government left office, they left a strong foundation of support for young people: a national careers guidance service, robust apprenticeships and a clear vocational pathway. Fourteen years later, those foundations lie in ruins. Connexions advisers are gone, opportunities for training have been slashed and, as I have said, nearly a million young people were left economically inactive.

Joe Robertson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Naushabah Khan: I will not give way at this point.

We are now left to rebuild what should never have been dismantled. It is promising to see that that is exactly what this Labour Government are doing. I welcome our youth guarantee that will create 350,000 new training and workplace opportunities, supported by 360 youth hubs across the country, and the investment of £750 million in apprenticeships that will equip 50,000 more young people with skills for the future.

We also recognise that the traditional path that allowed me to succeed—going to university—is not necessarily the right path for everyone. With a growing skills shortage, particularly in sectors such as house building that we need for building the infrastructure of the future, it is vital that we go further in encouraging young people to use their talents and feel confident that such career paths are valued and given the respect they deserve. I have made many visits to MidKent College—which serves my constituency—where young people are learning trades and are really passionate about what they do. They have skills in bricklaying, carpentry, welding, hairdressing and woodwork. Those are skills that my university degree could never have given me, and we must ensure that these avenues are fully supported so that young people can contribute meaningfully to our country's future.

Wendy Chamberlain: The hon. Member is talking about further and vocational education, which is important. Another aspect of it is that it helps young people for whom school has not been a success. It is not just about the skills that they learn; it is about that arm that is put around them. Does she share my concern at the rural agricultural college in Cupar in my constituency of North East Fife effectively mothballing its building and moving a number of its courses online, meaning that young people studying animal care for, for example, are missing out on those arm-supporting opportunities that they desperately need?

Naushabah Khan: I completely agree that those routes offer young people an alternative. They offer them a space where they have an opportunity to thrive in a way

they might not have been able to thrive in a traditional academic setting. I recognise the need for us to ensure that all those opportunities are protected in whichever way possible, and I recognise the work that the hon. Member is doing in her constituency to promote that.

I know that many of my young constituents in Gillingham and Rainham will welcome this Government's approach. Jack, a 19-year-old constituent of mine, wrote to me to say:

"I am trying hard to build a future for myself, but without anyone giving me a chance it feels impossible to get started. I want to work, to contribute and become independent, but at the moment, I feel stuck and unsupported."

My heart broke when I read that. I know that we have a lot of work to do as a Government to get this right, but Conservative Members should recognise their part in creating a legacy that has left thousands of young people living with despair or hopelessness.

We cannot have a generation stuck in limbo, truly struggling not because of their lack of talent or drive, but because the system has been deliberately dismantled. When I was 19, and living a few streets away from where Jack lives today, my future did not feel to me as his does to him. We must recreate a sense of hope and opportunity in this country. I am glad that, through my office and the actions of this Government, we may be able to give Jack the help that he needs, but is a moral stain on our country that we have allowed young people to reach the point of putting those words to paper because that feels like a reality to them. I hope that we get to the heart of this issue. I will back the Government in what they are doing to tackle youth unemployment as a matter of urgency.

5.35 pm

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): The facts speak for themselves: the unemployment rate for those aged between 16 and 24 is 15.9%—that represents 700,000 people—and 946,000 young people aged between 16 and 24 are categorised as NEET. There has been an 11% drop in the number of job adverts in the 12 months between July 2024 and July 2025. Under this Labour Government, there has been a staggering 14.6% increase in the unemployment rate of those aged 16 to 17.

When I go out and about in my constituency and talk to businesses—particularly small businesses in retail, hospitality and leisure, which are for many the first rung on the employment ladder—they make it known loud and clear that the Government's tax rises, and rising energy costs and bureaucracy, are eroding not just their margins but their confidence. That is perhaps the most corrosive effect of all. Once those businesses are gone, the opportunities for young people to get on the first rung of the employment ladder are reduced.

In listening to comments by Members from across the Chamber, I have been struck by what I consider to be the fundamental ideological difference between the two sides of the House—between my party and the Government—on the question of where wealth is created. Governments do not create wealth. They can play a role in catalysing the foundations of our prosperity, and it is right that they lean into that and create schemes where necessary, but at the core of this issue is the fact that empowering individuals and small businesses to take risks is what enables the economy to prosper. We see that time and again. It is noble that the Government

want to intervene to support businesses in creating jobs, and to create routes for young people to develop their skills and enter the jobs of the future, but we are just not seeing enough hard action that acknowledges the reality of where wealth is generated.

Joe Robertson: My hon. Friend talks about the differences between those on the two sides of the Chamber. As we have heard today, most of the Government's answers are: "We have a Government programme for that." Does he think that most young people would prefer a re-branded Government programme or a job?

Bradley Thomas: The best welfare programme of all is a job; nothing else comes close, in terms of the earnings that people receive as recognition of and reward for their contribution, and the effect on their self-confidence.

During this debate, we have not heard much, if anything, about incentives for people to take risks. Ultimately, every single business that employs people, whatever their ages, has been created by someone who has taken a risk because they have been empowered to put something on the line, be it capital or time. Every business, large or small, was started off by somebody taking a risk. Our economy is becoming increasingly risk-averse, and that is exacerbated by the pressure placed on businesses across the board, whether from rising employment costs, energy costs or bureaucracy.

Many organisations that are experts in this field directly critique the Government's policies. The Centre for Social Justice, the Institute of Directors, the British Chambers of Commerce and UK Hospitality all say that the choices made by the Government are having a detrimental and corrosive effect on the employment prospects of society as a whole, but particularly of young people.

I urge the Government to focus less on work programmes, and to instead speak directly with those who take risks to employ people of all ages. The Government need to be less burdensome, to get off the backs of those who take risks, and to instead support them. When the Prime Minister gave his very first speech at 10 Downing Street following the election, he said that the Government would tread much more lightly on people's lives. They are doing the opposite, and that needs to change.

5.39 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for opening the debate on this important issue. It is hugely important that hon. Members have the opportunity to speak on this subject. The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) suggested that Labour Members were risk averse, but I am going to take a risk: I will attempt to make a speech in which I will not make any political points. If I do at any time make a political point, I will allow the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) to intervene. I think that is very fair.

I start by taking the House back to lockdown in March 2020. I made the decision to leave my job as a teacher; I will not go into why, because I do not want to make any political points. I went to see my headteacher and said, "I want to resign," but he convinced me to stay until September, the start of the next academic year, so I handed in my notice on 22 March 2020. If hon. Members know anything about recent history, they will

know that resigning on 22 March 2020 was quite a gamble, because the following day the country changed and we went into lockdown. I found myself working from home, giving online lessons and that sort of thing, and thinking to myself, "Now I've got to find a new job during lockdown." I was not worried about it April, May or June, but when we got to August, I started to think, "Oh my gosh, in a couple of weeks' time I will be unemployed."

I will not pretend that I was particularly young in March 2020—I am not trying to claim that I am a young person—but I wanted to tell that story because for me, the idea of being unemployed was terrifying. I recognised the huge impact that being unemployed, for any length of time, would have on my mental health. Members across the House will agree that for people who suffer from mental health issues, which we recognise affect people to different degrees, work can be the solution, because it can provide an opportunity to give back to society and provide self-worth, which is really important.

Most of my contribution will be about the work of Harlow college. I was about to make a political comment, but I stopped myself. I came to this House not to be negative, or to talk down the country, but to talk up Harlow. Over the past year, the number of young people in Harlow not in education, employment or training has gone down, mainly because of the work being done by Harlow college. I pay tribute to the college's principal, Karen Spencer, who has written a few points for me—it is not too long, and certainly not as long as what my mother would write, so hon. Members should not worry—about the work of Harlow college, and schools in my constituency, to get the NEET rate down in Harlow. I thank the college and those schools for their work.

Karen Spencer writes:

"Harlow college has developed a targeted NEET programme that recognises the complex barriers many young people face. Through flexible entry routes, small group provision and strong pastoral support, learners are helped to rebuild confidence, re-engage with education and progress into further study or employment. Importantly, these students are fully integrated into college life, including English and maths, enrichment activities and digital support. Harlow College also recognises that preventing young people from becoming NEET must begin earlier."

That is a really important point that we can all understand. I know young people in Harlow who have been out of employment for a number of years, and whose parents have perhaps been out of work for a number of years, and we have to change that culture. She goes on:

"The college works closely with local schools, including Passmores Co-operative Learning Community."

It is a community co-operative—"co-operative" is, technically, a political term, but it is in the title of the multi-academy trust.

I pay tribute to Vic Goddard, the executive head of Passmores Co-operative Learning Community, for his work with the college, because this must work both ways. Karen says that Harlow college works

"with college staff going directly into schools to discuss careers, support applications and help prepare young people for interviews. This early, collaborative approach reduces the risk of young people falling through the gaps at key transition points and demonstrates the vital role that further education colleges play in tackling NEETs and supporting social mobility."

[Chris Vince]

The right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness has not intervened on me, so I do not think I have made any political points.

Let me finish by saying that I am absolutely determined for young people in my constituency to have the best opportunity moving forward. I am delighted that this Labour Government are investing in my town, and that the UK Health Security Agency will have its permanent home in Harlow. That will mean high-tech, high-skilled jobs for young people in Harlow.

5.45 pm

Shivani Raja (Leicester East) (Con): Every young person I speak to in Leicester wants the same basic things: to work, to earn, to learn and to build a future for themselves. They want the dignity that comes from that first pay packet, the confidence that comes from responsibility, and the chance to prove themselves in the workplace. They do not want to sit on the sidelines of our economy and—let us be honest—we do not want that for them, either.

I hear constantly about the Government's ambition—their ambition for more people to be in employment, the ambition for this and that—but ambition does not create jobs. It is not just the Government who have ambition; young people have ambition. They have the ambition to succeed, to buy a house with their wages, and to raise a family. Ambition is not lacking among our young people, but ambition does not create jobs. Jobs exist only when employers can afford to take on people, or to take a risk on expanding or on starting a business, and right now, this Government's policies are making that harder, not easier.

What young people lack are opportunities. Entry-level jobs are disappearing, not because young people are unwilling to take them, but because businesses are increasingly unable to afford the risk of hiring them. This Government repeatedly underestimate how employers respond to rising costs. I know that those on the Government Front Bench and a large section of Government Members have never worked in the private sector and will not understand the risks of starting a business or working in the private sector. I know that they have never had to meet a payroll date, or had sleepless nights thinking about whether there is enough cash for them to take any salary at all, or about whether taking on another member of staff will cripple them.

I come from the private sector, and I understand businesses—my family runs its own businesses—so let me help Government Members to understand. Higher employer national insurance, rising business rates and increased regulatory risk all feed into the same calculation. When margins are tight, businesses do not take chances; they prioritise experience over potential. That is rational behaviour, but it locks young people out of the labour market.

As we have heard, youth unemployment stands at 15.9%, and nearly 1 million young people are not in education, employment or training. That is not because young people have stopped trying; it is because the number of entry-level opportunities available to them is shrinking. Retail, hospitality and leisure are where many young people learn how to work. They learn reliability, communication and resilience. Those sectors operate on

tight margins and employ a disproportionate number of young people, yet they are precisely the sectors being squeezed the hardest by this Government.

Business groups have been clear about this. Yesterday, we heard the Government announce further changes to business rates, including additional relief for pubs. Any support for struggling businesses is welcome, but temporary discounts, transitional reliefs and future reviews do not change the fundamental problem. Costs are rising faster than confidence, and uncertainty discourages hiring.

In my constituency, claimant counts already sit above the national average. The number of young people aged 18 to 24 claiming unemployment-related benefits has risen over the past year. That is hardly surprising, given that businesses tell me that they are scaling back entry-level recruitment in response to rising costs. The story I hear again and again is the same: employers want to grow, but they cannot justify the risk. When the door to work closes, young people do not suddenly stop wanting to contribute. Instead, they are pushed towards welfare—not because they choose dependency, but because opportunity has been taken away. That is how a benefits system becomes a waiting room, rather than a springboard. This matters, not just economically but socially. Without early work experience, young people struggle to progress; skills fade, confidence falls, and the distance between them and the labour market grows. That is how temporary unemployment becomes long-term disengagement.

This does not have to be the outcome—there is another way to get young people back into work. We Conservatives believe that the answer is not to manage decline through temporary reliefs and reviews, but to remove the barriers that stop businesses from hiring in the first place. If this Government are serious about tackling youth unemployment, they must stop focusing on managing the consequences of higher costs and start removing those barriers, which means backing small and medium-sized businesses, reducing the cost of employing people, and ensuring that our tax and regulatory system rewards job creation rather than punishing it. Young people want to work, they deserve the chance to work, and it is the responsibility of this House to ensure that Government policy opens the door to opportunity, rather than quietly closes it.

5.50 pm

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to speak in this important debate on a vital topic. There have been numerous fascinating contributions from Members across the House, which is why I was so astonished by the contribution from the Opposition Front Bencher, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately)—she was patronising young people when she should have been apologising to them. Hundreds of thousands of young people fell out of employment, education and training on the Conservatives' watch.

In Banbury, youth unemployment is lower than the national average. I do not think that will surprise anybody; given its Soho Farmhouse, celebrity farmers and the Chipping Norton set, it may be assumed that youth unemployment is not something we know. That would be wrong, though, because there are deep pockets of deprivation in places such as Grimsbury and Ruscote—both of which I served as a councillor for—but also in Chipping Norton itself. There are too many young people there

who have been failed for far too long, and the result is that they do not do things. They do not learn to drive, they find it difficult to get a job, and they end up having shorter lives than people just down the road from them. In rural areas, too, things such as the decimation of buses that we saw under austerity have led to some kids being unable to go to college or get into town to go to a job, so the cycle continues.

The difficulties affecting our young people should anger us all and upset our British sense of fairness, because our young people have so much to offer. During the pandemic, in 2020 and 2021, young people were asked to make sacrifices that were not made by any previous generation. Freshers' weeks at universities and colleges were done via Zoom, kickabouts with your mates down the park were not allowed, and nights on the town were banned. What did young people get in return? They were told by the Conservative party at the last general election, "Go and do national service." This is a party that did not help young people to get into work or to stay in it, with youth unemployment growing by almost 50% between 2021 and 2024. Under the Conservatives, the UK was the only G7 country whose employment rate was lower after the pandemic than before it—if they want to talk about records, that is their record.

The Conservatives want to come to this Chamber and talk about what this Government are doing. They are the ones who closed youth centres; this Government are opening youth hubs. We are rolling out programmes to get people into work, in contrast to the Conservatives' plan to cut support. This Government are overhauling jobcentres so that they support both people who are looking for work and businesses that are looking to recruit, and we are also getting buses back on the road. This Labour Government are providing a jobs guarantee; the Opposition are guaranteeing absolutely nothing, because they have learned absolutely nothing from the 14 years that they were in government.

5.53 pm

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I will be very brief, Madam Deputy Speaker. In her remarks earlier, the hon. Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Naushabah Khan), who is a Kent Member of Parliament, rightly praised the work of MidKent College and the training in construction trades that it is offering young people. I will add my praise for the work of the east Kent colleges, which is in a similar vein—they are also doing a tremendous job under quite difficult circumstances. However, there is little point in offering that training in skills, only to see disappointment at the end of it because the opportunities have gone. When a young man or young woman trains as an electrician, plumber or bricklayer, they expect to then go on to earn money in a job as an electrician, plumber or bricklayer. As my hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State knows, people in the construction trades in east Kent are being laid off. House building is grinding to a halt, houses are not selling and the market is flat. That is all as a result of the Government's fiscal policies.

In towns in my constituency such as Herne Bay, Sandwich, Birchington-on-Sea and Westgate-on-Sea, many of the jobs are hospitality-based. They are either directly in hospitality—pubs, restaurants and small hotels—or they are dependent upon the visitors that

those businesses attract, such as the seaside amusement arcades and Dreamland in Margate. All these businesses are dependent on people having money to spend to be able to employ staff. Those staff are not being taken on, and those staff are the young people. I may be getting on a bit, but I can remember my first job washing up in a restaurant in Stratford-upon-Avon. I needed to earn some money, and I was able to walk in and do it, and that is not happening now. Businesses are laying off staff, rather than taking them on.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) said earlier, it is young people who are not being employed. Why? It is a direct result of the fiscal policies of this Government. Directly or indirectly, it is national insurance, business rates, the cost of inputs and the cost of electricity. People cannot run a restaurant or a pub without heating and lighting or food to put on the table. There are pubs closing in my constituency. A couple of weeks ago, I heard of another. A lovely riverside pub, the Dog and Duck, in a place bizarrely known as Plucks Gutter, has shut. The young couple who were running it—they had a splendid summer season—found that business crashed at the end of the summer. They could not afford to pay the staff along with paying for the rates, the food, the electricity and everything else that goes with running a good little riverside pub, so it has gone. Please God, it will come back again, but that couple have had to retrench, and they put their heart and soul into it.

It is no good. We do not want a sticking plaster, and we do not want schemes. We do not want to be told, "Yes, you can do this and you can do that. There are these opportunities." These young people—soon it will be my grandchildren—want jobs. They want the dignity of being able to go out, to do a hard day's work, whether that is washing up in a café, picking fruit in an orchard or whatever, and to get a pay packet at the end of it that they have earned and can spend as they want. That is the dignity of employment, and that is what I fear this Government are denying them.

5.58 pm

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate. How do we, as so many colleagues have asked this afternoon—certainly on the Opposition Benches—persuade an employer? How do we create the incentives for an employer to take a chance on a young person who may have no work experience—they may be full of ambition, fresh ideas and curiosity, but with little or no experience to offer—when that same employer could choose an older candidate who is proven, reliable and familiar with the workplace? If we can answer that question, we will help more than one person; we will help ensure that we provide the door to opportunity for people to have that dignity of work, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) has just talked about.

I have been a Member of Parliament for nearly 21 years, along with the Minister. In that time, she, like me, will have visited hundreds of schools—I certainly have, from Holderness academy to Withernsea high school—and asked thousands of students the same question: "What do you want to be when you leave school?" Not once has a child replied, "Unemployed", and for good reason. Young people are ambitious. They want the dignity of work, about which my right hon.

[Graham Stuart]

Friend spoke so passionately just now, over the indignity of welfare. They want to climb a ladder of opportunity, not fall into the trap of dependency. However, as was reflected in the Minister's speech, study after study tells us the same hard truth. Young people who experience long-term unemployment are more likely to end up poor, sick and more isolated than their peers, with no options and no hope. No way should we be consigning our young people to that fate.

Labour Governments have done this before. I never want to question anyone's honesty, but some Labour Members have been very selective in the data that they have given. They have talked relentlessly about the 14 years, but not one of them has given youth unemployment figures for those 14 years, which anyone fair-minded would surely do rather than picking some three-year period around covid. The hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) did make a fair statistical point. He said, "OK, youth unemployment has gone up under Labour." He conceded that: how refreshing. However, he also said that it was going up when we came to power and we should deal with that. It was a fair point and a point well made, but in 1997 youth unemployment stood at 14%, and by 2010, under the socialists—the Labour party—it had climbed to 20%.

Dr Arthur: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Graham Stuart: I will make a little more progress, and then I will happily give way. Given that I have referred to the hon. Gentleman, it is the very least I can do.

By 2024, the level had been brought back to below 14%. Again and again, Conservatives have brought youth unemployment down. I have mentioned—as have others, including the Minister—just how damaging it is for young people to be unemployed. It has not just a short-term horrific impact, but a lifelong impact. I do not quite know why that is the case, but study after study shows that it is. Now, less than two years in, the figure is 16% and rising. We have seen this film before, and unless we change course—unless the Government change course—we know how it ends. So how do we change course? I think that Conservative Members have tried to indicate to Opposition Members what the answer might be. I know that Opposition Members lack experience of running businesses—so few of them have ever had to make that huge decision, that risk-filled decision, to employ someone and then to employ more people, having to find the money to pay them at the end of the month as well as paying all the taxes—but the answer is that we do it by changing incentives.

As any good economist knows, the single biggest cost for almost any business is its workforce, yet this Chancellor has chosen to increase the minimum wage and so many other costs on business. In turn, the cost of employing 18 to 20 year-olds—just since July 2024—has risen not by £2,000, not by £3,000, but by a staggering £4,095, in less than two years. If we understand that behaviour is driven by incentives and we make it much more expensive to employ a young person than to employ someone older, what happens?

Well, it is not a surprise: the rate of youth unemployment has gone up. Let me now give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Dr Arthur: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I thank him for reflecting on a longer period than just the last few years. However, if he has been in this place for 21 years he will remember that the level of youth unemployment in 2010, a year to which he referred, was not because we had a socialist Government—although I am a big fan of Gordon Brown—but because we had a global financial crisis. Unemployment was high in the UK, but it was high elsewhere as well. The right hon. Gentleman will also remember that part of his Government's response to that was austerity. Does he want to reflect on the impact of that on our young people?

Graham Stuart: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair and reasonable point, but if he goes back and looks through the data, he will see that youth unemployment stayed stubbornly high under the last quasi-socialist Government, and it was not just because of the 2008 crash. The truth is that, throughout that period, we had a much higher level of youth unemployment than we should have done. He says that we had austerity, but the then Government overspent. We inherited a massive deficit and slowly brought it down throughout the 2010s, but we overspent in each and every year, so the idea that we had austerity is a myth. "Austerity" means living within our means, but we did not live within our means. We overspent each and every year, but by the time we got to covid, we had managed to get our deficit right down. We showed fiscal responsibility, because we know that if Governments spend money that they do not generate, they impose a burden on the very young people on whom unemployment is now being imposed.

I will deal with the minimum wage, which Labour Members have touched on. They asked whether we want to tell young people that they are not worth higher pay. Well, if they do not have the experience, and if they lose out on getting a job against an older person because they do not even have cost competitiveness, they are in trouble. Since the introduction of the development rate in 1998, there has been a lower wage for younger workers. That is deliberate, for a very sensible reason: when young people enter the workplace, they are doing exactly that—they are developing. They are developing skills, confidence, discipline and the ability to work productively alongside more experienced colleagues. Employers were explicitly permitted to pay less in order to reflect an economic reality.

Jayne Kirkham *rose*—

Graham Stuart: I do not doubt the good intentions of the Labour party, the Cabinet and the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), who I may allow to intervene in a moment, but good intentions do not disguise the truth. They have not run businesses, and it shows. They do not understand how employers make decisions or how behaviour is incentivised. By abolishing the development rate, the Chancellor wanted to signal that she is on the side of young people in order to put in place a political divide: "You Tories don't want to pay young people a fair and decent wage!" Of course we do, but we want them to have jobs. This is the insider-outsider issue that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) touched on earlier.

The effect that the Chancellor has had is the opposite of what she desired, and she is not helping young people. Many have received a short-term pay rise, but hundreds of thousands have received the ultimate kick

in the teeth. They have received not a pay cut, but no pay at all, because the jobs they should have been offered have disappeared in a puff of the Chancellor's smoke.

After the Government's first Budget, a survey by the Beverley and District chamber of trade found that 88% of its members said they would be less likely to employ young people because of the rise in the minimum wage. Despite that warning, the Chancellor returned with a second Budget and destroyed even more opportunities with another £26 billion tax raid. We can but pray that she is out the door before she completes her tax-taking trilogy. If the Chancellor changes nothing, we need to change the Chancellor.

What would the Conservatives do differently? We would start with a simple truth: jobs are created by employers—by not Ministers, schemes or programmes. Private employers are the ones who generate wealth. The ladder of opportunity is not built by ministerial good intentions; it is built by creating incentives for the behaviours we want. The behaviour we want from employers is for them to take a risk, and to feel that it is worth their while for their family to invest in and give an opportunity to a young person. But under this Government, the first rung of the ladder is being sawn off. Young people do not begin at the top; they begin with a Saturday job or a summer shift, and their first payslip. That is where confidence is built, habits are formed and futures are forged. When those jobs disappear, the ladder does not get longer; it just gets shorter and steeper.

A Conservative Government will abolish business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure—not 10% of them, but 100%. Those are the sectors in which so many young people take their first step. Cutting costs gives businesses the freedom to grow and hire, and we do not need a vast number of people to administer a scheme. When we simply lower the costs for employers, they get on with it. That will create real opportunities for young people to learn, earn and prove themselves.

Under Labour, businesses face another three years of higher and higher costs, heavier regulation and constant uncertainty, leaving young people blocked, frustrated and struggling to get a foothold in the job market. We will repeal Labour's job-destroying Employment Rights Act, because we cannot regulate our way to prosperity. The Act introduced 28 major reforms—count them—placing significant new requirements on businesses. By the Government's own estimate, it will lead to £5 billion in costs.

The planned changes to zero-hours contracts are perhaps the most damaging to young people, because employees will require guaranteed hours and compensation for cancelled shifts. I fully accept that these measures are well-intentioned, but they will reduce the flexibility that employers value, and that young people also value because they can balance their studies with gaining experience. Businesses will hire fewer young workers, leaving a generation without the chance to learn, earn and prove themselves.

Jayne Kirkham *rose—*

Graham Stuart: I hope the hon. Lady will say now on the Floor of the House that if the youth unemployment rate continues to go up, as it did under previous Labour Governments, from the 14% inherited from the

Conservatives to 20%—if that were to be the terrible outcome, with its scarring impact on young people—she would not seek to stand for the Labour party at the next election, because she would recognise that she had failed us.

Jayne Kirkham: As an ex-employment lawyer—in fact, I was an equity partner in a law firm that employed 50 people, so I do have some experience—I remember that when the minimum wage came in in 1998, the figure for over-21s was the same, but the Conservative party changed that, so that those under 25 were paid less, although people's rent does not cost less when they are 24. There is still a differential for under-21s of £2 an hour, so how can the right hon. Member say that that differential is no longer there when it still exists?

Graham Stuart: The differential has been eroded, but the hon. Lady is quite right to mention that. What we are talking about is balance. None of us is talking about a total free-for-all for employers. We are looking at getting balance, and it looks as though that balance has gone wrong, as the hon. Lady must know. What have been the great external economic shocks over the last year and a half? There have not really been any. There is no reason, other than the policies of this Government, for this increase in youth unemployment, with the loss of nearly 100,000 jobs in hospitality. This is about getting the balance right, and this Government have not done so.

The Conservatives will align incentives, cut costs and free businesses to hire—to get the balance right—and in doing so, we will give them the freedom to give young people a chance to prove themselves, because Conservative Governments stand for work, not welfare, and for opportunity, not dependency.

6.11 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): As we have heard, the number of young people not in education, employment or training is at its highest level for more than a decade. Astonishingly, the most recent figures show that 946,000 young people are in that position, which is almost one in every eight young people across the country. We can all agree that this situation is completely unsustainable and damaging to our society, but despite their promises, the Government's actions have only made it harder for young people to find jobs. To the surprise of no one, apart from the Chancellor and her Back Benchers, increasing the cost of employment through the rise in national insurance has led to more unemployment. Last month saw the biggest monthly fall in the number of payroll employees since the pandemic, and the unemployment rate across the United Kingdom is 5.1%.

What is the Labour Government's response? They just keep increasing benefits. Welfare spending will rise by £18 billion this year, and is on track to increase by another £73 billion over the next five years. The biggest driver of that increase is spending on working-age adults. The number of new claimants for the personal independence payment is 78% higher than pre-pandemic levels, and 110,000 graduates under the age of 30 now claim at least one benefit without being in work. Why would a young person today take on the risk of their idea and start a business, or put hours of effort into a job, when they see more and more of their peers getting by on Government handouts?

[*Lewis Cocking*]

I come to this issue with the very simple belief that the best form of welfare is a well-paid job, and that must be our country's guiding principle.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Can I tempt my hon. Friend with another very simple belief, which is that unemployment is like any other commodity: the more one pays for it, the more one will have of it?

Lewis Cocking: My right hon. Friend makes an incredible point, and that is precisely what businesses tell me. As I have said, it comes as no surprise to any of my constituents or businesses in Broxbourne—it is a surprise only to the Chancellor and the Labour party—that if the Government tax jobs more, there will be fewer jobs. The Opposition have been making that point. I am always surprised when Labour MPs come out and say that they have spoken to businesses in their constituency and everything seems fine. They should speak to businesses that have a Conservative MP, because they would hear a completely different message.

More people in decent, sustainable employment and a life off benefits is better for our economy and our public finances. To show young people that there can be a better future, we must change the economic model to reward employment properly and change our education system so that young people are prepared for the world of work.

We should be more creative about what we are asking young people to learn at school. Countless employers in my constituency have told me that, when they hire school leavers, they lack important skills such as writing an email, speaking with customers over the phone, and understanding basic finance and the language of contracts. It is not that young people today cannot or will not develop those skills, nor is it the fault of our brilliant teachers; the curriculum simply is not geared to preparing young people for work in the modern world. We should be inviting local businesses, entrepreneurs and employers into schools more regularly so that they can share their knowledge and experience to encourage students to think about how they can get their ideas off the ground and what it takes to run a viable business.

When I asked about this issue before, I was told by a Government Minister from the Dispatch Box that it is the Government who create economic growth in this country. Let me say gently to the Government that it is not they, nor us as MPs, who create economic growth in this country; it is all our constituents across the United Kingdom who take a risk, put their ideas forward, create jobs and economic growth locally, and employ lots of people.

In school, students could learn about marketing, economics, maths and law, all without knowing that they are actually learning those skills and all without a textbook in sight. That sort of system would help our young people to navigate the crucial period after leaving school and make them more attractive to employers. I have seen fantastic work at the Broxbourne school, which teaches a business T-level in which students go out into the world of work and have an apprenticeship alongside learning in the classroom. That is what we need to gear our education system towards: preparing young people better for the world of work in the 21st century.

I went through my whole education in the United Kingdom under new Labour and Tony Blair, and I remember Tony Blair saying that he wanted half of all young people to go to university. University might be the right choice for some young people in this country, but it is not the right choice for everybody. When I was choosing what I would do after school, the word “apprenticeship” was not even in the school's vocabulary. There was no offer of an apprenticeship. School leavers then either went to university or fell off the edge of a cliff and did nothing. That record, from when new Labour was in power, is not one that I would be proud of; I think Labour Members need to reflect on what they did last time they were in government, because it clearly did not work then and it is not going to work now.

Jayne Kirkham: The hon. Gentleman must be really pleased, then, about the Prime Minister's new target of two thirds of young people being in either higher education or apprenticeships and training.

Lewis Cocking: Of course I am pleased about that target, but anyone can stand at the Dispatch Box, set a target and make it sound good. We want action on the ground. The Government have been in power for 18 months, and when I speak to my constituents, including young people, they say, “We don't see action.” We need to move faster and further on this.

Jayne Kirkham: The hon. Gentleman must also be pleased to see the further education White Paper, which will put some of those things into action.

Lewis Cocking: I would gently say to the hon. Lady that her party colleagues had 13 years to come up with a plan for government when they were in opposition. That paper should have landed the day after the general election; that is when the Government should have been getting on with it, not 18 months down the line. My message to the Government is clear: yes, make the obvious tax changes that businesses from all our constituencies are crying out for, but also show that you are serious about creating economic growth, tackling youth unemployment and bringing forward fundamental changes to education.

6.19 pm

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): I turn 40 next week. I hope that does not render me too old to highlight the realities faced by some of our young people. They feel let down and some even speak of intergenerational unfairness. The facts are stark: youth unemployment is rising, home ownership feels out of reach, NEET levels are at unprecedented highs, and youth savings are almost non-existent. By any serious measure, being a young person in Britain today is getting harder and harder.

It is therefore no surprise that since the general election, support for the Labour party among 18 to 24-year-olds has halved. The Government simply do not understand aspiration, personal freedom or opportunity, and young people in Mid Leicestershire and across the country are increasingly starting to realise that. On the Conservative Benches, we understand that promoting aspiration, freedom and opportunity is the best path out of poverty and to improving social mobility—and, indeed, getting on in life. Put simply, we must help our young people to help themselves.

It is a shocking indictment of this Government's economic policies—the rise in national insurance, the burdensome regulations of the Employment Rights Act 2025, and the utter decimation of our hospitality sector—that youth unemployment now stands at above 700,000, with NEETs close to 1 million. Even our brightest graduates are struggling to find work. That is unsettling for young people and it is holding back their potential.

Hon. Members should not just take my word for it. Earlier this week, I hosted the Institute for Hospitality here in Parliament. Delegates told me that the sector has lost over 100,000 jobs, many of which are traditionally taken up by young people at the very start of their careers. So I ask the House: what message does that send to young people? We should be offering them opportunities, not giving them their P45s. This is a betrayal of the next generation. Young people do not want a life on handouts; they want a chance to stand on their own two feet.

Sadly, personal responsibility means very little to this Government. Surely, it is the Government's duty to send a positive message to our young people that through hard work, determination and responsibility they can achieve economic freedom and success. They can own their own home, they can have that nice car and they can take those family holidays. They can build a life that they want through their own graft, which they and their family can be proud of. It is increasingly clear that it is only us on the Conservative Benches who understand that. We are on the side of hard-pressed taxpayers.

Lewis Cocking: My hon. Friend does not look a day over 30, so it cannot be his 40th birthday coming up.

Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to go further? Of course we need economic growth. We need to tax jobs less and let the people outside create that economic growth, but we also need to look at the education system so that we prepare young people better when they leave education for the world of work. That is what employers are crying out for.

Mr Bedford: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Another campaign I have been articulating is on financial education. That is also key to unlocking opportunity for many of our young people.

Only us Conservatives believe in young people. We are on the side of hard-pressed taxpayers, we are on the side of small businesses, and now more than ever we are on the side of young people. I am a Conservative because I believe that economic freedom comes through hard work.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

6.23 pm

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): This has been an excellent and engaging debate, in which I think everyone has recognised that this is an important issue to which we should be dedicating time. Indeed, it is a crisis, because youth unemployment is rising faster here in the UK than anywhere else in the G7.

We have had some fantastic contributions from those on the Conservative Benches. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), a former employment Minister, spoke in an extremely well-informed way. He also incorporated some very practical things into a call to action. We had a passionate speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), who talked specifically about The Greyhound as an exemplary business in her constituency. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) made a very apposite comment: that the best welfare programme for young people is a job. In an outstanding speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Shivani Raja) shared her deep experience of working in a family business and the importance of those jobs in our retail and hospitality sector to teaching young people reliability, communication and resilience.

Graham Stuart: My hon. Friend is picking out remarkable contributions to this debate. Was she particularly struck by the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone), who is not in his seat, saying that the Conservatives should apologise for not having any mention in their motion of transport to help young people get to work, when the much longer Liberal Democrat amendment, ironically, has no mention of transport either?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) spoke extremely eloquently about the importance of the Dog and Duck in his constituency and about how terrible it is for the local community that it has closed because of all the extra costs. My right hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) was absolutely on the mark about some of the statistics and the fact that we have seen this film before. We have learned about the importance of the ladder of opportunity that is built by good intentions. We need to create those jobs in the private sector; we cannot regulate our way to prosperity. My hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking), in a speech that was very practical and befits his background in both the private sector and local government, had some very sensible points to make.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): In the Minister's speech, she seemed to be lauding jobs created by the Government. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is ridiculous to suggest that the Government should create jobs instead of business?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend is spot on, because it is that foundation of private sector prosperity that will create the tax revenues that we can use to pay for excellent public services. A similar point was made by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford)—and I agree that the House is shocked to learn that he will be 40 next week. He illustrated the importance of business and of the private sector.

At times—I hope you will permit this, Madam Deputy Speaker—a quote from Mark Twain came to mind:

“lies, damned lies, and statistics.”

I cite it to summarise some of the contributions. I want to set out for the record some statistics. Youth unemployment is now at 15.9%. There has been a rise of

[*Dame Harriett Baldwin*]

2.5% on this Government's watch. As we have heard in a range of speeches, 729,000 young people are unemployed in this country. That is a scandalous 103,000 more than the previous year. That number does not even include those who were signed off as long-term sick. Indeed, nearly 1 million young people are not in education, employment or training, and that is up by 25,000 since this Government came to power. Many of them are university graduates. The Centre for Social Justice has warned that over 700,000 university graduates are now out of work and on benefits, and many are fleeing the country, looking for opportunity elsewhere. Last year there was net emigration of 59,000 people under the age of 24.

Dr Johnson: Will my hon. Friend comment on the proportion of benefits claimants who are under the age of 24? In Sleaford and North Hykeham, 25% of people on unemployment benefit are under the age of 24, which is clearly a very large amount.

Dame Harriett Baldwin: As we have seen so often in this debate, that is a tragedy. Every young person deserves the chance to move into the world of work. What we are seeing from those statistics is that this is not a blip, but a trend—and a trend that is moving in the wrong direction.

Graham Stuart: Does my hon. Friend look forward to the Minister's reply, as I do? Youth unemployment has already gone up from 14% to 16%. Does she want to hear from the Minister at the Dispatch Box a commitment that this Government will reduce it back down, so that they can for once end their time in power—in 2029—however short-lived it may have been, with a lower rate of youth unemployment than they started with?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I certainly hope that we will hear a plan of action to tackle this alarming crisis, and a less selective grouping of statistics than we heard from the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson) when she opened the debate.

This Government have made it more expensive, burdensome and risky for businesses to hire young people. That is not a view that I am expressing from a partisan point of view—[*Interruption.*] I will try to follow the example of the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) and not be partisan, by quoting from external organisations. The Federation of Small Businesses warns that many firms are now scaling back recruitment, with young workers the most exposed. The highly respected and neutral Institute for Fiscal Studies has warned of a worrying rise in unemployment among young workers, citing policy-driven increases in labour costs. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research has highlighted a cooling labour market with disproportionate effects on young people.

How in their first 18 months have the Government managed to have such a terrible impact on our young people? First, there is the national insurance rise. The Institute of Directors has described the national insurance rise as a direct disincentive to hiring. Young people are the least experienced, the least established and the most

vulnerable to cost cutting, and when it is made more expensive to hire, employers hire fewer people. It is not complicated.

Secondly, we have Labour's increase in the minimum wage. Since the 2024 general election, the cost of hiring a full-time minimum wage worker has risen sharply across every age group. For over-21s, the annual cost has increased by 15%, but for 18 to 20-year-olds, it has jumped by 26%, despite the fact that there is no employer national insurance to pay for that age group. For apprentices, it has risen by 25%. In fact, since Labour got into government, it now costs £4,000 more a year to hire an 18-year-old full time.

Dr Arthur rose—

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I give way to a Member from the governing party.

Dr Arthur: I am very proud to be a Member from the governing party. I am sure the hon. Lady would not tell those young people in our constituencies that they do not deserve that pay rise, particularly when it is about ensuring that two people, doing the same job side by side to the same standard, get the same pay irrespective of their age. Surely that is a good thing.

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I am sad to see that the hon. Gentleman does not recognise that that young person will now be standing next to another young person who is unable to get a job. Surely he must agree that the level at which people are being paid has had an effect on the fact that there are fewer people in these jobs.

Gareth Snell rose—

Dame Harriett Baldwin: Government Members do not have to listen to me; they can listen to the Federation of Small Businesses, which said that those wage rises risk pricing young people out of the labour market. That is not me speaking; that is the Federation of Small Businesses, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman will agree with it.

Gareth Snell: The Federation of Small Businesses will be looking for answers to those policy challenges that it is rightly putting to this place. What would the hon. Member's answer be? By how much should young people's pay be reduced in order to strike the balance that so many Opposition Members have talked about? By how much should the minimum wage be reduced for young people so that they can be guaranteed a job?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I have news that will perhaps come as a bit of a shock to the hon. Gentleman: it is his party that is in power, and it should be his Front Benchers and the Chancellor he should be having that conversation with. Labour market economists at the Resolution Foundation—not normally considered to be right-leaning, by the way—have noted that when minimum wages rise faster than productivity, employers tend to favour experienced workers, disadvantaging young applicants. The very people Labour claims to champion are the ones being priced out of the labour market.

Thirdly, Labour's business rates reforms have piled pressure on our high streets. As we have heard time and again in this debate, it is hospitality, retail and small firms that traditionally give young people their first job.

Indeed, my first job was behind the bar at a now defunct pub; it taught me an enormous amount, and I was very grateful for the opportunity. The Confederation of British Industry has said that rising business rates “suppress investment and hiring”. When fixed costs for employers increase, their capacity to hire is reduced.

Lastly, and perhaps most damaging of all, is Labour’s Employment Rights Act 2025, which introduces sweeping day one rights across the board. The Government’s own economic analysis of the Bill says:

“higher labour costs could reduce demand for work, damaging the employment prospects of the same workers the package is trying to support...the risks are highest for workers with the weakest attachment to the labour market...and the youngest workers, since they are still gaining experience and skills.”

This is not a partisan point—this is the Government’s impact assessment of their own legislation.

According to the Youth Futures Foundation,
“the risk profile of recruiting young people has increased”.

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development reports that employers are already reducing recruitment plans, particularly for inexperienced workers, due to regulatory uncertainty.

Dr Caroline Johnson: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I am sorry to interrupt it. I want to ask her about the people who are writing hundreds and hundreds of applications for graduate schemes, and who are finding that they are locked out of those schemes, having been deprioritised because of the colour of their skin. Why should the Deputy Prime Minister’s son or the children of the Leader of the Opposition be prioritised for jobs over a tractor driver from Lincolnshire?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: My hon. Friend makes a good point.

The third-party testimony I have been giving shows that for large firms, the legislation is a headache; for small firms, it is a deterrent to employing; and for young people in our country, it is a disaster. When employers are forced to choose between hiring an experienced worker or taking a chance on an 18-year-old with no track record, the Government have made that choice brutally simple. The result is fewer opportunities, fewer first jobs and a generation shut out before they have even begun working.

The Labour Government’s policies are not pro-worker; they are anti-opportunity. They are killing youth employment with higher taxes, higher costs and higher risks for employers. Young people deserve better. They deserve a Government who understand how jobs are created, how businesses operate and how opportunity is built. They deserve a Government who will not price them out of the labour market. They deserve a Government who are prepared to reform the welfare system, so that they do not become trapped in welfare benefits dependency.

The Conservatives will stand up for those young people. We will abolish business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure, benefiting 250,000 businesses and reviving our high streets. We will break Labour’s doom loop with our golden economic rule and save £47 billion. We will abolish stamp duty. We will introduce a £5,000 first jobs bonus, backing the next generation. We will repeal every job-destroying, anti-business, anti-growth measure in the Employment Rights Act. We will double

apprenticeship funding by ending debt-trap university degrees. We will overhaul the sickness and disability benefits system.

We will hold this Government to account, and we will fight for a jobs market that gives every young person the chance to succeed.

6.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): If only the Conservatives had had 14 years to do much of what the shadow Minister just outlined. It seems as though they never tire of pulling apart their own abysmal record. Today they have chosen to focus on the crisis of opportunity that they handed down to young people, and that this Government are determined to address.

The Conservatives were perfectly happy, it seems, for youth apprenticeship starts to plummet by nearly 40%. They sat and watched as the number of young people neither learning nor earning spiralled upwards by 300,000 in three years, and they were devoid of ideas to help young people overcome the barriers to work that they face. Perhaps worst of all, when confronted with undeniable proof of their failure, they blamed young people, instead of supporting them.

This Government will never take that attitude to the next generation—an attitude of ambivalence at best, and contempt at worst. Instead, we are clearing up the mess that the previous Government left in their wake. We are giving young people opportunities to succeed, and the support that they need.

We are determined to meet the size of the challenge that we inherited, and to deliver on the huge scale that is required. That is why we are refocusing apprenticeships towards young people. We are also bringing support to where young people are by expanding youth hubs to over 360 areas across Great Britain. That is just part of our youth guarantee, which we are rolling out so that every young person gets the chance to earn or learn; and it accounts for part of the more than £1.5 billion that was made available for employment and skills support at the Budget, which will create around 355,000 new training or workplace opportunities.¹ Our jobs guarantee will make available subsidised paid employment for around 55,000 young people. These are significant interventions, while the Conservatives offer nothing. The vision they have to offer young people is as bleak as the reality of their record: they offer low-paid, insecure work, and a cold shoulder instead of a helping hand. We have seen where that leads, and we have chosen a different path.

Graham Stuart: The Minister knows that youth unemployment was at 20% when the Conservatives came into power, and at 14% when we left. Can he commit that his Government, with their vast array of programmes, will bring youth unemployment back below the level that his Government inherited? Previous Labour Governments have failed to do that, and shoved up youth unemployment, with all the damage that goes with that. Will his Government ensure that the numbers come down, and if they do not, will the Government put their hands up and admit their failure?

Andrew Western: That is why we are making interventions in the form of the youth guarantee and increased investment in the growth and skills levy. I gently point out that,

1.[*Official Report*, 4 February 2026; Vol. 780, c. 3WC.] (Correction)

[Andrew Western]

as the right hon. Member will be aware, the rate of youth unemployment rose by 4% in the Conservatives' last two years in office. Today we have heard attack after attack, and excuse after excuse for youth unemployment rising, but it was rising when they left office. This is not a new problem. It is a significant challenge that we are serious about addressing, but if the Conservatives wish to continue with their policy of collective amnesia about the mess that they left behind, they will never have anything to offer young people.

I turn to Opposition Members' contributions, beginning with that of the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), who showed that the Conservatives have suddenly developed empathy for young people after leaving us with a NEET number of almost 1 million. We heard Tory Members compare the youth unemployment rate with those of other G7 countries, but we have the second-highest youth employment rate in the G7. We are not complacent, and we know that there is work to do. [Interruption.] I am aware that it is a different figure, but it is relevant when looking at the overall picture.

Several Members, but first among them was the shadow Secretary of State, said that nobody on the Government Front Bench had ever worked in a business. I suggest that she checks the record. Certainly, both the Minister of State, Department for Work and Pensions, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), who opened the debate, and I worked for many years in the private sector. I managed a small business; I worked in a global business; and I did several other jobs in the private sector in between.

Conservative Members suggested that they cut the welfare bill and halved unemployment, using a pick 'n' mix of flattering figures from various moments of their time in office. However, we, like people up and down this country, will judge them on their legacy when they left office. They left a spiralling welfare bill that disincentivised people from looking for work, and they left us the only G7 country with a lower employment rate than before the pandemic. They are not prepared to face up to the mess that they left our country in, and they do that time and again. I admire their chutzpah for continuing to table Opposition day debates on subjects on which their record is absolutely appalling and by a considerable margin the most significant factor in what we face today, but that does not mean that the public will forgive or forget what they left behind.

The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), asked about the impact of artificial intelligence on the workforce. I assure her that the Government are cognisant and mindful of the need to keep a close eye on it. We have recently set up a new cross-Government unit that will look at AI's impact on the labour market, and will offer free AI foundations training for all workers. She raised concerns about the defunding of level 7 apprenticeships. I will not pretend that the Government's decision is not difficult. We have chosen to target the apprenticeship funding that this Government have to spend on young people. That is because they are less likely to have a relationship with an employer who might be able to fund their training, and less likely to be able to access some of the other

opportunities that people who access higher-level apprenticeships might have, and because there are other routes, including a more traditional higher-education route, for people to access instead of a level 7 apprenticeship.

The hon. Lady asked about the timing of the roll-out of the youth guarantee. The first tranche—the first 55,000 opportunities—will be in place from April, and by September we will see the roll-out of the full 300,000.¹ She went on to criticise the national insurance increase in the Budget and its impact, but then set out that the Liberal Democrats would cut business rates and VAT and scrap that national insurance contribution increase. I say to her gently that that is the problem with the Liberal Democrat position; they never say how they would pay for it, or what they would do. She lambasts the decisions taken in the first Labour Budget. Would the Liberal Democrats choose to withdraw the additional money that has gone into the NHS? It is not credible to set out only what they are against.

We heard a number of excellent contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Norwich North (Alice Macdonald), for Welwyn Hatfield (Andrew Lewin), for Gillingham and Rainham (Naushabah Khan), for Harlow (Chris Vince) and for Banbury (Sean Woodcock). Those excellent contributions not only highlighted the toxic legacy of the Conservative party, but set out the range of key interventions that this Government are making, which include, but are not limited to, the youth guarantee.

I think the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) asked a question about the timing of Connect to Work, but I may have lost track.

Damian Hinds: It was about the Minister's projection for the Connect to Work numbers by the end of this financial year, its first year in operation.

Andrew Western: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that clarity. He will be aware that Connect to Work is already live in two thirds of delivery areas. By April, that will be all areas. In his area of East Hampshire, it is already live, and we expect that it will support up to 4,800 people.

Damian Hinds: Is that for this financial year?

Andrew Western: I will confirm for him separately the figure for this financial year. That figure is the aspiration in the round, using the £18.7 million funding that has been made available.

The right hon. Gentleman then launched a staunch defence of zero-hours contracts. He will know that we have a fundamentally different view of that. It is my view that insecure work is a blight. It is hugely problematic for those on challenging budgets not knowing what hours they have to work each week. This is the fundamentally different perspective that we have on this side of the House.

Damian Hinds: Would the Minister apply that principle to bank staff working in the national health service who have what is in fact a zero-hours contract—a bank staff contract—to top up in other roles in the NHS when that support is needed?

Andrew Western: The challenge in the NHS is markedly different—I would freely acknowledge that—but the right hon. Gentleman is talking about other roles in the

1.[Official Report, 4 February 2026; Vol. 780, c. 4WC.](Correction)

NHS. It is not unusual for people to hold more than one job if they are operating as bank staff, so they do not have the uncertainty about receiving no funding at all.

The right hon. Gentleman also made the criticism that the jobs guarantee only kicked in after 18 months. That is the final stage of a range of new interventions that this Government are putting in place, including an additional supported conversation at 13 weeks, followed by four weeks of intensive work coach support with specialist teams. It is not just a question of a jobs guarantee after 18 months; a broad range of interventions are being put in place.

The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey), who I do not think is in her place, said that apprenticeships were an opportunity for young people to find work, and I quite agree with her, but the reforms of the Conservative party had the effect of delivering a situation where, as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson said, the average age of those entering into apprenticeships was significantly increased. We are seeking to reverse that trend, and it is important that we do so. This is a key mechanism for giving young people the skills that they will need in the future. I believe she also called this a youth unemployment crisis of this Government's making. I fail to see how that can possibly be the case when there was such a stark increase in the youth unemployment figures in the final two years of the Conservative Government.

The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) said that the best welfare support of all was a job, so he will be delighted to see the additional 513,000 people who have entered into employment over the past 12 months. The hon. Member for Leicester East (Shivani Raja), who is also not here, said that she was tired of hearing about this Government's ambition, but the Conservatives had a paucity of just that. They left almost a million NEETs, a welfare system that disincentivised work—something we have begun to address—and an employment rate lower than before the pandemic. They can accuse us of being too ambitious if they like, but they had given up on delivering opportunity for our young people—something that this Government will never do.

The right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart) asked how we would encourage an employer to take a chance on a young person. We are doing that by not charging national insurance contributions for under-21s or for apprentices under 25, by fully funding apprentices at SMEs and by placing young people in six months of guaranteed work if they have been out of the workforce for 18 months so that they have the chance to prove themselves. That is a range of interventions that we are putting in place because we recognise that there is a challenge with youth unemployment. It is long standing and it is not new, but we take it very seriously.

Gareth Snell: On the point that the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness made, the natural extrapolation to what I believe the Conservatives are suggesting is that the way to incentivise that employer would be to allow them to pay less than the minimum wage or indeed cut the minimum wage rate for young people. I would oppose that. Would the Minister?

Andrew Western: I certainly would. I also note that the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin), having

complained about the increase in the minimum wage in her closing contribution, failed to say what level the Conservative party think it is acceptable to reset that at. I personally could not look young people in the eye and justify such a cut to their wages, but the Conservatives seem happy to do so.

The shadow Minister also pointed to the lack of a plan of action, but that was set out comprehensively by my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, underpinned by the £1.5 billion for the youth guarantee and growth and skills levy funding increase, but not limited to those interventions alone. The attacks on the national minimum wage increase are frankly a smokescreen for a party whose policies targeted young people for 14 years and would very clearly continue to do so now.

I cannot resist remarking that I thought it more likely for the hon. Member for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford) to be in the young person category than in the 40-plus category. I note that he has had a change of employment status, because he was on the Front Bench on Monday but has returned to his previous position in the Parliamentary Private Secretary pigeonhole—there is a thriving labour market on the Conservative Benches, if nowhere else. He pointed to youth unemployment rising, homeownership falling and NEETs being on the up. That is a brave take given that every single one of those facts was true in July 2024. He then asked—again, this is daring, but I know that he is daring if nothing else—what that had done to the voting intentions of young people in relation to the Labour party. If I were a Conservative Member of this place—I have no intention of being one, and I do not know how much longer he intends to be one—I would not point to any other party's polling among 18 to 24-year olds, because theirs is truly dire given the appalling legacy that they left behind.

Andrew Lewin: Speaking of daring, the Leader of the Opposition said today that the Conservatives do not want any more centrist ideas. What does the Minister make of that and their future with young people?

Andrew Western: If that is the position of the Leader of the Opposition, Conservative Members may need to find a new home other than Reform—[*Interruption.*] I am not sure where that comment came from, but I think it might have been my hon. Friend the Member for Bury South (Christian Wakeford), who knows a little about political journeys and will allow me to leave it there.

I, too, am concerned about the spiralling welfare bill and the rise in youth unemployment, about which we have heard a lot today, but the shadow Minister refused to set out what the Conservatives would do. If that is the best that they can offer on one of the few days a year on which they have control of the Order Paper—no idea, no clue and no plan beyond highlighting multiple problems in our society, which we inherited directly from them, as the facts show—I think they will have rather more Opposition days before they come back to the Government side of the House.

Question put (Standing Order No. 31(2)). That the original words stand part of the Question.

The House divided: Ayes 91, Noes 287.

Division No. 423]**[6.58 pm****AYES**

Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Burghart, Alex
 Cartledge, James
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Costa, Alberto
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Lamont, John
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit

Mayhew, Jerome
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 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
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Robertson, Joe
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Paul Holmes and
 David Simmonds**

NOES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Baines, David
 Barker, Paula
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex

Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia

Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, Ian
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 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, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dixon, Anna
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gould, Georgia
 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
 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*)
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 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, Naushabab
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Miliband, rh Ed

Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast
 by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 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
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave

Roca, Tim
 Russell, Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stewart, Elaine
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Swallow, Peter
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 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, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael

Whitby, John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan

Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Deirdre Costigan and
 Mark Ferguson

Question accordingly negated.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 31(2)),
 That the proposed words be there added.

Question agreed to.

*The Deputy Speaker declared the main Question, as
 amended, to be agreed to (Standing Order No. 31(2)).*

Resolved,

That this House welcomes the Government's commitment to invest in young people's futures; notes that the UK has the second highest youth employment rate in the G7; recognises that the Government announced more than £1.5 billion of investment over the next three years, consisting of £820 million of funding for the Youth Guarantee to support young people to earn or learn, and £725 million for the Growth and Skills Levy; further welcomes that the expanded Youth Guarantee will reach almost 900,000 young people, including through Youth Hubs in every area in Great Britain and a new Youth Guarantee Gateway; further notes that this investment will also create around 300,000 more opportunities to gain workplace experience and training; and further recognises that, as part of the Youth Guarantee, the Government is breaking the cycle of unemployment by guaranteeing paid work to around 55,000 young people aged 18 to 21 who have been on Universal Credit and looking for work for 18 months.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing
 Order No. 118(6)),*

CLIMATE CHANGE

That the draft Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 16 December 2025, be approved.—(*Nesil Caliskan.*)

*The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the
 Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until
 Wednesday 4 February (Standing Order No. 41A).*

Education Funding: Distribution

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Nesil Caliskan.)

7.12 pm

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the issue of the distribution of education funding, because it goes to the heart of what kind of education system we want. As Liberal Democrats, we want every child to be provided with the opportunity to succeed and reach their full potential. However, I am sure that the Government and MPs from across the Chamber would agree that the current system is not working as well as it should.

Now is the time to tackle the historical unfair distribution of education funding. Every child should have access to the same resources and opportunities, regardless of where they live or their level of need. That unfairness in funding across local authority areas shapes what local schools can offer and how quickly children receive support, and ultimately affects whether families experience education as a source of opportunity or a source of constant struggle. That is wrong.

The national funding formula and the high needs block of the dedicated schools grant were intended to bring fairness and transparency to school funding, but historical proxy factors remain embedded within them. Those factors lock in funding patterns from decades ago, protecting some areas—regardless of how they have changed—while capping others, even as pupil numbers rise and needs become more complex.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on securing this debate. She is absolutely right to bring this incredibly important issue to the House. It does not matter where we are in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the problems are the same. Over the past couple of years as an elected representative, I have seen a rise in the number of people with special needs requirements, while schools are deteriorating and need work done. These problems seem to be a burden upon education authorities. Does she agree that now is perhaps the time for the Minister and the Government to review how they allocate their funding? By doing so, it could bring about something positive for all schools.

Pippa Heylings: I agree with the hon. Member. It is exactly why we need this debate at the national level. I recognise the work undertaken by the f40 fairer funding campaign, which has provided comparative historical data for the whole country, exposing the huge variations in funding allocations per pupil by local authority. Nowhere is that unfair disparity more clear than in my constituency. Cambridgeshire remains in the bottom quartile nationally for the dedicated schools grant and for high needs block funding per pupil. We rank 133rd out of 151 local authorities in 2025-26. That ranking has been the same for more than a decade, despite the unprecedented growth in Cambridgeshire. The consequences are stark.

If Cambridgeshire schools were funded to the same level as Lincolnshire—a shire county funded close to the national median—they would receive an additional £23.8 million every single year. That equates to roughly £118,000 a year for a typical primary school—think

of that. Equally, if Cambridgeshire were funded to the same level as neighbouring Peterborough, schools would receive around £33 million more annually. That is the scale of the gap we are talking about, and it is impossible to justify. This chronic underfunding interacts directly with the crisis in special educational needs and disabilities provision.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): My hon. Friend is raising incredibly important points on the distribution of funding, but does she agree that the distribution of funding during life stage is also important? *[Interruption.]* According to the Early Intervention Foundation, the NHS is spending £3.7 billion a year on the cost of late intervention. In theory, the Government could spend an extra £3.7 billion on early intervention on SEND at no extra net cost to the Government.

Pippa Heylings: My hon. Friend makes a hugely important point, and we have just heard agreement from across the Chamber about the importance of both the geographic distribution of funding and to which age groups it is distributed.

The underfunding interacts directly with the crisis in special educational needs and disabilities provision. Funding has been historically low in our county, and it cannot meet the rising demand. While there has been a 72% increase in high needs block funding since 2017, the demand for education, health and care plans has risen by 91% in Cambridgeshire over that same period.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I got some data this week that told me that our local authorities are spending £60,000 a child extra on independent special schools versus maintained special schools. In the south-west of England, only one third of children can go to state maintained schools. Does my hon. Friend agree that as schools are having that money taken away from them to support the councils, the problem is just getting worse?

Pippa Heylings: I could not have put it better myself. That issue is symptomatic of and a causal factor in the problems. We are seeing the gap between funding and spend widening year after year. In my area, that is compounded by rapid population growth. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are forecast to grow by a further nearly 17% between 2023 and 2041. Schools are expanding quickly to meet demand, yet funding lags behind reality. Growth funding is limited and tightly constrained. Section 106 funding supports buildings, not staffing or ongoing SEND provision. While Cambridgeshire growth is seen as the golden goose for the national economy, local families, schools and councils are being penalised for that growth.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): As a vice-chair of the f40 group and as an MP in Cornwall, which has the 13th lowest SEND funding, I understand exactly what the hon. Member is talking about. Does she agree, however, that we now have a welcome focus on SEND, that we have increased funding, and that the schools White Paper and the SEND White Paper, which will be published soon, will provide a good opportunity to look closely at the SEND system and perhaps—although it will be very difficult to address those massive discrepancies in one go—start to look at how SEND funding is used across the country?

Pippa Heylings: I have some key questions for the Minister about exactly that point.

A stark reality keeps county councillors and their finance officers awake at night. Cambridgeshire's overall dedicated schools grant deficit stood at £62.8 million at the end of 2025. Forecasts show that the high needs block deficit will rise to about £94 million by March 2026, and potentially to £200 million by April 2028. The council is now paying about £3 million a year to service the interest on the debt, which places the county in severe financial risk. I raised this question with Minister McGovern when we had a meeting about the local government financial settlement—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. We must not refer to right hon. and hon. Members by name. Although the hon. Member for Birkenhead (Alison McGovern) was the Minister in post, we would still not refer to her by name.

Pippa Heylings: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Everyone now needs to know what will happen to the debt in 2028 when the Government centralise the funding, as they have announced that they will. If it is not absorbed or absolved by the Government, Cambridgeshire, like many other councils, could be approaching section 114 bankruptcy territory. That is what is keeping its councillors awake at night.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): Is the hon. Lady aware of a device called the statutory override which allows local authorities not to declare a deficit in their accounts although they are still incurring a debt? As for schools funding, Gloucestershire is almost at the bottom of the league. This week we received the terrible news that one of our private schools is closing. It has been in existence for 100 years. When it closes at the end of the summer, 170 staff will lose their jobs and 324 pupils will have to find other schools. Undoubtedly, when these private schools close—and we have heard that Exeter Cathedral School will close part of its function at the end of the summer as well—some of the pupils will have to go into the state system, which will put even further pressure on it. The reason cited by the school was the 20% VAT charge, which is having an unfair effect on children in private schools.

Pippa Heylings: I am sorry to hear what has happened with that school, but I think we need to look, in the round, at what is happening to all schools and all school funding. I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's mention of the statutory override, and I will come to it later in my speech.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing this important debate. Sadly, York falls below Cambridgeshire and Gloucestershire in the tables, and ours is the lowest-funded authority under the new fair funding formula, although we have high levels of deprivation. Does the hon. Member agree that when we are looking at school funding—pupils in York are worth as much as those in Camden—we need to look across the piece? York also receives the lowest amount of health funding, and low funding across the board means that our children are getting even less funding.

Pippa Heylings: That goes to the heart of it. All children, no matter where they live, deserve the right to, and the opportunity of, the best education they can have.

Let me return to the issue of the debt, and the deficit that the council is holding as a result of the statutory override. Independent analysis suggests that by 2028, the national dedicated schools grant deficit could lie somewhere between £5.9 billion and £13 billion.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Torbay unitary authority is the most deprived local authority in the south-west of England, and also the most deprived local authority that has the joy of having a Liberal Democrat Member of Parliament. However, we are also a member of the f40 group. In 2023, we signed up to a safety valve agreement which effectively snatches SEND placements from children in our systems. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to see the SEND White Paper rolled out there fast? Childhood is a very short period in one's life, and children do not have the time to wait.

Pippa Heylings: I completely agree.

What does this mean for our schools? It is no surprise that 37 primary schools across Cambridgeshire are operating in deficit. Schools do not have any headroom left; they cannot absorb further pressures without making damaging choices about staffing, class sizes and support. I have heard from the schools in my constituency, including Linton infant school, Linton Heights junior school, Trumpington Meadows primary school, Fulbourn primary school, Comberton primary school and Barrington primary school. They have all told me that they have more children on their SEND register than their funding will cover. They are spending their core budgets on this provision, because they care, and because they know that they have a statutory duty.

Barrington primary school told me that staff are educating children in an area of rapid housing growth. The school is paying up front while waiting months for the funding to catch up. Schools are paying up front for education, health and care plans, and when the funding arrives, it falls well short of the true cost of full-time support. That makes responsible staffing and financial planning almost impossible, and I place on the record my thanks for the amazing work of all staff across all our schools.

As the chair of the children and young people's committee at Cambridgeshire county council, Councillor Edna Murphy, has said, it is essential that every child has a good education that addresses their needs and supports their wellbeing. Teachers are working hard, and many children have a good experience, but all schools must be able to support children locally. That requires staff and facilities, which only proper funding can provide.

We cannot lose the support of the families and carers at the forefront of this issue. Alicia and Harry Watson are the parents of Penelope and Flora. Penelope is an autistic 10-year-old with pathological demand avoidance traits, severe anxiety, and complex sensory and eating difficulties, and she has been on the waiting list for an EHCP for over two years. Alicia and Harry are facing the horror that many parents in my constituency have

[Pippa Heylings]

had to face. They are navigating adversarial tribunal processes, exhausting all channels and doing the right things. Alicia says:

“Throughout this process, we have felt completely out of sight and out of mind. Passed between services. Told to wait. Told thresholds were not met. Told funding was not available. Told support was being ‘explored’ while months went by and nothing changed”.

Importantly, Alicia has had to give up her NHS career as a care co-ordinator—work that she loved and was proud to do in the public sector. She did not leave by choice; she says:

“I left because my children needed me to step in where the system would not”.

The system is affecting productivity and economic growth. It is emotionally devastating, inefficient and expensive. That would be avoidable if funding were aligned with need earlier.

As the Government look to unveil SEND reforms through the schools White Paper, we urge them to ensure that sufficient extra funding is in place, and to reform the funding formula. I ask the Minister for clarity and certainty. When will the Government publish the overdue schools White Paper? Do they intend to review and rebalance the proportion of funding that is for the high needs block, so that funding is fairer between different areas? How will fast-growing counties—or unitaries, under the local government reorganisation—such as Cambridgeshire be funded proportionately and fairly, so that schools, councils and communities are not penalised for growth?

Finally, when the statutory override ends in 2028, will the Government take over responsibility, or will they leave local authorities facing bankruptcy and carrying historical SEND debt, which is in no one’s interests, and definitely not in the interests of the children and young people whose education we are all striving to improve.

7.28 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould):

I thank the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Pippa Heylings) for securing this debate on this important matter. I really appreciate her taking the time to meet me and lay out her concerns in person. We had a very constructive conversation. I echo her thanks to all the brilliant teachers and staff who work so hard in her constituency. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), who came to speak to me about similar issues, the work of the f40 group, and the need to support not just schools, but, more widely, the professionals who wrap around schools in communities around the country.

I want to start where the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire ended, which is with the stories of families. I have travelled around the country speaking to thousands of parents and young people, and sadly, the experience she set out is all too common: parents’ fight for support, the exhaustion of having to navigate different systems, and parents having to give up their jobs to make a full-time job of trying to get support for their children.

Chris Coghlan: On the point about the terrible fight that families face, the Minister will know that I wrote to the Education Committee to pass on the testimony of

653 families from across 114 local authorities about harmful, unethical or unlawful behaviour by local authorities on SEND. These testimonies have 195 references to suicide. One of them said:

“My child now has ptsd, has lost the full use of their arm, is covered in scars from failed suicide attempts”.

The Education Committee wrote to me saying that these testimonies corroborated its findings about the failures in local authority governance. Does the Minister agree that, on SEND, there can be no case for weakening EHCP children’s rights, and that families’ trust in local authority governance has collapsed?

Georgia Gould: The stories the hon. Member has collected are unimaginably awful, and I commend him for listening to families and engaging with the Education Committee. We are taking its report very seriously; it is one of the documents informing our approach to reform. Conversations with families around the country are informing it, too. We have been clear that we need more support earlier. He talked about the critical nature of early intervention, and families have told us about that. We need greater partnership and earlier support, but families are also very clear that we need a system that protects their legal entitlement to additional support in education. What we have seen, and the stories we have heard today, show the failure to invest in early intervention.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire talked about the urgent need to bring forward the reforms. We said that we were determined to bring them forward in the first part of this year, and we are working very hard on that. However, we want to ensure that the voices of parents, young people and teachers are at the heart of decision making, and we have taken the time to do the further engagement. The proposals that we will take forward are strengthened by that engagement, and by the contribution of families and Members across the House.

However, we have not been waiting to invest and to take action. We have already invested in Best Start in Life hubs, and in leads on special educational needs and disabilities. We have put £740 million into capital for specialist places. We have announced a further £3 billion of capital for this year, and we will set out how that is to be distributed across the country. Just recently, we announced a further £200 million in support for teacher training, and we will make it mandatory for teachers to have continuous professional development on special educational needs and disabilities.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): On the point about distributing funding across the country, does the Minister recognise that, under the current high needs block system, a pupil in Westminster receives £2,800, whereas a pupil in Devon receives less than half that amount? When designing the new system, would she ensure that it is less of a postcode lottery, and that rural areas like mine will not be certain to receive less funding?

Georgia Gould: We had to move quickly to bring extra funding into the system. Hon. Members will know that we have put an extra £1 billion into the high needs block, and we used the funding formula that was available. However, we will review that, to see whether it is in line with our reforms. We want to ensure that people get good-quality, consistent support, wherever they are in the country.

Despite the dire situation that we inherited, the Government have prioritised education spending. We have invested £1.7 billion in additional education funding in 2026-27. That is critical to support schools to give young people a positive mainstream education, but we recognise that we need to continue to work to make sure that we meet the needs of the future. We will be setting out more in the schools White Paper.

The issue of statutory override and the pressure on councils was mentioned. I am very aware of that, as I previously led a council. We need to recognise both the financial pressure on councils and the need for strong accountability for council performance. The size of the deficits that some councils are accruing may not be manageable with local resources alone, and we are going to bring forward arrangements to assist them as part of the broader SEND reforms. The Government will say more about that as part of the upcoming local government finance settlement in early February. The Government have been clear that SEND pressures will be absorbed within the overall Government departmental expenditure limit budget for 2028-29, such that the Government will not expect local authorities to need to fund SEND costs from general funds. We will set that out further in the future. I really appreciate the strength of feeling across the House and the cross-party working from everyone here.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: We have already heard this evening about the difficulty of parents getting EHCPs. Even when they have got them—90% of parents who apply do eventually get them, despite the struggle—their provision is not guaranteed. The Government are spending record amounts on SEND, yet we are still not really solving the problems, so there is clearly something wrong with the system. We are eagerly awaiting the White Paper, but can we be assured that the system itself will be thoroughly examined to see how it can be overhauled?

Georgia Gould: I can absolutely assure the hon. Member that we are doing that work. We need to look at this issue at every level. We heard about the importance of early intervention. It is also critically important that we have strong partnerships across local authorities, schools and health, and that we look at the provision in every school and every community. The teacher training announcement was so important; our expectation is that every teacher in every school should be a teacher of young people with special educational needs and disabilities. We are also looking at the fabric of our buildings, the accountability systems and the support that is put in place.

Vikki Slade: A few weeks ago, I raised some of these very excessive charges, although I had a bit of pushback from some residents saying, “My child needs this very expensive school.” Can the Minister confirm whether the Government are looking at companies that are coming in and making profit at the expense of our children? We are talking about children who have very complex needs. For 78 children in one local authority in my constituency, the charge is more than £100,000 each. Thirty of those children are from one school alone.

Georgia Gould: We have put £3 billion into specialist places to ensure that there is high-quality provision across the system. Independent specialist schools play an important part in the system, but excessive profits should not be made from the care of children. We want the money that is going into the system to go into supporting children.

We also want to ensure that every child has the right to an education within their local community. I talk to too many children who have to travel, sometimes for two hours, to get an education. As I travel around the country to look at the system, I see two things. First, the system is absolutely in crisis; there is failure in every single part. I hear that from every single part of the system and we have heard some examples today. Secondly, there are dedicated people who are trying to make it work, including those mentioned by the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire. There are special educational needs co-ordinators and local partnerships who go the extra mile. There are schools that are thinking deeply about how to provide an inclusive education. That makes a difference; parents who are having a positive experience tell us that they can finally breathe because the support is in place. There are green shoots of that change—such as partnerships between special schools and mainstream schools—which we can build on.

We take this responsibility for generational change very seriously. My commitment is to work in partnership with everyone who cares about this issue. I appreciate the opportunity to continue these conversations and to continue to talk about the work we are doing. When we bring forward the schools White Paper, there will be a full consultation on the work we are setting out, and we have heard this evening, very powerfully, how important that work is. We cannot continue to fail children with special educational needs and disabilities and their families, and we need to give the right resources to the teachers, teaching assistants and health professionals who are trying to support them every day.

Question put and agreed to.

7.40 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

MEDICAL DEVICES

That the draft Medical Devices (Fees Amendment) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 16 December 2025, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 294, Noes 108.

Division No. 421]

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Adam, Shockat
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Fleur
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Helen

Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Irons, Natasha
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Ayoub
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewin, Andrew
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 Malhotra, Seema
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 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
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reeves, rh Rachel
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughtier, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stewart, Elaine
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth

Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen

Ward, Chris
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Anderson, Lee
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Braverman, rh Suella
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartlidge, James
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Cocking, Lewis
 Costa, Alberto

Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dewhirst, Charlie
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Griffith, Andrew
 Harris, Rebecca

Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lopez, Julia
 Mak, Alan
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 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
 Philp, rh Chris
 Platt, Jo

Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mr Mohindra)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wrighting, Rosie

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 28 January 2026

[MATT WESTERN *in the Chair*]

Local Authority Children's Services

9.30 am

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered children's services in local authorities.

I applied for this debate because of a 10-year-old constituent who was abused, tortured and murdered by those who should have loved and protected her. Her name was Sara.

Sara was found dead in the early hours of 10 August 2023. Her body was covered in bruises. She had a traumatic head injury, human bite marks and multiple broken bones, and she had been burned by a domestic iron. Next to Sara's body, the police found plastic bags, packing tape and a cricket bat, all with Sara's blood on them. The people who did that to Sara deserve a special place in hell. Sara's death was not a one-off tragedy; it was the most extreme and horrific consequence of children's services being hollowed out, fragmented and weakened over the years. Surrey county council is failing children left, right and centre.

Another example is what happened to my constituent Julia. She and her husband pleaded with Surrey county council for help with their daughter, Eloise, who had special educational needs. Surrey ignored those pleas and refused to give Eloise special educational needs and disabilities support, and eventually it took the parents to court because it was concerned that they were a safeguarding risk to their daughter. The court saw through that and sided with the parents. It said that it was Surrey's lack of support for special educational needs that was failing the child, not the parents. Appallingly, Surrey tried to cover up its problems with special educational needs provision and push it on to a safeguarding failure.

Judith, another of my Woking constituents, was breaking up with her partner following many incidents of domestic and child abuse. She feared for her children's safety if they continued to see their father. On the advice of Surrey county council, the family court gave the father visitation rights, and heartbreaking abuse followed. The court then took away the father's right to see the children. That is why we need to end the presumption in favour of parental contact. Abusers should not care for their children. Surrey now insists that the father start seeing the children again. It says that it has a duty to explore whether contact would be safe by reintroducing the children to him. It looks like Surrey is rolling the dice and creating situations in which children can be harmed. This is supposed to be one of the most affluent areas of the country, and yet this is what our services—the services for my most vulnerable constituents—are like.

The day before Sara was murdered, Surrey's children's services turned up at the wrong house due to an administrative error. In another case, the council failed to show up to a promised meeting about a child's care. As a result, the child did not get the support they needed—there are real-life consequences for Surrey's incompetence.

In November 2025, the child safeguarding practice review that I called for into Sara's murder was finally released, and it confirmed exactly what I feared: the state, and especially Surrey county council, failed Sara at every stage. All the warning signs were there, but they were not acted upon. The authorities were fully aware that Sara was at risk. She was placed on a child protection plan before her birth, yet was a victim of domestic abuse from that day onwards. Surrey social workers wanted to take her away from her father, but they changed their mind, and the consequences will haunt us all.

After Sara's murder, the senior officer responsible for children's services at Surrey county council, Rachael Wardell, was offered and accepted a pay rise of £8,700. I do not know how that woman can sleep at night. It sends a message that failure carries no consequences; in fact, it is rewarded.

The safeguarding review highlighted that there were national issues as well. Children's services in one in five local authorities across the country are not good enough, according to Ofsted. There is a range of spending across local authorities. York spends £35 million and its children's services are rated outstanding, but just down the road, Bradford—which, I admit, is slightly larger—spends £262 million and its children's services are rated as inadequate.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): My hon. Friend is speaking about very serious issues, and I commend him for not apportioning blame to one side or the other; he understands that, in different circumstances, there are different reasons to blame. The Government's removal of the funding uplift for the most remote authorities will have an effect on children's services, as it will on SEND provision and a whole range of council services. In Somerset, for example, it is 53% more expensive to provide home-to-school transport than in an average authority, yet the funding uplift has been removed. Does he agree that that is a shocking way to treat our most remote authorities?

Mr Forster: I do. Funding is an issue; I am concerned that we are not properly resourcing our children's services departments. The Government's recent decision to shift funding away from rural constituencies like my hon. Friend's could have a dramatic impact, and the Government need to recognise that in different parts of the country, there are different funding challenges. Obviously, a suburban-urban seat like mine has challenges, but it will clearly be easier and cheaper to travel around than his.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making an important speech on behalf of his most vulnerable constituents. Does he agree that rural and sparsely populated authorities can deliver good-quality children's services only if special educational needs provision, health integration and transportation are treated as national responsibilities and not afterthoughts, as they so often are? On the funding piece, Westmorland and Furness council is receiving funding of £535 per head this year. In three years' time, it will be £380 per head—a 29% cut in three years. Does he share my fear that that puts the safety of our children, particularly our most vulnerable ones, at risk?

Mr Forster: I completely agree, and that is why I called for this debate. We are not spending enough on vulnerable children, and that funding cut in Westmorland is absolutely shocking.

I highlighted the example of York and Bradford, which are two cities in the same region. We need to end the postcode lottery on the lives of children. Children should not be living with that abuse, neglect and fear, but in the awful situations where they are, we need local authority children's services to have their back and step in to protect them.

Nowhere is that failure more despicable than in Conservative-run Surrey county council. My county council's children's services were rated good by Ofsted in March 2025—a decision that many fellow MPs, constituents and people across Surrey find bonkers. This “good” rating is clearly a thin veneer that covers up the rot within. Sixty-six local authorities in England are rated good. Based on what I know and what I have just said about Surrey, if that is good, what on earth is happening in the rest of the country? The Children's Commissioner has been clear about this: her research shows huge regional disparities in child in need plans. In some areas, children receive early intervention and regular check-ups. In others, we see pointless bureaucracy, long waits and a revolving door of social workers who are poorly trained and supported.

Children's services in local authorities cannot protect children because of significant loopholes in the home education system, as highlighted by Sara's safeguarding review. It proved that Sara's murderers used those loopholes to hide the abuse. When they could no longer hide the abuse from the school, Sara's father and stepmother took her out of school, saying that they would homeschool her. The school could do nothing about that. The abuse continued—and there were tragic consequences.

The Liberal Democrats have long campaigned for a homeschool register to ensure that we know where the hundreds of homeschooled children across the country are and that they are safe. Some of them have never attended school—not once. We need a register of children not in school. That is backed by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and by the Children's Commissioner, who have said that it would be an important step and tool to keep children safe.

Homeschooling can be hugely advantageous, and parents have a right to choose it, but we need a register and, above all, parents should lose the right to homeschool if there are safeguarding concerns. It is clear from Sara's safeguarding review that repeated failures to share information are one of the key barriers to keeping children safe. The Liberal Democrats have been campaigning on this for years. We need to provide joined-up support to meet children's needs. The mechanism is known as the single unique identifier, and it would help to ensure that there are no more appalling safeguarding cases like the ones I have highlighted.

Every area in our country needs to have a multi-agency safeguarding hub, so that all organisations can work together, share vital information and, above all, protect children. A key example of the need for that is Sara's father and murderer. He was a taxi driver who passed a Disclosure and Barring Service check. He got his licence through Woking borough council—the licensing authority in my area—yet Surrey county council's children's services knew that he was a child abuser. It was foreseeable that

he would be driving around children with special educational needs or other vulnerable people, including for Surrey county council, as it uses taxi drivers for home-to-school transport. Why are we risking vulnerable children's lives because the computer says no? We need to share that information.

This Government's recent spending review agreed a real-terms cut in the grant to local authorities for children's services—that is appalling. We should not be cutting that funding; we should not be putting a price on a child's life.

I have a number of asks to the Minister. We need better joined-up public services where information is shared quickly and effectively to prevent children from being put at risk. We need to ensure that local authorities are well equipped to deal with the upcoming changes in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, so that no child falls through the cracks. Does the Minister agree that something is clearly wrong in Surrey? I urge him to put Surrey county council's children services in special measures.

I know that Surrey county council is to be abolished, and I am pleased that it is, but children's lives are at risk now. We cannot wait for local government reorganisation. Surrey's failures must have consequences for its leadership, not for my vulnerable constituents. From April of next year, my area will have a new local authority: West Surrey council. I do not want Surrey county council's record of mismanagement and poor culture of serving the public to be transferred to the new local authority. That is why I urge the Minister to intervene to protect vulnerable children like Sara in Woking and across Surrey.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Matt Western (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to speak in the debate. Clearly, there are quite a few Members so, on the basis of what I have seen, I ask Members to speak for four to five minutes—an informal application of a time limit—and we will see how we get on.

9.44 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for chairing the debate, Mr Western. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) for representing his constituents so well in this debate, and in particular, given the horror story that he shared, I express my condolences to Sara's family.

Colleagues may have heard York's story, but those who have not are about to hear it. The hon. Member for Woking was right to say that York moved from the position of “requires improvement” to “outstanding” in one go. I have to point out to the Minister that our local authority has the lowest level of funding per capita after the fair funding review, which does not seem fair at all because we are not the most affluent place by far.

The catalyst for the change in York comes down to two people: Martin Kelly, the director of children's services, and his deputy, Danielle Johnson. I pay tribute to them. If hon. Members want to learn about York's journey and the outstanding achievements that have occurred, the director and his deputy are open to dialogue. At the heart of the change was a new practice model with a committed workforce. We moved from 45 agency

staff to zero, on the basis that if someone was not committed to the service and the children, they had no place in the authority. A pioneering approach puts children at the heart, builds on co-production, innovates for change and evidences practice. Through reform, costs have been cut by £7 million. Through co-ordination across services, the local authority has built stability and made a difference to every child.

We are desperate to do more—to reshape services, drive change and press ahead with transformations. The model moves from transactional to relational, risk avoidance to risk management, safe certainty to safe uncertainty—that is just about being honest about risk—and short-term interventions to long-term outcomes. Every decision has the child at its centre and considers the long-term implications of each decision, developing resilience all the time. Its strength-based approach seeks out every opportunity for the child and is summed up,

“Our children belong in York, connected to the people they love and supported by the network around them.”

But the journey does not end there. A child or young person’s holistic needs should be met in one place, so here are my asks of the Minister. Mental health services must be integrated around the child, not separated in the child and adolescent mental health services, which is failing all our young people. We have a SEND hub in the city where all children can gather, along with parents and professionals, in an integrated way, but we need CAMHS as part of the conversation. That will remove the need for a diagnosis, because a label does not describe where a child is on multiple spectrums. We must have fully integrated support around a child’s needs.

We need to start young, so I urge the Minister to put the investment into the 1,001 critical days. We know that in the case of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder, for instance, we need to ensure at the very start of life that we have got the right interventions around the parents, including during the nine months of pregnancy. We will then have a stronger opportunity to prevent care orders in future and ensure that there is appropriate antenatal care, as well as comprehensive support for the family.

We also need funding in York. I mentioned how low our funding is. We have eight areas in the lowest quintile of deprivation in our city. Everyone, including Ministers, talks about how York is a beautiful city, about the Vikings, and about the walls and the Minster, but that does not make a child safer. In fact, many of the children have never seen those assets, and many are struggling because we simply do not have the resources we need. When it comes to per capita funding, York is in the lowest 25 for schools and 23rd for higher needs funding. Our city needs more funding, because a child in York is worth as much as a child in Camden, and yet we have about a third of the funding to do things. More than that, we want to be able to push our model further, provide more services for parents and ensure that we can keep the family together, which is our objective as we seriously reduce the number of children in social care.

We also want to drive our model of good practice further, so that we can draw on the world’s best practice and bring it into York, particularly in the early years—those pre-school years—to support parents on their journey as well. We must work with a child’s developmental

pathway, not against it. We therefore need to ensure that we have the right pedagogies in place. I was disappointed earlier in the week in the debate on play in education. To work with children we really need to understand the way that the mind develops.

My plea to the Minister is to look through a prism of poverty. We have significant areas of poverty in York, and yet if we put in the right investment, we know that we can make a difference to our children.

We are ambitious in York, and I am proud to showcase all that we have done, but we desperately want to go further. We know we can do it—in York, we have always been a laboratory of social change, a pioneering spirit built within all of us—and therefore I urge Government to work with us to deliver more not only of the Government’s objectives but of our own, for our children.

9.50 am

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Western. As of March 2025, nearly nine in 10 London councils were rated good or outstanding for children’s services. By contrast, in the south-west of England, the figure is barely half that.

Children’s services in Devon have faced serious challenges over recent years and in May 2025, Ofsted’s full inspection of Devon county council’s children’s services judged the service to be inadequate overall. That means that too many children experiencing neglect or abuse did not receive timely or effective help, too many plans drifted, and too many care leavers did not get consistent support.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster) and I agree with almost all of what he said. For me, I want to make it plain that I would not criticise the people working in children’s services, because I feel that individual social workers are a bit like goalkeepers: all too often, rather than praising their work for the children they save, we condemn and lambast the individuals who have cases where things go wrong. Yes, there is failure, and yes, there are real errors of judgment at the local authority level, but my sense is that the fault and the blame—indeed, the sin that my hon. Friend points to—lie with the perpetrators.

Devon’s position is serious, but it is not static. In formal correspondence with Devon county council in December 2025, the Minister for Children and Families set out the Government’s position on the progress being made in improving children’s services in Devon. He explicitly noted the “improving picture” and the

“increasing evidence of improvement to social work practice”, linked to stronger prioritisation and support from corporate and political leadership. He also pointed to Ofsted’s recent monitoring work, which recognised that “the range and impact of support provided to care leavers in Devon has improved since the last inspection.”

I appreciate that the Minister said that from a place of caring deeply for children’s services, not just as a political leader, but as someone who has been a leader in this sector for well over a decade.

Workforce instability in children’s services in Devon, especially the high use of agency staff, has held the service back. Reports in 2023 show that about 50% of children’s social work posts were filled by agency staff, compared with the national average of about 18%. In Devon, a permanent children’s social worker costs roughly

[Richard Foord]

£23 per hour, while agency staff cost about £44 per hour. Closing that gap and reducing the reliance on agency staff is clearly urgent.

Devon has taken measurable steps in the past year to build stability in children's services and to reduce reliance on agency staff. According to Devon county council's latest People First strategy, the number of agency team managers has been cut by about 40% from 20 to 12 as of last April, improving leadership within frontline teams. Devon's assessed and supported year in employment programme for newly qualified social workers, and the county council social care academy, continue to recruit and support newly qualified social workers, with roles actively advertised throughout 2025 and tailored development pathways to encourage permanent careers in the county, rather than the short-term contracts that we have seen before.

I will now talk about residential care.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Somerset council tells me that providers of residential homes for children in care can charge as much as £8,000 to £15,000 per week for one child, because they know that the council will have no other choice. Somerset council, however, is making good progress with its non-profit Homes and Horizons partnership. Does my hon. Friend agree that, to tackle profiteering companies, councils need more support to disrupt the market that provides residential homes?

Richard Foord: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. His situation is similar to ours: in Devon, it is reckoned that those profiteering companies make a complete packet. Local Government Association analysis suggests that 20 of the largest independent children's social care providers in England took in about £1.6 billion in fees in 2021-22. Roughly 19% of that—about £310 million—was recorded as profit. Plainly, there is too much money leaving this sector and not doing the right thing for children.

Devon's children's services are improving, but Devon's children deserve services that are not just improving but consistently good, and moving towards outstanding.

Matt Western (in the Chair): The four to five minutes was not kept to as tightly as I would have hoped, so we will have to go to a formal four minutes for speeches because of the number of Members who have indicated that they wish to speak.

9.55 am

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I commend the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) for the compassionate way that he spoke, and the dignity that he brought to Sara's memory. When we have to speak about horrific cases in this place, it can go one of two ways, and I think that he did justice to the young woman today.

Stoke-on-Trent city council is often at the top of league tables that councils would wish to be at the bottom of, and at the bottom of league tables that they would wish to be at the top of. That is a structural failing that we have had for many years, and our children's

services are no different. Although they were rated inadequate in 2019, they now require improvement to be good, and that is partly because of the leadership that has been shown since the 2013 local elections. It is normally us and Hartlepool that are No. 1 in terms of the number of children in care as an absolute number, but also per capita—per 10,000. It is a financial drain on our council, which the Minister has been made aware of, not least because I have told him.

This year, one in three pounds that the council spends will be spent on children's services. Compared with our statistical neighbours, 1,086 children in care is a phenomenally large number. It is an anomaly that we cannot get to the bottom of. At this point, I want to commend the work of our chief executive at the council, Jon Rouse, who has worked nationally on these issues and has deployed as many techniques as we can muster to get that number down, but it has remained stubbornly high. It fluctuates around 1,000, but that just means that we are spending millions of pounds on children in care at a time when money is tight.

The Government have helped; since the 2023-34 budget—if the Government sign off on this year's request—the council will have received around £70 million of exceptional financial support to balance the budget, to deal with the overspend driven exclusively by the demand in children's services. We cannot work out why so many young people are being put into the care system. Our city does have poverty—a lot of places have poverty—and social capital is not high. We are not that dissimilar to our statistical neighbours, and yet our numbers are significant and not coming down at the rate that we want.

The Minister is not immune to the challenges that places such as Stoke face. He knows that there have been complex issues with small local authorities in densely populated urban areas where there are underlying socioeconomic factors, but that should not be a reason to accept these high numbers. It is bad for the city, but also for the young people in care; we all know that care-experienced young people tend to have lower social capital and lower opportunities, and their life chances are disproportionately impacted by the fact that they go into care. We need to work out a solution to that.

I have raised my asks to the Minister privately, but I want to put them on the record today. Can we look at a rigorous partnership working board for Stoke-on-Trent that brings together Government, local authorities and the expertise we have heard about from Members today, to get to the root cause of the problem in Stoke-on-Trent? I will be taking up the offer from my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) to speak to her officials about how they have made their remarkable progress, because if we can learn from that, we absolutely will.

Are the Government willing to look at a rigorous, potentially academic-led investigation into the drivers of social care need in Stoke-on-Trent, so that we can get to the cause, as well as the solution? Can we talk about Ofsted? The city council was doing remarkably well, and then the Ofsted judgment came in and said that we were managing too much risk, so we instantly had to go back to a risk-averse situation that has driven those numbers up. Those are my three asks, and I thank Members for their time and attention.

9.59 am

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster) for securing this important debate. He made a powerful speech on behalf of his vulnerable constituents, and vulnerable people across the county of Surrey and beyond.

The central failing I want to highlight is this: Surrey county council—my constituency's local authority for children's services—repeatedly chooses not to use its statutory powers even when children are unsafe, out of education or legally entitled to support. Children and families across Guildford are feeling the consequences. Schools are often the first to spot safeguarding concerns. Headteachers and designated safeguarding leads do not raise alarms lightly. They do so because they are often the only professionals with consistent daily insight into a child's wellbeing.

At a meeting last year, a headteacher told us that safeguarding thresholds in Surrey are far higher than in comparable authorities. Referrals stall and the council is reluctant to move from voluntary support to formal safeguarding processes. That is often justified by the family resilience model. Of course, there is nothing wrong with a strengths-based approach, but the issue is how it is applied.

One headteacher at the meeting described, with visible emotion, a child in her school showing clear signs of neglect and abuse. The headteacher followed safeguarding procedures and referred the case to Surrey but, instead of investigating, the council informed the parents that a safeguarding concern had been raised and the parents removed the child from the school. That headteacher told us that she lies awake at night not knowing where that child is or whether they are safe. That is not an isolated incident. My hon. Friend the Member for Woking referred to Sara Sharif, the most tragic example in Surrey.

Those safeguarding failures are deeply linked to failures in education. In an example from my constituency, a looked-after child is approaching a critical educational transition, but approval for an appropriate placement has been delayed because that child is in temporary accommodation outside Surrey due to a shortage of placements. Despite Surrey being the corporate parent, it treated geography as a barrier rather adapting the system. There are many other examples I could share.

I have several questions for the Minister but, given the time, I will write to him. Today, I simply want to ask whether he will commit to reviewing whether Surrey county council is meeting its statutory safeguarding educational duties, particularly in relation to thresholds for intervention. Children in Surrey need a system that acts without hesitation when their safety, welfare or education is at risk. I urge the Government to do all they can to ensure Surrey county council meets its legal responsibilities. I fully support my hon. Friend the Member for Woking's call for the Government to intervene in Surrey to keep children safe.

10.2 am

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) for making a powerful speech.

As a foster carer, a member of an adoption panel and a former lead member of a tier 1 local authority, I have seen at first hand the damage that austerity has caused to local authorities across the country, in particular to children's services. The lack of resource and support has contributed to the number of children in care rocketing. That in turn has created a placement sufficiency crisis in children's social care. The number of children in residential care more than doubled between 2010 and 2024. That has presented extra pressures on authorities, as children have to be routinely placed at a distance from their local area. Every day that the previous Government were in power, an average of 140 children—equivalent to nearly five full classrooms—entered poverty.

We now have a Minister for Children and Families who understands the problems we face, as he delivered the independent review of children's social care. I will focus on some of the changes Labour has made to improve children's services thus far. First, the continued roll-out of the Mockingbird programme, which brings new foster carers together with those who are more experienced, helping to create an extended family-like community around foster families, providing advice, expertise and support.

A few weeks ago, I spoke to a group of foster carers about their experiences. Many told me of the positive impact the Mockingbird scheme had had on them. Therefore, I welcome the additional £40 million that the Government are investing in children's social care, which is helping to ensure that programmes such as Mockingbird continue to be rolled out across the country. If we cannot attract enough new foster carers—and that is always a challenge—then we need to keep hold of and support the ones we have.

Secondly, the Government are bringing in important changes in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that will protect local authorities from paying exorbitant fees to large, privately run children's home providers. As I have said previously, many more children are living in residential care due to the placement sufficiency crisis. As has been mentioned this morning, in 2022 the largest 20 providers of children's residential placements collectively made £310 million in profits. That was all off the back of the public purse. It is therefore welcome that, as a result of the Bill, large children's placement providers will have to give regular financial information to a newly created financial oversight scheme. I am glad that the Bill will give the Government the power, if necessary, to cap the profits of private children's home providers.

There are many other positive changes to highlight, including those ensuring greater oversight on home schooling for children subject to a child protection order. The roll-out of the Staying Close programme will give care leavers from residential care—the number of whom has grown significantly—extra support to stay in housing and to get education and work. New requirements will ensure that all local authorities offer family group decision making—a move that will keep more children out of care altogether, and which in turn will save authorities money. We are opening new Best Start family hubs in all English local authorities—something that we have really missed.

Taken together, the changes will alleviate pressures on local authority children's services and give greater protection to our children and greater support to carers. It will, of course, take time for many of these changes to

[John Whitby]

be felt. However, having been on the frontlines of children's social care for more than two decades, I know that these changes will make a real and tangible difference to our most vulnerable and at-risk children.

10.7 am

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) for securing this important debate and for his passionate and heartfelt speech.

I want to begin by acknowledging that Kirklees council has improved significantly since previous inspections. The most recent inspection in 2024 judged it as good overall for children's services, and it has been allocated extra funding in 2026-27 to try and address some of the findings. However, the message to the Government is that the councils that have done all they can to get from requires improvement to good need extra support in funding and resources to then go and push further to get to outstanding.

Today, I want to focus on one area that may not otherwise be raised. We have heard that the pressures on local authorities are intense and growing. In Dewsbury and Batley, around 300 children are being raised in kinship care—cared for by grandparents, aunts, uncles or close friends who step in during moments of crisis. Alongside that, over 100 children are currently in local authority care in Kirklees. Importantly, Kirklees has lower numbers of looked after children than many of our neighbouring councils, reflecting long-standing preventive approaches and sustained investment in early help and family support.

We also have a higher proportion of children able to remain with their extended families, with greater use of special guardianship orders, which we know significantly improve outcomes for children. Kinship carers in particular provide a vital service in offering continuity, familiarity and love at a time of upheaval. Yet too often, they do so with insufficient support. Across Yorkshire and Humber, almost half of kinship carers rate the support they receive from local authorities as poor or very poor. Alarming, 12% say they may not be able to continue caring for their kinship children in the next year if circumstances do not improve. That will put almost 2,000 children at risk of entering formal care in Yorkshire and Humber. That is not just a human tragedy, but also a financial one.

Evidence shows that, for every 100 children supported in well-resourced kinship care rather than local authority care, the state saves £4 million a year, while improving long-term outcomes for those children. Nationally, children's social care reforms are widely welcomed and have been shaped by the expertise of the Association of Directors of Children's Services. The renewed focus on multi-agency family support, early intervention and prevention is particularly welcome.

The proposed investment, through the Families First Partnership programme and wider reforms, has the potential to make a real difference, strengthening our ability to help families stay together where safe, deploy evidence-based interventions and deliver high-quality social care. But reform must be matched with sustained funding and genuine cross-Government co-ordination

alongside real, sustained support on the ground. That means investing in early intervention, strengthening kinship care support, improving placement sufficiency and ensuring joined-up working across services.

My final point to the Minister is that, in the first year of being an MP, I raised the automatic off-rolling of children after 20 days of absence without authorisation. That really needs to be looked at—there needs to be a formal meeting and a review of why that child was out before just off-rolling them, because that can create safeguarding issues.

10.11 am

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Western. I congratulate the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) on securing the debate, telling Sara's story so powerfully and allowing us the space to discuss one of our most important public services.

First, I pay tribute to everyone who works in children's services across our country, but particularly in my two local authorities of Middlesbrough and Redcar and Cleveland. Before entering this place, I was privileged to be the cabinet member for children in Redcar and Cleveland. I was impressed, every single day, by the extraordinary staff working in that department—under immense pressure, as has been discussed. I often used to say that the toddlers who lost early intervention services in the first wave of austerity were now teenagers coming into care with complex challenges, and I think we are still seeing that today.

I want to highlight the most recent Ofsted inspection in Redcar and Cleveland, which was published just this morning. In 2022, the department was rated as requiring improvement across all areas, and it was a top priority for the Labour council that came in in 2023 to turn that around. I was proud of Ofsted's recognition of the work we were doing on that front in 2023 and, today, I am very pleased to see that Ofsted have rated Redcar and Cleveland as good, with strong practice and swift support for children and families. That is a big step forward, and a real credit to all the staff, the directors—previously Kathryn Boulton, and her successor Danielle Swainston—and the cabinet member responsible, councillor Bill Suthers. His leadership has been steady and co-operative, and he deserves recognition for that. It is obviously not the end of the journey, but it is a very important milestone in making sure that we serve the children we all have a duty towards.

That is especially welcome given the challenging context that councils face, which we have discussed today. The Institute for Government recently found that nearly every local authority is overspending on children's social care, largely because placements with private care providers have become much more expensive. It has been described by the Competition and Markets Authority as a "broken" market, and it needs addressing. Private providers extract high margins while councils raid reserves and increase council tax, disproportionately in areas of high deprivation, just to keep children safe. My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) mentioned Hartlepool; across the Tees Valley we have a cluster of local authorities under extraordinary pressure in this area, and no one in this Chamber thinks that that is a sensible way to run such an important public service.

There are answers; I welcome the new grant funding, the Best Start family hubs and the Families First Partnership programme. Important changes are coming forward from the Government, but we can do more to disrupt that broken market. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill has given the Department powers to act. We can cap private providers' profits and set up regional care co-operatives, as recommended by the MacAlister review—which the Minister, as its author, is very well acquainted with. That can improve commissioning and increase in-house and not-for-profit provision. In the Tees Valley, council leaders are exploring that idea together, to stop competing with each other, pool our buying power and shape a more stable local market to get better value for children and taxpayers.

I am convinced that this is a necessary step in our region, and it sits alongside work on prevention, family help and a more stable workforce. I hope that we can look at this. With the right national framework, the right investment and the confidence to try new models, we can build a children's social care system that is stable, compassionate and worthy of the young people it serves.

10.14 am

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western, for what I think is the third time in three days—I feel very blessed. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster) on securing this important debate, on his incredibly moving speech and on all his hard work and advocacy in this area. Woking is extremely lucky to have somebody fighting its corner as he does.

Too many families in rural areas face a system that they feel is too distant, too fragmented and increasingly under strain. Local authorities' budgets are under immense pressure, particularly in rural areas, where delivering support is inherently more expensive. Delivering children's services in rural areas costs more, sustainable buildings are harder to find, connectivity is weaker and long distances make everything from early intervention to crisis support more complex and expensive.

The funding formulas rarely account for those challenges. Per child expenditure varies hugely between authorities, with some spending three and a half times more per child than other areas. I welcome the Government's commitment to invest £500 million to rebuild family services under the Best Start umbrella and the creation of Best Start family hubs, but children in rural constituencies like West Dorset need safe, accessible family spaces for children's services to take place. Local authorities should be empowered to retrofit vacant buildings, such as the stationmaster's house at Sherborne station, into family hubs that meet local needs, rather than centralised services that can be miles away.

I also welcome the extension of the adoption and special guardianship support fund into 2026-27, but short-term extensions are not enough. Children with complex needs cannot thrive without the certainty of long-term therapeutic support. The Koru Project, a local charity providing vital support in Dorset, warns that without long-term funding, children cannot receive the care they need. It has shared heartbreaking cases: a young girl in her fourth care placement who relies on

her therapist as her only stable relationship; and another child, with severe additional needs, who sees therapy as her only safe space.

Professionals agree that, in complex cases, long-term Government support is vital. One constituent, Brenda, is a blind adopter raising a teenager with FASD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and developmental trauma. Specialist therapy funded through the scheme has helped her daughter to regulate her emotions and engage with her education, health and care plan. Kate and Dave, who care for two children with overlapping needs, face constant anxiety because, although assessments can be funded, the ongoing therapy that professionals say is essential cannot.

Local authorities must have stable, predictable funding and proper support and guidance from central Government to meet those challenges. That means recognising rurality in the funding formula, ending short-term fixes and ensuring that access to services does not depend on a postcode. Children in West Dorset and in rural communities across the country deserve services that are stable, accessible and fair.

10.17 am

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western.

For obvious reasons, we often hear in this House about failure, notably in the tragic case raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster)—I congratulate him on securing this important debate—but I will focus on a local authority that has been able to turn its children's services around. In 2017, a BBC report warned that children in Powys were being put at risk because of serious failings in the council's children's services. Inspectors found missed safeguarding opportunities, weak oversight and poor follow-up—concerns so serious that Welsh Government intervention was actively discussed.

That history matters, because it gives context to the progress that is now being made. Since 2022, under Liberal Democrat leadership of Powys county council, there has been a focus on rebuilding children's services from the ground up—strengthening leadership, supporting the workforce and putting children's safety back at the centre of decision making.

That work is now being recognised independently. A recent external assurance review concluded that Powys children's services are safe and improving, with no serious failings identified. The reviewer specifically highlighted stable leadership, strong advocacy for children through independent reviewing officers, and high-quality performance reporting—precisely those areas that were found wanting in 2017. Staff report feeling supported and proud to work in the service, and Powys social workers and safeguarding professionals have been recognised at regional awards for their work protecting children and involving young people directly in shaping services.

No one is pretending that the job is finished. Pressures remain, particularly around funding and placements, but the direction of travel is clear and welcome. Powys has moved from a service once described as putting children at risk to one independently judged to be safe and improving. That is what sustained leadership looks like, and it is a positive example that this House should be willing to recognise.

[David Chadwick]

The overlying point is that vulnerable children need a strong state to look after them, and functioning children's services that keep them safe are essential. That is why I hold the Conservatives and Reform in complete contempt, because they do not believe in our state. They have spent the last 40 years bashing and cutting the state; they attack it over and over again, spreading their cynical poison that a small state is desirable. Well, a small state will end up endangering our nation's children. It is essential that these services are funded properly and well to keep our children safe. That is why I am proud to be a Liberal Democrat, and I am proud of what Powys county council has achieved over the past few years.

10.21 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) for setting the scene incredibly well. Our children's services are so important, and the story he told has been well illustrated in the papers. It is almost inconceivable how that young child went through such brutality and violence. The story moved us all, and I thank him for sharing it with this Chamber; it is important for what we need to achieve. It could have been prevented, which is why this issue is incredibly important.

Local children's services are essential to support, protect and improve the wellbeing of children, young people and families before any minor or moderate problems escalate into crisis situations. The early help approach has important benefits for parents and the community. I always try to give a Northern Ireland perspective to debates. I am mindful that the Minister does not have responsibility for Northern Ireland, but I like to add some comments to illustrate the problems we have and some of the helpful things we are doing. I will try to be on the positive side.

In Northern Ireland, and especially in my Strangford constituency, numerous services go above and beyond at all levels to serve children. The Ards Arena youth resource centre provides activities for confidence building, peer interaction and safe community engagement. There is also multi-agency support through the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, which brings together statutory, voluntary and community organisations to improve outcomes for children and families.

That is not to mention the Newtownards child social services team based in James Street in the town centre of Newtownards, the major town of my constituency. I know many of the staff personally, and the contribution they make to the lives of young people does not go unnoticed. The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) referred to staff and what they do. It is important that we remember the many staff members who make fantastic contributions, and their focus must be on the perpetrators, as he rightly said, to ensure that issues are addressed.

As of 31 March last year, 22,243 children were known to social services as a child in need, which means they are assessed as requiring services to achieve or maintain a reasonable standard of health or development, or to prevent significant impairment. The pressure on local

children's services is intense, and support can range from marital break-ups to missing children and children with deteriorating mental health, or even children who have had to be removed from the family home. Some of those are desperate cases that certainly worry us.

Protecting children's wellbeing and ensuring the necessary support is there before a crisis is critical to ensuring that young people feel safe and do not reach a point where they require an emergency service. We must strengthen families and provide services to keep young people's lives stable. Research suggests that preventive services, community youth centres and support programmes improve health, education and social outcomes, so let us do our bit to ensure that those services are sustainable and fit for purpose.

Local support and children's services play a proactive role in ensuring that children in my constituency and across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can thrive. Modern society and social issues can be hard enough for young people to navigate. The pressures on young children and families are incredible, so we must ensure they have the support they need. I want to do that, other right hon. and hon. Members want to do that, and I know the Minister wants to do it too.

I look to the Minister for a commitment to children's services across the United Kingdom. Perhaps he can have some discussions with the Northern Ireland Assembly to see how we can do things better together.

10.25 am

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster) for securing this important debate and for his tireless dedication to ensuring that what happened to Sara Sharif never, ever happens to another child again.

We have heard a range of contributions today, and I want to start by saying that children's services in local authorities across the country play a vital, statutory role in ensuring that all children, including the most vulnerable, receive the support and education that every child deserves and needs. Like the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer) and my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord), I pay tribute to those working on the frontline, who are often overworked, underpaid and under-thanked. They deserve our thanks, notwithstanding the systemic and structural failures.

As many hon. Members said, many local authorities face deep funding challenges. For some local authorities, that is exacerbated by what has been called the fair funding review. I fear we will see short-term decisions that ultimately cost the taxpayer more in the long run. The Liberal Democrats have always argued that we should see spending on supporting our children as an investment in our future—our society's future and our economy's future.

I will return to funding, but I now turn to where my hon. Friend the Member for Woking started. I listened to his powerful words about Sara's story with tears in my eyes, and I was reminded that I felt similarly in May 2022, when the then Education Secretary—one Nadhim Zahawi—gave a statement in the main Chamber following

the brutal deaths of Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes. As is always the case after such horrendous stories, we said, “Never again,” and he promised that lessons would be learned.

When the Children’s Commissioner gave evidence to the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee last year, she said:

“Every time a child dies, we give exactly the same set of recommendations, including better multi-agency working and better join-up, yet time and again”—

including after Victoria Climbié, Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Sara Sharif—

“we find ourselves saying the same things.”—[*Official Report, Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Public Bill Committee*, 21 January 2025; c. 44, Q94.]

The Government must take action, and I welcome the fact that they are taking a number of steps in the right direction—I am very happy to acknowledge that. Last year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) and I met Professor Alexis Jay to discuss the findings of her review into child sexual abuse. She impressed upon me two points: the importance of a child protection authority and the importance of data sharing.

I am grateful that the Minister has now announced a child protection authority, and I hope he will set out a bit more on the timelines and implementation. On data sharing, which was so critical in Sara’s case, I welcome some of the measures in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, not least the introduction of a single unique identifier. The Liberal Democrats strongly support that because we believe that proper data sharing between services will improve child safeguarding. I hope the Government will continue to address some of the concerns that have been raised about privacy and data sharing, given the Government’s record at times of data loss and being hacked. I raised with the Home Secretary a few weeks ago my fear that there are people outside this place who are scaremongering and suggesting that this is digital ID for children, when actually it is about how we safeguard children, provide better services, and commission better services and research to support them.

Another measure in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which is currently in the other place, is the children not in school register. As my hon. Friend the Member for Woking said, the Liberal Democrats have long supported such a register, so that vulnerable children do not disappear from the system. However, during the passage of the Bill we have repeatedly set out our concerns about the amount of information that has to be collected for that register. This is not just about the impact and intrusion on families; even the Association of Directors of Children’s Services, in oral evidence to the Public Bill Committee, was circumspect about the amount of detailed information that home-educating parents will be expected to supply. I have talked to councillors and local government officials, and they are worried about the huge burden this will put on local authorities in meeting their new duties. If the Government are going to put these duties on local authorities, funding needs to follow, so that they are properly resourced to collect the data and implement the register.

That brings me back to funding. As we have heard, underfunding is a consistent theme in children’s services. I talked about children being an investment. Unfortunately,

politics is such that Governments think in electoral cycles. The return on an investment in a young child is often not seen for 15 or 20 years, so it is very hard to make the case for that investment to the Treasury. The Minister has my sympathy and support in that.

In his independent review of children’s social care, the Minister said:

“What we have currently is a system increasingly skewed to crisis intervention, with outcomes for children that continue to be unacceptably poor and costs that continue to rise.”

I recognise that the Government announced a children’s social care prevention grant last year, but I am afraid that money pales into insignificance when we hear so starkly today from my hon. Friends, many of whom represent rural constituencies that are seeing deep funding cuts through the reallocation of local government funding following the fair funding review, that the most vulnerable will lose out.

It is not just rural areas, but London constituencies, too. Government Members often say to me, “You represent an affluent area.” Yes, on the whole I do, but that does not mean that deprivation, need and vulnerable children do not exist. My local authority in Richmond is one of the worst hit in the country—it will lose about £47 million of Government funding over the next four years—and it is those vulnerable children who will miss out. The pots of funding the Government are making available for children’s services are welcome, but when we offset that against the losses, we are going to see children suffer. It is a real shame that we are seeing this money taken away in London, because between 2010 and 2023, London boroughs saw an 11% reduction in the number of looked-after children, while England as a whole experienced a 30% increase. The changes to the children and young people’s services formula in London risk undoing the very good work we have seen London boroughs do to give our children the best start in life.

Obviously, I will always argue for more money to be spent on children’s services, but I recognise that there is not a magic money tree, and we face a difficult fiscal situation, not least as a result of the previous Conservative Government. There are ways that savings can be made. Early intervention is one of them, and I know the Minister is very supportive of that approach. There are a number of great measures in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, such as family group decision making. I ask the Minister to look at the amendments tabled in the other place by my noble Friend Baroness Tyler, who wants to ensure that local authorities have a duty to support parents after a child is taken away from them, so that they not only overcome the trauma and grief but make a lasting change. The data shows that half of newborns in care proceedings are born to mothers who have already been through proceedings with another child. We need to take action early to prevent the same thing from happening again.

A number of Labour and Liberal Democrat Members have talked about the eye-watering cost of private social care providers and fostering agencies, which are bleeding local authorities dry. I welcome the backstop power in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill for the Government to put a profit cap on children’s social care providers. I urge the Minister, as I have again and again: please extend the profit cap to private special schools, which are also bleeding our local authorities dry. When one school charges more than £100,000 a year in fees

[*Munira Wilson*]

plus transport, while state-maintained alternatives do it for £25,000 for the same cohort, that is an obvious place that the Government can save money. The answer is capital investment in state-run specialist provision, in the same way that it is in state-run children's care homes. I know the Government have already started on that, but they need to go further.

Edward Morello: My hon. Friend is making a wonderful point. It reminds me of a conversation I had recently with my council about a group of 10 to 15 parents with autistic children who definitely did not need to be in specialist schools and needed local provision. Because of the different pots of money, it was easier for the council to pay a private provider £100,000 and have the children travel 20 to 30 miles, because it could not afford the capital cost of £1.5 million to set up a local school. It wanted to do that, but it did not have the money, which disadvantages parents who now have kids travelling vast distances.

Munira Wilson: It is a familiar story, and I completely agree with my hon. Friend.

I am getting an indication from the Chair that I am already overrunning, so I will try to cut my last points short. The Minister is aware that I have long campaigned on kinship care. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill takes welcome steps forward, but there is much further to go. As he knows, putting a child with a family member in the short term is not just better for their long-term outcomes; it would save local authorities around 50% of the cost of putting them in care, even if they gave kinship carers allowances on a par with foster carers. That has to be an urgent cost-saving intervention. The Minister must also restore the adoption and special guardianship support fund grants, as we heard so clearly from my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello), who talked about the long-term impact.

I will conclude by quoting the Minister's own words at him. In his review, he stated:

"How we care for our children is nothing short of a reflection of our values as a country."

We have heard today that we are falling short on that. We stand ready to work across parties to ensure that his vision becomes reality.

10.36 am

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) for securing this important debate, and for his powerful and thoughtful contribution, particularly in relation to the tragic case of Sara Sharif.

We have heard thoughtful contributions from right across the House this morning. The hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) spoke passionately about her city, about sharing best practice and about the importance of the first 1,001 days of a child's life, which are critical. The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) talked about the variation in children's services around the country and how it is a postcode lottery, and in particular about the difference between London and the south-west. It is heartening to hear that services in his Devon constituency are improving.

There were calls for joined-up thinking from right across the House, led by the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). The hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) supported the hon. Member for Woking by raising concerns on behalf of her constituents regarding the quality of care from Surrey county council. I was particularly moved by the personal commitment to looked-after children by the hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby), who brought his experience to bear.

Themes we have heard from right across the House include support for kinship carers, the need for long-term funding, the lack of places, and the fact that we need processes in order to learn the vital lessons of the past. I associate His Majesty's loyal Opposition with those themes and, in particular, with Members' tributes to frontline staff. There may be systemic issues, but we know that frontline staff do their best under difficult constraints. They are overworked and underpaid, and deserve all of our support.

I think the nature of need in the country is shocking. Local authorities in England are supporting around 400,000 children in need. That is roughly one in 30 children. As of the end of March last year, around 49,000 children were subject to child protection plans, and more than 80,000 were in local authority care. Those figures should give us pause; one in 30 children is the equivalent of a child in every classroom. But this debate is not about numbers; it is about children—the most vulnerable, at-risk children in our communities. It is not about statistics, but about lives—and, in the case of Sara Sharif, a life lost.

Sara was living in Woking when she was murdered by her father and stepmother. The hon. Member for Woking has rightly been a passionate advocate for change, particularly since the publication of the local child safeguarding practice review. I commend him for that work. Nine of the 15 recommendations in the review were wholly or partially local, and I echo the call for Surrey county council to implement them swiftly but thoroughly. It is our responsibility in this place to ensure that where national recommendations are made, children's services are properly equipped to meet their statutory duties. I welcome the work that has begun, but there is more to do.

Nationally, the scale of pressures on children's services is clear. According to the Local Government Association, the number of children in care is 18% higher than a decade ago. Councils now carry out more than 600 child protection investigations every single day. But despite increased budgeted spending, councils have been overspending on children's social care by an average of 14% each year, and planned budgets for 2025-26 show a further 10% rise in costs. At the heart of this lies a fundamental problem: a shortage of high-quality placements for looked-after children. Demand continues to outstrip supply, driving up costs and putting intense pressure on social care, SEND services and care leaver support.

Under the previous Conservative Government, the proportion of local authority children's services rated good or outstanding rose from 24% in 2015 to 60% in 2024, according to the Institute for Government. That progress matters, but it is equally true that around a third of local authorities still require improvement or are judged inadequate. This is about children's safety. Having listened to hon. Members from across the political

spectrum, I hope I speak for many in saying that we all want the Government to succeed in this area. Getting children's services right underpins so many outcomes and, most importantly, helps prevent tragedies like Sara's from ever happening again.

The hon. Member for Woking may know that part of my constituency is in the Surrey county council area. The council has committed to implementing all the local recommendations in full. I share some of his concerns about the culture in that team and the need for joined-up services, so that children do not fall between the cracks. Encouragingly, Ofsted's most recent inspection, in 2025, highlighted some improvements at the front door of services. Inspectors noted that referrals to the children's single point of access received "timely and proportionate" responses, and that there was effective partnership working with the police, particularly in cases of domestic abuse and missing children. Multi-agency strategy meetings were found to be "timely and well attended" leading to considered decisions. Those are vital steps forward and I welcome them.

I have met the new lead member, Councillor Jonathan Hulley, to discuss this matter. I have a great deal of personal confidence in him, and he recognises the scale of change required in this area. I was heartened to see that a motion calling for an independent expert review of the improvements made at Surrey county council following Sara's death was passed unanimously by the council last month, with cross-party support. That independent scrutiny is essential to providing confidence that reforms are effective, lasting and properly focused. I will be watching closely for its outcomes, as I know the hon. Member for Woking will be, and I hope that we can all embrace the cross-party approach of our county colleagues across Surrey and within the council to drive sustained improvement.

As well as Surrey, in my constituency I also deal with children's services delivered by the royal borough of Windsor and Maidenhead and by Slough borough council—I do not know whether I am unique in having three different children's services. Ofsted rated the royal borough's services as good in October 2024. By contrast, Slough has been inadequate since early 2023, although subsequent focus visits, including in July 2024, found that children in need and those on child protection plans were receiving timely and appropriate services.

These neighbouring authorities illustrate a simple but uncomfortable truth: children's services remain a postcode lottery. Where services are well led, outcomes can and do improve under the existing framework; where they struggle, the causes are often leadership, capability and delivery on the ground, not the absence of legislative powers. That is why we should be careful and cautious about assuming that more legislation on its own will necessarily lead to better outcomes for children.

I wish to talk briefly about the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which continues its passage in the other place. I welcome the Government's acceptance of several amendments responding to the recommendations from the Sara Sharif review, particularly proposals to pilot meetings with parents before deregistration from school, and the option of a visit within 15 days of a child starting home education. However, there remain serious concerns. As drafted, the Bill would not fully address the specific safeguarding loopholes identified in Sara's case. Baroness Barran is doing excellent work in

the Lords to close those gaps, and I hope that the Government will think again on some of those issues. I welcome the Government's introduction of unique child identification, as we previously called for. More broadly, the principle of a register of children not in school, as raised by the hon. Member for Woking, has long enjoyed cross-party support. I would be interested in the Minister's comments on that.

Education matters and school attendance should be the norm, but parental choice also matters. Elective home education is a legitimate option for many families. As it stands, the Bill does not strike the right balance. I have received numerous representations from constituents concerned that the proposals would place excessive and unnecessary burdens on responsible home-educating families. The requirement to detail exact hours of education, on pain of breaking the law, is particularly intrusive and fails to reflect the reality of flexible home-based learning. Safeguarding measures must be proportionate and focused on identifying genuine risk, not on creating layers of bureaucracy that stigmatise families who are doing the right thing.

I urge the Government to go further in tightening the conditions under which a local authority may withhold consent for elective home education. Government amendment 120 to the Bill, which would apply where a child has been on a child protection plan within the past five years, does not go far enough. Local authorities should also consider whether a child has ever been subject to care proceedings, even where those proceedings did not result in a care order, as tragically was the case with Sara.

If the Bill is to honour its stated purpose, it must focus relentlessly on protecting children at genuine risk, not on sweeping up responsible families into an overly prescriptive system. Getting this right matters; as we have heard today, children's lives depend on it.

10.46 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) for securing the debate and for his powerful and heartfelt contribution. I have met him on a number of occasions, and I am sure we will continue to meet to discuss these and other related issues.

I express my own deep sorrow at the tragic death of Sara Sharif. By all accounts, Sara was a bright happy girl who should have gone on to enjoy all the things in life she had ahead of her. Instead, her life was brought to a brutal and painful end by the actions of her father and stepmother. In such circumstances, it is small comfort to know that those directly responsible for Sara's death have been brought to justice and will spend most of the rest of their lives in prison. I pay tribute to all who gave evidence that ultimately proved beyond doubt that her death was the result of lengthy and increasingly sadistic abuse.

We in this place must also reflect on the fact that, as set out in the local child safeguarding practice review, there were opportunities where Sara's appalling mistreatment could have been identified and stopped. I have already committed to write to the hon. Member for Woking, setting out the Government's full range of actions in direct response to the recommendations of the LCSRP.

[Josh MacAlister]

I will take a moment to recognise the hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) rightly praised the fantastic work of Martin Kelly and his team in turning around services in York, beyond simply looking at the Ofsted inspection results. The transformational change for children and families in that city is down to that team's brilliant work. My hon. Friend also rightly identified the concept of safe uncertainty. As we have heard, we are trying to legislate for and resource a system that needs to act decisively when there is significant harm, and support families where there is not significant harm, but there are concerns. Getting that balance right requires practitioners to occupy a very difficult position of safe uncertainty: not knowing, but holding competing hypotheses and ideas in mind about what might be going on for a family, and doing so in a calm, methodical and skilled way.

The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) made a point about social work judgment, which neatly summarised that reflection. Devon's performance is an ongoing concern—for far too many years, it has not been able to reach a level of providing good enough services for children and families. I welcome his summary of some of the progress that has been made, in particular in workforce stability. I will keep a close eye on that to ensure that we get Devon to the point where it is no longer under an intervention by the Department—but that intervention will continue for as long as necessary to get services to the place where his residents and the children he represents need them to be. Like many other hon. Members, he mentioned residential care and the concerns about profiteering, which I will return to in a moment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) was absolutely right to highlight the situation in which more than 1,000 children are in care. If we were to take a step back and ask whether some of those children could have grown up with people who already loved them and could keep them safe, if we had the resources and intervention available to support the family network, I am convinced, as he is, that the answer would be yes. I welcome the spirit in which his offer was given; he has raised that offer with me before, which is not being defensive about the challenges that the city faces, but asks whether the Department will take a proactive approach in offering improvement support, doing it in a slightly different way. I confirm to him that yes, we will, and I am happy to have further conversations with him. Similarly, with Ofsted, I wish to ensure that its inspection framework and the chief inspector's approach are totally in line with the Government reform programme. I am pleased to confirm that such work is very much under way.

The hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) wants to write to me about the situations that she raised. I am happy to look into them. She is also right to raise the crucial role of education as part of that partnership for safeguarding children.

As a foster carer, my hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby) knows better than anyone the importance of getting fostering right, so that we do not need to rely unnecessarily on residential care, with all the consequences of that. He was right to highlight the amazing work of Mockingbird constellations

to support foster carers. In the coming days, I urge him to keep a close eye on any announcements that may be welcomed positively on both those fronts.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) rightly highlighted the progress that has been made in Kirklees council and stressed the need to fund further reform, which is the action that the Government are taking with £2.4 billion to roll out the Families First programme. He made a point about off-rolling and children not on the school register, which I will return to directly in a moment.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer) in congratulating the local Labour team and the children's social care staff there on their work to turn around those services. Like him, I want to take action to disrupt the broken care market. I encourage local partners in the Tees valley and across the whole north-east to come forward with proposals for a regional care co-operative, which the Government will certainly consider.

The hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) was right to highlight the rural dimension of much of the debate. I, too, represent a rural constituency, and the way in which children's social care is delivered needs to reflect the benefits of dispersed access to services. On the adoption and special guardianship support fund, the Government will set out very soon actions to give more certainty and improvements to that fund into the future. I shall keep Members abreast of those updates.

The hon. Member for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick) was absolutely right to highlight the improvements not just in English local authorities, but in his own Welsh constituency in Powys. He rightly highlighted the centrality of advocacy for children, in particular for those in care.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was right to highlight the dimensions beyond just England. In fact, the UK Government have brazenly stolen Northern Ireland innovations in support of children in residential care. We look to bring the model of step-down care in fostering in Northern Ireland to the rest of the UK.

I will now answer directly some of the concerns expressed by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson). I appreciate the spirit in which she offered to work collaboratively with the Government. She highlighted a number of the issues where the Government have been listening and responding, not least with regard to the children not in school register, where we have tabled a number of amendments to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to address the specific points around burdens for families.

On funding, the hon. Lady quoted my report at me, so I will quote it back at her. I called for £2.6 billion of funding over a four-year reform programme. I am really proud to say that the Government have invested and met that and, in some cases, exceeded it. The Families First programme has received £2.4 billion on top of previous spending, and hundreds of millions of pounds will be spent to improve the care system. The job now is to make sure that that investment is spent well and has a lasting effect.

I recognise the point that the hon. Lady makes about private special schools and the profit cap. We will be setting out the full range of reforms that we will be making to the special educational needs system shortly.

We have heard the point that she has made on that. We have also announced £3 billion of capital spending for local authorities across England to increase special educational needs provision.

Finally, the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin), talked about the scope of the children not in school register. I appreciate the cross-party nature of his remarks, but it is a challenging position to occupy to say that there are too many burdens on families while also advocating for amendments to the Bill that would dramatically widen the scope of the children not in school register to more families. The Conservative amendment that he referred to, tabled in the other place, would cover all families who have ever had a child protection investigation. Under a third of those investigations identify significant harm, so it would be a significant widening of scope. I will happily have a further conversation with the hon. Member about that, but I have concerns about the scope.

In the light of the time available, I will briefly summarise the specific action that the Government are taking to address concerns about the child protection system in England. It is absolutely essential that we build a more confident, decisive and expert-led child protection response that learns, not only from Sara's appalling abuse, but from the experience of many other children who have been referenced in this debate.

We need to make sure that the children not in school register closes the loopholes where families are deliberately seeking to abuse their children. We need to build, as we are, multi-agency child protection teams that bring agencies from across different services, work in lockstep with the police, health services and social care, and make those judgments with only the most expert staff in their units. We are resourcing those and rolling them out as we speak. We need to make sure that well-resourced family help provision is in place for those families.

Nationally, we have just finished the consultation for the child protection authority. The national panel will be transferring to take on that function with a wider

scope, in the light of Alexis Jay's report. My ambition is to make sure that, in as many cases as possible where there is significant harm, we have a group of experts from across different services who can zoom in on that abuse and act decisively with the family court system, so that we have far fewer of these cases in the future. At a national level, my ambition is to make sure that we are able to rewire information sharing, including through the single unique identifier, so that we do not end up in that situation in the first place. I will finish by thanking the hon. Member for Woking for triggering this important debate.

10.58 am

Mr Forster: It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Western. I called this debate for several reasons: to highlight the failures of Surrey county council and call for its children's services to be put into special measures, to push for national changes to keep children safe, and to give parliamentary colleagues the chance to raise their constituency stories about children's services in local authorities. I believe I have done that.

The Government are taking action. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill should make some progress on child safeguarding, but I urge the Government to go further and faster in taking action to protect vulnerable children. I am pleased by and want to thank everyone for their kind words—I think we have had 15 speakers today. There are 15 recommendations from the Sara Sharif safeguarding report. I will continue to campaign to ensure that Sara's legacy is that she is the last person who was killed by people who should have loved and cared for her.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered children's services in local authorities.

Animal Testing

11 am

Michael Wheeler (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered non-compliance animal testing incidents in laboratories.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. The uncomfortable backdrop of today's debate is that animal experimentation results in legally sanctioned animal suffering. That is the fact that we must keep at the front of our minds, especially as we pride ourselves on being a nation of animal lovers.

At the 2024 election, I was proud to stand on a manifesto commitment to work towards phasing out animal testing. The stark reality, however, is that more than 5 million animals have been approved for use in experiments over the coming years. Behind that large headline figure lie individual cases that are often deeply distressing, such as primates being subjected to invasive brain surgery. That said, the focus of this debate is not on the legality of licences, contentious though they might be, but on what happens when even the limited legal protections are not upheld. In the current system, legally sanctioned animal suffering is compounded by systemic regulatory failure.

On 12 December 2025, the Home Office Animals in Science Regulation Unit—ASRU—published its 2024 annual report, which provides a window into the shocking suffering that occurs when our animal testing safeguards fail.

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): Reports have shown animals accidentally crushed in a compacter, a primate dying after being trapped in a cage unnoticed, animals falling out of a vehicle and being lost, and many dying of thirst or hunger or drowning in flooded cages. Does my hon. Friend agree that those cases of non-compliance are unacceptable, that more must be done to avoid them happening in future and that the people who allow them to happen must face the consequences?

Michael Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and of course I agree.

ASRU is tasked with licensing animal experiments and, importantly, ensuring compliance with the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. The reason for the Act is to protect animals and to require the use of non-animal alternatives wherever scientifically possible, yet the report shows far too many incidents in which animals were harmed, injured or killed because licence conditions were breached or basic standards were not met. These are not minor administrative errors. As my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) said, we are talking about animals drowning, starving to death, being left to die without veterinary care or being accidentally disposed of as waste.

In 2024 alone, there were 146 recorded cases of non-compliance in British laboratories. Although that figure represents a modest but welcome decrease from the previous year, the incidents still involve more than 22,000 animals. Analysis from Animal Free Research UK suggests that at least 542 animals either died or were euthanised as a direct result of those failures.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I have also worked alongside Animal Free Research on these issues, including to introduce a private Member's Bill representing its version of Herbie's law. As my hon. Friend says, incidents of non-compliance in 2024 involved 22,204 animals. Does he agree with me that the Government's recent "Replacing animals in science" strategy sets out a pathway for elimination in certain areas, but that in reality we should also still be enforcing compliance across the sector, and where possible, as with Herbie's law, moving further than we are at the moment?

Michael Wheeler: Of course. It will surprise my hon. Friend not at all that I agree. I will come to the wider context and wider solutions, but at this time, although we can look to improve the situation, we must absolutely look to make sure that current regulations are enforced as we speak, and not let slide, because there have been hundreds of animals whose suffering breached the current legal framework and should have been prevented.

Some of the most disturbing incidents involve something as basic as access to food and water. In 2024, there were nine separate cases in which animals were not provided with adequate food or hydration, and 24 animals died as a result. In another case, a mother was removed from her cage and killed, leaving seven unweaned pups to starve to death. The report catalogues a litany of serious failures. Animals were reused, in second experiments, without proper authorisation. Others were kept alive past what most people would consider a humane end point. They were left to suffer as tumours grew too large, or body weight fell dangerously low. In one case, misidentification of sex led to regulated procedures being performed on seven pregnant mice.

The failures affect a wide range of animals. Primates suffered injuries from faulty equipment, had tails trapped in cage doors or were left without food overnight. A freedom of information request revealed that in one case an incident deemed by ASRU to be a "minor breach" involved a dog being kept alive despite having suffered severe swelling of the parotid salivary glands as a result of the procedures that it had been through, before eventually being euthanised.

Given the gravity of the incidents, we should expect robust enforcement. Instead, we see a regulatory regime that is alarmingly weak. In three quarters of non-compliance cases, the only response was "inspector advice".

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman. He is bringing forward some very harrowing stories, and they are certainly hard to accept. Non-compliance with animal welfare laws on farms in Northern Ireland was detected in more than 21% of those inspected. It is clear that welfare inspection is the key to making them acknowledge the regulations and to ensuring that they do what they should be doing. Does the hon. Member agree that non-compliance is best detected through inspection and that there must be more focus on inspection rates, to ensure that issues can be dealt with?

Michael Wheeler: I of course agree, and I have some information that will illustrate the point and the importance of inspections. In 2024, just 68 establishments were audited across Great Britain. Only 10 of the inspections

were unannounced. That represents just 15% of inspections, which is down from 63% of inspections in 2018. The issue is further exacerbated by some elements of those audits being carried out remotely. Nearly 70% of non-compliance incidents were self-reported, which raises a troubling question about how much more is going undetected in the absence of regular, independent spot checks.

ASRU's current regime of regulatory reform includes increasing the number of inspectors by March to 22 full-time equivalents, up from 14.5, but incremental tweaks to oversight will not solve the underlying problem. In 2024 alone, 2.64 million scientific procedures were carried out on animals. That scale of activity cannot be meaningfully overseen through marginal staffing increases.

The wider issue is that we continue to allow legally sanctioned animal suffering. For instance, some licences permit deliberate deprivation. Primates' entire daily food intake can be restricted so that food can be used as a reward for correct task performance during sessions lasting up to six hours. Rats, meanwhile, can go without water for up to 22 hours a day, over a week, to encourage them to consume liquids containing potentially aversive substances. Thousands of procedures still rely on controversial tests such as LD50 toxicity testing and the forced swim test—an outdated model that the Government acknowledge has limited scientific value. Licence summaries reveal the severity of authorised suffering: thousands of animals undergo painful procedures without analgesia because pain relief might interfere with the results.

Equally concerning is the failure to uphold the core legal principle at the heart of the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. Section 2A is clear that scientifically satisfactory non-animal methods must be used wherever possible, yet an expert report commissioned by the National Centre for the Replacement, Refinement and Reduction of Animals in Research identified a “system-wide failure” to replace animals where alternatives already exist. Home Office summaries show that licences have been granted even when non-animal methods are clearly available. In one example, animals were being used as an intermediary step in heart disease research, despite well-known anatomical differences that limit the relevance of that research to humans.

It is time for us to find another way. More than 92% of drugs that succeed in animal tests do not end up being used by patients. That is primarily due to poor efficacy and safety issues that were not predicted by animal testing. We are now at the point where human-specific technologies, using human cells, tissues, artificial intelligence and advanced modelling, offer faster, safer and more relevant results. Pioneering work projects have been taking place for decades, leading to breakthroughs such as mini-hearts that accurately model human cardiac disease without harming animals.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend; he is making a powerful case, and a very traumatic one. Does he agree that if we are really to fulfil our 2024 manifesto commitment and enable a transition to more modern, human-specific technology, we should introduce Herbie's law without delay?

Michael Wheeler: I think it will come as no surprise to my hon. Friend that I do agree with him, and I will be making that very call.

We are in a good place when it comes to the development of alternatives. I therefore welcome the publication of the Government's “Replacing animals in science” strategy in November.

Irene Campbell: I should have said this earlier, but I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on phasing out animal experiments in medical research. Does my hon. Friend agree that the evidence is there, and that we can move much more quickly towards a place where animals are no longer needed in research?

Michael Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend for another valuable intervention. I agree with her.

The Government's strategy contains a range of positive measures, such as increasing funding for human-specific technologies, but we can move faster—more, we have an opportunity to grow the strategy by supporting cutting-edge, world-leading new technologies that are developed right here in the UK. I urge the Government to go further. I urge them to commit to the replacement of all animals in medical research in the UK by 2035. As colleagues have said, that is known as Herbie's law, after a beagle bred for the laboratory but saved before he was used.

Herbie's law would provide a practical, collaborative pathway to deliver the Government's manifesto commitment to phase out animal testing. It would set a clear ambition to replace animal experiments in medical research over the next decade. It would establish expert oversight and support scientists through the transition. It has been carefully drafted by legal experts, is backed by more than 155 of our colleagues here in Parliament and enjoys strong public support.

The non-compliance incidents detailed in the ASRU report and the fact that those incidents regularly cause serious animal suffering in this country should shock us and prompt reflection and action. Ultimately, the only way to eliminate those incidents completely is to end animal testing once and for all. We need a research and innovation system that is scientifically excellent, ethically robust and animal-free. I urge the Government to strengthen enforcement, ensure the law is upheld in practice, and deliver a clear, timeframed road map to phase out animal testing.

11.15 am

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles (Michael Wheeler), who has given us a powerful depiction of what happens when things go wrong. He highlighted the importance of making sure the Government ensure an oversight and licensing regime so that things do not go wrong. He touched on different areas of policy, to which I should respond. I will start with his stories of where things have gone wrong, the push for Herbie's law, and how we go further and faster on the removal of animals from scientific testing.

We can all probably agree that we want to phase out the use of animals in science and the strategy that colleagues in other Departments have introduced to replace animals in science shows the direction of travel. There are calls to go further and faster and of course we will listen and work with colleagues on that.

Irene Campbell: I thank the Minister for giving way. The strategy is of course hugely welcome, but there are no timelines associated with much of the strategy. For it to work effectively and get us to where we need to be, we need timelines. Is there any indication of when timelines are likely to be made clear to us?

Sarah Jones: I will certainly take that question back to my colleagues who are implementing the strategy, and I have heard from other colleagues the call for a faster timeline. The science is developing, and my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles mentioned the transformational technology that we have and the opportunities for growth. We do not know the answer to some things because the science is not yet finished, but I hear the point about pushing for change as soon as possible.

The purpose of the strategy is to phase out animal testing. That is this Government's ambition and intention. The relevant human alternatives that we want to replace it with have to continue to protect public health and product safety, and we have to be sure that replacements are able to do that. Uncomfortable though it is, we know that the use of animals in science has enabled us to develop medicines that we would not have been able to develop otherwise would. To replace that, we need to make sure that what comes afterwards is robust. It is everybody's ambition to have a revolution in research and innovation in this country, and to build on that and use our expertise to make sure we go as fast as possible, but I hear the call for timelines and I will talk to my colleagues about how we try to do that. The strategy has a tiered approach to identify which animal test can be replaced soonest, and which are the easier ones to get done first. I very much hear the call for a timescale for a longer-term road map.

There is great public interest in making sure that we treat animals as they should be treated when they are used in research. My hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles talked a lot about the work of the regulator, and how we should take a robust approach to regulation. The regulator is overseen by the Home Office Minister Lord Hanson, who signed off on a package of reform to it last year, which my hon. Friend mentioned. My hon. Friend was slightly more dismissive of it than perhaps we would be, and I heard what he said, but there has been an increase in the number of people who are able to ensure oversight and a new focus through the reform programme. It has just begun, and we need to give it a bit of time to see whether it works more effectively. I hear loud and clear his calls for the Government to ensure that the regulator is as robust as it can be.

It might be useful to look at how the regulator currently works, and then we can work together going forward. I do not know if my hon. Friend has met the

regulator, but it might be worth convening something with other interested MPs, to have a conversation about the reforms and where we think things will improve. The regulator is set up to prevent compliance breaches and investigate them. If non-compliance is confirmed, the regulator has a broad range of sanctions available. There is a conversation about whether it is using all those sanctions in the way that it could. The sanctions range in severity, and my hon. Friend mentioned those at the lower end, but the regulator does have more extensive powers to act.

It might be useful to have a conversation with the regulator about how we balance self-referral. Self-referrals often come in; we have very good and honourable people doing research and using the system as it should be used. I also hear the slight question about self-referral, and whether we are in the places that we need to be as much as we should be. There is a balance in the regulatory approach and how punitive the approaches can be. We want the sector to be open and transparent, so we have to get that balance right. I am sure that my hon. Friend understands that. If we are disproportionate—if that is a risk—then work gets offshored and goes elsewhere, where the systems are not anywhere near as powerful as they are in this country. We need to have proportionality in our approach to non-compliance.

We also need to understand that self-reporting is not a bad thing, but a good thing. We want a culture of care that is respectful of animals. Most incidents of non-compliance are self-reported, as I have said, and the decisions taken after that are then proportionate. Where there are more significant breaches, the sanctions are there, and we could have a conversation with the regulator about when those sanctions are imposed and when they are not.

I thank colleagues again for raising this issue. We have a strict and rigorous licensing regime, which I am partly responsible for, both for the 100-odd companies that are able to test on animals and the 13,000 individuals who have a licence to use animals in testing. The regulator is going through reform and has had its functions beefed up over the last year. We have an ambition as a Government to end the use of animals in science, but, as a Minister, I will always commit to push for more and will always listen to my colleagues for advice.

The good takeaways from this debate are that we need to understand where the regulator is coming from a bit more, what the balance is for proportionality, how we can all move forward, and, having heard the calls for more timeliness in ending the use of animals in testing, how we can work with colleagues across the Government to deliver that.

Question put and agreed to.

11.25 am

Sitting suspended.

Defence Industry: Environmental, Social and Governance Requirements

[ESTHER MCVEY *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of environmental, social and governance requirements on the defence industry.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank the Minister and hon. Members for making time to attend what I hope will be a consequential debate.

Last week, we all heard the Canadian Prime Minister speaking at Davos. He is not quite my flavour of politics, but he spoke a truth: we live in a much more dangerous world and we cannot rely on the international rules-based order to protect us. We are quickly learning an ancient truth that hard power is the most material reality. If we continue to play by imaginary rules while our enemies, and sometimes even our allies, are playing a different game altogether, we are destined to lose, with disastrous consequences for our country and for our children.

Sadly, many of those old assumptions are embedded and entrenched in our financial services industry, universities and politics. In turn, that is having a deeply damaging effect on British defence companies and ultimately on our ability to defend ourselves.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Defence firms such as Leonardo in Yeovil are happy to invest in environmental and social products. Leonardo has invested heavily in Yeovil college and entertainment venues and is building its own solar farm—but does the hon. Member agree that, if defence firms are to meet those obligations, the Government need to award contracts such as the new medium-lift helicopter, and that, if not, we will lose the benefits for our community forever?

Jack Rankin: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point about Leonard, which builds helicopters in his constituency, and I am sure the Minister has heard his pointed remarks.

Parties of both colours have pledged to increase defence spending. This Labour Government have committed to an uplift of 3% in the next Parliament, but when will we see it? What proportion of it will simply make up historical military pensions? How much is actually going to cutting-edge research and development? Currently, only 4% of defence spending goes to small and medium-sized enterprises, which often lead the way on innovation.

What if I told the Minister that there is billions of pounds in funding waiting to be unlocked that would cost the taxpayer nothing, be a huge boost to the economy and improve our national security? It is sitting in the private sector. The importance of private investment was recognised in the strategic defence review, but we are not properly utilising it. Right now, British defence companies are deprived of much of that potential investment because funds of various descriptions prioritise sustainable investment or environmental social governance—ESG—regardless of return. Sometimes those funds actively rule out defence, explicitly or implicitly, in the rules they set.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. I want to correct what I hope was a slip of the tongue when he mentioned parties “of both colours”; he means “of all colours” because I believe the Liberal Democrats have come forward with a proposal for £20 billion-worth of defence bonds in order to properly finance the rapid scale-up in defence manufacturing that we need in the UK.

Jack Rankin: I am delighted to correct the record; it is good to see that parties of all colours are backing increased defence spending in a more uncertain world.

The ESG system implies in some sense that defence investment is unethical, but there is nothing less ethical than sending British sons and daughter into battle under-equipped. That is not a blue, red or yellow party political point; I am proud to represent the parts of Slough borough not covered by the Chairman of the Defence Select Committee, the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), we have discussed this very point, with which I understand he and his Committee all agree.

Many on the Government side of the House also see the problems of ESG. In March last year, a group of 100 Labour Members of Parliament wrote to banks and fund managers urging them to prioritise defence investment and class British defence investment as ethical. I welcome the presence of the hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) in the Chamber today; I know he has discussed this matter both directly and with the Financial Conduct Authority, and I look forward to his substantive contribution in the debate.

I gently point out, however, that some of the ideology is pushed by some of those on the left who might take woolly views on certain conflicts, specifically Gaza. We should do what we can in this place to challenge that culture, and I suspect that there are many of those naive rules made in this place—perhaps under different geopolitical circumstances—that we should reassess.

To fix this problem, we must first acknowledge just how bad things are in some instances. I am a member of the Scottish Affairs Committee, and a few weeks ago we were able to question Warrick Malcolm of ADS Scotland, which represents Scottish defence businesses, about the chilling effect that progressive authoritarianism has had on the businesses they represent. When he attempted to host a Scottish parliamentary reception to highlight science, technology, engineering and mathematics apprenticeships—broader than just defence—200 protesters shut down the Parliament, allowing no one in or out, and essentially cancelled the whole event. Those people who did squeeze through the melee outside, many of them apprentices in their young 20s, came in in tears because of the abuse they faced.

Sadly, only the Scottish Conservatives supported the reception, while all others steered clear. What message does that send to those in the industry, those hard-working constituents of Members of the Scottish Parliament, when their representatives have no time for them and effectively shun them. Mr Malcolm also talked to the Committee about how a company he represented was vandalised, reducing its capacity by 75%. How will that business remain viable? We can think of careers fairs at universities being shut down, and damaging the attractiveness of defence as a sector to work in; it is a sector that keeps us safe, but it is often not one that employees feel safe to work in.

Edward Morello: I thank the hon. Member for humouring me with a second opportunity to intervene. He raised the important point that many defence manufacturers, especially in the South West, provide high-skilled job opportunities for local people. My hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) has already mentioned Leonardo in Yeovil, which also employs vast numbers of people in my West Dorset constituency. Those links with local schools and higher education institutions are vital to creating a pathway for people in the south-west, especially those in rural communities, who might not have another avenue into high-skilled labour.

Jack Rankin: Of course the hon. Member is right. We have a collective responsibility to advocate for these businesses, as he just did, but as a nation we must also face down this pernicious culture.

To return to the point about financial institutions, the culture we set in Parliament influences them. We do not need to look too far from ourselves to see where the problem is—our own parliamentary pension fund de facto excludes British defence companies by investing in sustainable funds. Its single largest equity holding, the BlackRock low carbon equity fund, fully excludes nuclear weapons, which in reality excludes nearly all defence.

What does our pension fund invest in instead? Tencent Holdings, the parent company of WeChat, which largely considered to be part of China's surveillance state. That is the very nub of the issue, and illuminates the great irony of the situation. The FCA will unequivocally say that there is no conflict between ESG and defence; while that might sometimes be technically true, the reality often paints a different picture. We just need to follow the money.

The Devon county council pension fund—which I picked because I thought the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) might have been the Minister responding to the debate, and it covers his constituency—states clearly that it prioritises return on investment and does not impose ethical exclusions. However, if one follows its investment down the rabbit hole to its pool provider Brunel Pension Partnership, which handles 93% of the council's pension funds, we find Paris-aligned pooled funds with carbon thresholds and controversial weapon screens. As we can see, the system is set up against the defence industry. In that system, smaller companies have no chance, because the filtering happens long before capital ever reaches them.

It may well be that pensioners also end up short-changed, given that major British defence companies BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce and Babcock have made returns of 50%, 100% and 146% respectively this past year. This issue extends to our most sensitive areas. While I hope we never need it, I think most sensible people in this country support the backstop of our nuclear deterrent, and ESG potentially threatens that.

We currently have retained EU law that adopts the Paris-aligned benchmarks that exclude nuclear as a controversial weapon. For a fund to be considered Paris-aligned, it will have to meet that benchmark and, by retaining that law, we are encouraging that. Although the Government nominally prioritise Trident, around 1,500 businesses in the supply chain are implicated and will therefore be potentially excluded from finance. As long as we continue to tolerate this madness, we are fighting with one hand behind our back.

We have discussed access to capital, but that is useless for SMEs without a bank account. Defence companies in this country are being debanked. I first came across the issue when meeting a defence SME in my constituency, which had been debanked three times by high street banks. That business makes ammunition for Ukraine. Think of the message that sends to a defence start-up: an entrepreneur just would not go near it. Some of the problem is being driven by the B Corp certification, and I urge the Minister to look at that. "Know your customer" and anti-money laundering operation checks are also a huge issue that needs to be addressed. All that is downstream of the same negative approach to defence that I have described.

This culture has, at least in part, been brought about by successive Government policy, and can also be reversed by it. As a start, the Government should insist that all publicly managed funds should not be investing in funds that explicitly exclude defence. That would be a clear statement of intent about the Government's expectations, and it would encourage others to do the same. We should also have clearer rules about the exclusion of nuclear so that the SMEs vital to the Trident deterrent are not unfairly cut out.

Much as it pains me to say it, perhaps we could even learn from France, which treats the defence sector as strategically vital. The Chancellor could write to the FCA today and change its remit. Just imagine the change if we were to approach defence as we have approached climate policy over the past 20 years. I am aware that the Government passed legislation in October to permit the FCA to regulate the ESG sector from 2028; although that might seem like a positive step, it could simply entrench the concept legally and say that ESG is sanctified by the Government. If we are serious about rebuilding our defence infrastructure and about national security, we must get serious about the self-harm that ESG culture has done, and is doing, and be prepared to take steps to address it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I remind Members to bob if they wish to be called. We will go to the Front-Bench speakers at about 3.30 pm. I am aware we are expecting a vote, which might come as early as 3.30 pm; I will obviously suspend the sitting when that happens.

2.42 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I genuinely thank the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) for securing this debate and for his kind words. We can work cross-party to change the culture across financial services with our voices from this place. May I also say what a pleasure it is to be here with my hon. Friend the Minister? I thank her for all her work on Op Courage and Op Ascend, and on veterans' homelessness.

I want to be clear: ESG does not need to get in the way of lending to SMEs. It is important to say from the outset that many conflate ESG rules with broader ethical and commercial decisions that firms make; I will perhaps come back to that. I speak from some professional experience: I was acting head of compliance for a fintech where day in, day out, I had to make calls on whether to do business with some of these customers.

ESG can, in limited circumstances, be interpreted as blocking lending to SMEs, something that is inconsistent and increasingly at odds with our national security, industrial strategy and economic resilience.

I will touch on what I believe is an artificial distinction between so-called dual-use military technology and single-use military equipment. I come across so many main high street lenders that find this difficult. British high street lenders have every right to put up their hands and say, “We do not want to lend to any company that is involved in chemical weapons or cluster munitions.” They have every right to look at some of the United Nations weapons conventions and say, “We do not want anything to do with them.” However, many lenders are not lending to dual-use military equipment makers.

I will give some examples. I met a fantastic company, Needles and Pins Aerospace, at Defence and Security Equipment International. The company has found banking, insurance and finance very difficult. It produces the insulation that goes on military helicopters—helicopters, by the way, engaged in humanitarian aid missions around the world. The insulation that goes in those helicopters is not an ordnance or a bomb; it is there to protect our British armed forces. It is worth bearing in mind that these lenders and their compliance departments—and I was from that parish—should really get to know the products and services that their customers want to seek finance for.

Another example from my constituency is Edmund Optics, which produces prisms and lenses. There are medical, aerospace, commercial satellite and civilian aircraft applications for those. However, some of those products and services have a dual use—there is also a military use to them. Again, lenders get caught up in a very binary distinction; they should be spending more time understanding the products and services that companies provide.

I want to give another shout-out, this time to 4GD, a data-driven defence training SME with which I have worked extensively, along with ADS, the industry trade body. I saw 4GD’s founder Rob yesterday, and he has told me countless stories about being debanked. His business is about training British armed forces to do what they do better, so that they are more equipped against our adversaries, safer and more resilient. There is nothing more ethical than that. The fact that high street lenders have closed their doors to that commercial opportunity shows the inherent laziness among some people in compliance departments, who refuse to understand the products and services for which their prospective customers are seeking finance.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Windsor for referencing the work I have done alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker). Last year, along with 100 Labour parliamentarians, we wrote to fund and bank managers about ESG. I was really pleased that two things came off the back of that. First, some funds marketed as sustainable said they were going to invest in defence companies, because they found nothing in the rules that inherently disbars sustainable funds from investing in defence—there is nothing in the regulator’s rulebook that does that. That is just a fact, and that fact was ultimately confirmed by my old employer, the Financial Conduct Authority. I am immensely grateful to its chief exec, Nikhil, for his speech last year on defence, and for the FCA’s statement. The FCA has

been rock solid and clear that there is no tension between ESG regulatory rules and defence financing—none whatsoever. I say to the financial services practitioners who are listening: please take heed of that.

As I mentioned, there have been some good shifts, but ESG and broader ethical considerations are only part of the structural barriers facing defence firms. Recent work by colleagues across the House, including a report I co-authored, “Rewiring British Defence Financing”, makes the point clearly. That work shows that ESG considerations sit alongside and are outweighed by deeper, more persistent problems across access to capital, commercial lending risk, cash-flow pressures, contracting structures and compliance complexity. Defence SMEs are not failing to secure finance because they are somehow irresponsible actors, but because they operate in an ecosystem defined by long payment cycles, sometimes single dominant customers like the primes, uncertain procurement pipelines and fragmented support across Government.

On that last point, let me turn to the work of my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry, who cannot be here today. He has done some phenomenal work setting up the office for small business growth in the Ministry of Defence, which is designed to break down some of the contractual complexities and the fear factor that many defence SMEs face when trying to contract with the MOD. I am happy to confirm to the House that one company in my York Outer constituency, Flyby Technology, will be part of the new OSBG’s shaping cohort, to get into the nitty-gritty of how we can streamline the contracting processes for SMEs, in line with the Government’s mission to increase the direct spend in defence SMEs across the country.

I want to touch on the role of primes when it comes to SMEs in particular. Sometimes the cash-flow challenges created by defence primes are not acceptable. The primes are great employers in this country. I have been to Barrow-in-Furness and seen at first hand how BAE Systems is transforming the fortunes of that town. The primes have a great understanding of their tier 2, 3 and 4 suppliers, but they need to make sure that they pay SMEs on time and quickly.

This is not a mundane point. Were Members to sit down with the chief financial officers of these SMEs and look at their cash flows, it would be clear: a 90-day payment term with a prime, or even a 120-day payment term, increases working capital requirements. The company then has to go out to lenders to try to get financing to cover the shortfall, because the primes are really slow. In turn, that means that when defence SMEs try to get loans for inventory or asset financing, they are often offered worse terms. Primes have a duty to start paying the wonderful SMEs of Britain quickly, because improving their payment terms will create a cyclical effect. Some great primes are better at it. Overall, the result is a system in which highly capable, export-ready firms struggle with the basics—securing bank accounts, insurance and working capital—not at the margins but as a matter of course.

I am worried that some insurers are becoming increasingly hesitant about insuring defence companies because of the risk of political violence. I have worked with Aviva and others on this issue. It is interesting to note that some of the protesters who target the insurers may well themselves have insurance policies with them,

[Mr Luke Charters]

or their defined-contribution workplace pensions may well be held in one of these insurer's accounts. There is a degree of hypocrisy there. Insurers should have every confidence from Members in this place that they are doing right by the defence sector in supporting its growth and development.

Why do all these complexities matter? As the hon. Member for Windsor touched on, they create serious consequences, because if challenges mount up, they could undermine our sovereign defence capability. If British firms cannot raise capital here, what will they do? They may choose to scale abroad or sell to overseas buyers rather than to the British base, or fail altogether. We could become more dependent on foreign supply chains for critical technologies. The Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), has done some really strong work on critical minerals and our sovereign capability in that respect. We have to ensure that there is a sovereign financial base to support our sovereign defence industry.

The challenges we have talked about in procurement, ESG and access to finance hit SMEs the hardest. They do not have big teams of financial experts, and the larger primes can navigate the challenges more easily as they have access to wider capital pools that the smaller firms do not. There is a risk of strategic contradiction, because on the one hand we are asking defence firms to scale, innovate and deliver at pace, but on the other hand we seem to be tolerating a financial system that treats some firms as a reputational liability. That is not sustainable, to borrow a term. The issue is not necessarily ESG principles themselves, but the absence of clarity in how lenders apply their risk tolerance to defence. ESG concerns are only one part of the financing challenge facing defence firms, alongside credit risk, contracting structures and cash flow, but they are the tip of the iceberg. Because these issues are often poorly defined, they create uncertainty that deters lending.

What is missing is a shared understanding across Government, regulators and financial institutions that defence, when conducted lawfully, in line with UN weapons conventions and in support of democratic security, is not a problem but a public good to be enabled. The hon. Member for Windsor touched on the theme of their being nothing more ethical than lending to defence companies that are equipping our Ukrainian friends. Other countries around the world understand that. The US has been much more explicit in aligning its financial system with its national security priorities, particularly in terms of single-use and lethal military equipment.

What needs to change? There is an overwhelming case for a multilateral defence bank—such as the proposed defence, security and resilience bank—that would meet some of the financing challenges. We cannot just look at incremental fixes. I do not want to take up too much time on that, but there is a role for multilateral development finance.

As the report I wrote sets out, private capital alone is not filling the gap, particularly for SMEs in the dual-use space, and where finance does flow, it can be short term. I do not want to get into the details, but we need to make sure that the institutions of the state, be that the

NSSIF—the national security strategic investment fund, an arm's length body that is part of the British Business Bank—or the National Wealth Fund or UK Defence Innovation, sing together and make sure that their finance comes into innovative technologies.

We need to learn the lessons from the Defence Advanced Research Projects Agency in the US. I heard that a significant proportion of US GDP growth comes from the DARPA investments of the 1980s—of course, that agency invented the internet, the smartphone and so many other underlying technologies. Let us learn from the leadership role of DARPA.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The hon. Gentleman plainly knows a great deal about this subject and is educating a few of us on it. He talks about the US example; could he also reflect on the European Union regulatory regime around ESG, given that the EU is about to start investing considerably more in defence?

Mr Charters: When it comes to our European friends, we have to have cross-border financing. I have met some of the main German commercial lenders that want to come in; likewise, British financial services are investing in success stories such as Rheinmetall and some of the great European defence brands. We have to come together, not just with our European friends, but with Canada and other allied nations around the world, to approach defence financing on a multilateral basis. That is the real lesson.

Let me touch on what our adversaries are doing. They know that they need to innovate quickly when it comes to building up their own financing capabilities. Russia is moving towards more off-balance-sheet lending to a lot of its defence sector. Russian advance manufacturing companies are increasingly gaining access to the Chinese bond market. In general, the Russian war economy is mobilising at pace. Clearly, when it comes to some of our adversaries' financing mechanisms, they are daring to do things differently—according, of course, to the rule books and ethics of their particular countries. We need to be agile enough to reform our own financing capabilities at pace, too. I am very concerned that we risk forcing British defence SMEs to seek foreign ownership, to offshore their operations or to seek finance overseas simply to survive. That is strategic self-harm when it comes to our sovereign defence capabilities.

You will be pleased to hear, Ms McVey, that I am about to close. In an era of renewed geopolitical competition, the question is not whether the state should play a role in defence finance, but whether we are prepared to act now in order to do so with the seriousness that our security environment demands. I believe that a strong defence financing sector acts as a deterrent to some of our adversaries and means that, where we need to scale industrial capability much quicker, we are ready to do so, if we have a defence financing revolution. This is not a choice between values and security; it is about recognising that, in the world we live in, the two are inseparable.

I hope the Minister will take this opportunity to set out how the Government can encourage lenders to turn on the taps for some of the innovative defence SMEs, no matter whether they are producing prisms, training

our special forces or insulating our helicopters. There is nothing more ethical, in our modern world, than supporting the defence SMEs that are maintaining our collective security.

2.59 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) on setting the scene and the hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) on his excellent contribution; both had plenty of knowledge and information. It is always nice to see the Minister in her place, and I wish her well in her role. I remind her gently of the invitation to come to Beyond the Battlefield in Portavogie in my constituency; maybe she will be able to confirm that shortly—it is nothing to do with this debate, but I wanted to take that opportunity to remind her.

Our armed forces protect our freedoms and deter aggression in a world that has become increasingly volatile. The defence sector employs tens of thousands of people across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, while sustaining thousands more in supply chains, and underpins our sovereign capability. In today's climate, where threats have become much more serious and less predictable than at any time since the end of the cold war, the 2025 strategic defence review highlights the importance of private investment, stating that the sector must make a

“concerted effort to unlock private capital and expertise”,

and outlines the environmental, social and governance role in this sector. I am reminded that the pastor of my church, the Baptist church in Newtownards, said last year that there are 67 wars in the world. It is a world at war, in the truest sense.

From June 2028, ESG ratings providers will be regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority, with new rules on transparency, governance, conflicts of interest and stakeholder engagement. There has been a significant shift towards identifying those factors since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which is always in our minds; the pictures and stories from Kyiv in the paper today remind us of the pressure the Ukrainians are under. Morningstar data shows that exposure to aerospace and defence has increased across European funds, including those with ESG labels. That reflects a growing recognition that a strong defence industrial base is essential for security. This Government's defence industrial strategy sector plan must emphasise the importance of making the defence sector more attractive to private investment, as the Government continue to support and increase it, which I congratulate them and the Minister on. The money they have allocated for Northern Ireland is very welcome, and I appreciate it.

I want to highlight two important examples in Northern Ireland that demonstrate both the challenges and the opportunities. Thales UK, located in east Belfast, is a key player in defence innovation. I have visited Thales on several occasions with my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson). I remind the House of the £1.6 billion deal announced in March 2024 for 5,000 lightweight air defence missiles, which are one of the reasons why Ukraine has been so successful in holding her own. Production of those missiles is currently supporting approximately 700 jobs at Thales, while also supporting Ukraine's defence efforts in the current conflict.

The work done at Thales highlights Northern Ireland's key position in, and contribution to, the UK defence industry. As I said to one of the Minister's colleagues in the Chamber, I am very keen to ensure that Northern Ireland's defence sector can see more of the contracts and opportunities. I know the Government want to do that—I am not saying they are not doing it—but I emphasise that again.

Thales has been proactive in engaging with ESG principles by contributing to the drafting of the UK defence ESG charter in 2024 through ADS Group, integrating ESG criteria into supplier selection and supporting the UK's low-carbon transition through energy-efficient technologies and cyber-resilience. Far from being restricted by ESG, Thales continues to demonstrate that responsible, ethical practices do strengthen capacity to compete, while attracting local talent and building investor confidence in a sector that is vital to our national security. I am very encouraged by Thales's introduction of apprenticeships this year, which it is committed to. Thales pays some of the apprentices' fees, and they get a good wage. That is really constructive and positive, and it comes through the business that the Government here do with Thales and what Thales does as a company.

I am proud to raise another example of Northern Ireland's contribution to our defence industry: the historic Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast, which is one of only three naval shipyards in the UK equipped to carry out major Ministry of Defence work. We are very pleased that it is central to Government policy once again. In 2023, Harland & Wolff became part of the Team Resolute consortium with Navantia UK and BMT, after having been awarded a £1.6 billion contract by the MOD to build three fleet support ships for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service.

The impact on the shipyard will be significant. It will include upgrades such as new automated panel lines and advanced robotics, and the technology will move forward to meet the ESG criteria. Harland & Wolff is committed to long-term, ethical production and sustainability while providing jobs in Northern Ireland, and it is really proactive in meeting those criteria. If we want to move forward with a policy, we have to bring companies with us, and that is clearly happening in Northern Ireland. To be fair, I think it is happening across the whole of the United Kingdom. I urge the Minister to commit to issuing joint guidance with the Treasury and the FCA to financial institutions to clarify that responsible investment in UK defence companies, which is vital for national security and jobs in places such as Belfast, can be fully compatible with ESG principles.

I will conclude with this comment. I very much welcome the fact that the Government are prioritising private investment in defence, but we must build on that by providing clearer policy guidance. It is in the national interest of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to ensure that our defence industry continues to be supported by Belfast-based firms such as Thales and Harland & Wolff. I ask the Minister to identify and support measures that unlock investment, increase contractual opportunities for businesses in Northern Ireland, in particular, and maintain our defence sovereignty.

3.6 pm

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) for securing this important debate and introducing it so eloquently. It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who always makes important contributions to debates about defence matters, and my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters), whose knowledge of defence financing is extremely granular.

This debate is a chance to make it clear that the highest form of corporate social responsibility is for a company to be involved in the defence of the country. To me, it is quite bizarre that people and institutions would put the provision of proper equipment for our armed forces or our allies who are fighting against fascism in Ukraine in the same category for divestment as tobacco, pornography, modern slavery or forced labour. That just seems perverse.

Investment in the task of keeping the British people safe from the growing threats posed by hostile actors is not just legitimate, but a moral necessity. In the context of the strategic defence review, which correctly identifies the urgency and significance of unlocking private capital to drive the investment in defence that we need to meet the growing and complex threats facing the country, the impact of environmental, social and governance ratings on securing finance for defence must be looked at more closely than ever before.

We must not lose sight of the fact that the whole point of having the strongest possible defence capability is to act as a deterrent. We are not aiming to use these weapons; we are using them to try to prevent a war from happening. I am sure that I do not need to point out to Members the ethical, environmental and social harm of conflict. I know they are acutely aware that the best way to avoid war is to prepare for one. Only by projecting strength and showing our enemies that we are ready to fight can we deter the worst-case outcome.

As the hon. Member for Windsor said, back in March 2025 I and 100 other Labour MPs signed a letter, which was co-ordinated by my hon. Friends the Members for York Outer and for Aldershot (Alex Baker)—she is disappointed not to be able to join us today—calling on Britain's bank and fund managers to do away with rules that class investment in defence, notably in supporting Ukraine's fight against Russian aggression, as somehow unethical. As the letter stated,

“There can be no more ethical investment than giving the Ukrainian people every ounce of support that can be mustered by their allies.”

That same standard, of course, applies to our own defence—one of the core tasks our constituents send us to this place to take care of. Ten months on from that letter, today's debate is a prime opportunity for the Minister to update us on what consideration the Government have given to this issue, especially with regard to what I hope is the imminent defence investment plan.

As a Member of Parliament for a constituency in north-east England, I am particularly excited by the opportunities that the Government's increase in defence spending can create for my constituents in North Durham and across the region. Less than a third of the Ministry of Defence's spending with British industry is directed to London and the south-east, so defence can be an engine for growth in the regions.

I share the Labour Government's ambition for defence spending to act as a key engine for economic growth, especially in more deprived, post-industrial parts of the country, which have borne the brunt of decades of deindustrialisation, including my North Durham constituency. It is worth noting that, during the cold war, there were tens of thousands of jobs in the defence sector in north-east England. There was Swan Hunter shipyard, and there was a very large factory, Vickers, producing land systems—it is still a very good factory, under Pearson Engineering, but a lot smaller. People remember the industrial contribution the north-east was making to defence.

Unfortunately, the north-east now has the lowest per capita defence spend of any region or nation, according to the MOD's own figures. I would go so far as to argue that there are significant ethical and social benefits from the kind of defence investment that would bring jobs to our area, upskill my constituents and provide them with the opportunity to make a good living in exercising the patriotic duty of pitching in by equipping the people who are defending our country. Can the Minister update us on the impact of ESG ratings on directing capital towards areas such as the north-east, where there is a heritage of industrial jobs and skills, and where investment would bolster the Government's agenda of tackling regional inequality and bringing opportunity back to places such as County Durham?

When they go wrong, ESG ratings can act as a drag on crucial investment in defence, but that does not mean we should write off the importance of ethical considerations when financing the defence of our nation. It is right that, even when investing in defence capabilities, we do all we can to operate in line with, for instance, the planet's environmental limits. Indeed, many defence companies have already changed in line with ESG considerations. Through the UK defence ESG charter, the defence sector in the UK has collaborated to drive ambition and action on sustainability. The charter promotes greater transparency, dedicating firms to working together to meet commitments focused on climate transition, clean technology, societal impact, and governance and ethics. The charter was shortlisted for the 2025 Trade Association Forum awards in the ESG initiative of the year category.

To give one example—it is actually the company that the hon. Member for Strangford talked so eloquently about, because it has a site so near to his constituency—Thales in the UK sources all its electricity from renewables, and ESG forms at least 15% of its supplier selection criteria. The platinum medal from EcoVadis places Thales among the top 1% of all firms in its rankings. Clearly, the moral grandstanding of backing away from defence investment on ethical grounds does nothing to improve the ethical footprint of the defence industry. Instead, we ought to be working with industry to incentivise better practices, such as those I have just outlined. With that in mind, will the Minister elaborate on the positive role that ESG can play for defence companies? How can we ensure that the industry takes the greatest possible consideration of its impact on the planet, without getting in the way of its No. 1 priority, defending our nation?

Thankfully, ESG standards are becoming less and less of a roadblock to defence spending, with ESG-labelled investment in defence rising steadily since 2021. However, broader structural issues continue to act as a barrier to

unlocking growth in defence. SMEs, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer mentioned, face particular challenges in accessing finance and banking, because of banks' own compliance policies rather than ESG ratings. Will the Minister expand on how the Government can address those challenges, and encourage banks to adjust their compliance policies to better ensure that defence SMEs can access the capital they need to get off the ground?

We must never lose sight of the moral case for the defence of our nation, which I know matters so much to my constituents in North Durham, many of whose family members are veterans or serving in the armed forces; indeed, one in 10 of the households in my constituency is in that position. We must do all we can to secure the capital that our defence industry needs to rearm the country at pace and stand up to the growing threats we face. I look forward to hearing from the Minister about how we can ensure that ESG requirements do not act as a barrier to this moral and practical necessity, and I hope to continue working with Members across the House to drive investment in the British defence industry, especially in the north-east of England.

3.15 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure, Ms McVey, to serve with you in the Chair this afternoon, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) for securing this important debate.

It is often said—including by my hon. Friend in his opening speech today—that we are living in an ever more dangerous world. In fact, it is the most dangerous world in my lifetime or that of my hon. Friend, although he never tires of reminding me that he is a year younger than me.

The Government's own 2025 strategic defence review stated:

“The threats we now face are more serious and less predictable than at any time since the Cold War”.

Clearly, therefore, we should do everything in our power to ensure that our armed forces are well-staffed and well-equipped. The defence of the realm is the first duty of any Government. However, for that to mean anything, defending our nation must take priority over other aims. Yet far too often we have seen our armed forces and the companies that supply them being forced to put social value requirements ahead of their existential duty to keep us safe.

As crazy as that sounds, it is no exaggeration or hypothetical concern. In 2022, the Royal Air Force paused recruitment of white men to try to raise its proportion of women and ethnic minorities. The RAF quite literally and explicitly would rather have hired nobody to defend this country from the air than hire a white guy. That is lunacy.

Cruel or unpleasant behaviour towards women is repulsive and clearly should have no place in our armed forces, their suppliers, or indeed any workforce. Where women want to jobs that have historically been filled by men—where they can do them; many roles in the armed forces have physical requirements that cannot be compromised—there should be no barrier to them doing so. I applaud those women, as I applaud the men who are willing to risk their lives for our freedom. However, to abandon our defence of the skies in the name of

diversity quotas is completely and utterly mad. The RAF has since apologised for its decision, but I mention it today because it is crucial in the context of this debate. It shows the climate in which British companies that want to supply equipment to our military must operate.

As has already been said by many hon. Members, in order to trade in the UK, defence companies must comply with the general ESG regulations set out under the Companies Act 2006. If they wish to sell their equipment to the British Government, they must comply with the rules set out under the Ministry of Defence's climate change and sustainability strategic approach. That includes the publication of a carbon reduction plan and compliance with rules designed to minimise environmental impact. If the firms wish to be publicly listed, they must wrangle the Financial Conduct Authority's rules on ESG ratings.

Generally, defence companies are not considered to be an ethical investment, meaning that they are often scored badly for the purposes of ESG ratings, as my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor and several other hon. Members have already said. Given that the FCA has consistently pushed funds to focus on ESG-compliant investments, that is clearly a significant cause for concern.

Just last year, some of the country's largest investors, including the National Employment Savings Trust, which is the workplace pension scheme set up by the Government, reiterated their determination to refuse to invest in defence stocks, in the name of “ethics”. What exactly is ethical about shunning those companies that dedicate themselves to equipping our defence forces and protecting our freedom? As the FCA moves to standardise rules for ESG ratings providers, we still have no clear indication about how it intends to treat defence companies for the purpose of ESG ratings. In pursuit of secondary aims, we are making life more difficult for British defence companies and, in turn, for the armed forces that we expect to keep us safe.

One way or another, our armed forces will need to procure the equipment they need to do their jobs. While ESG requirements continue to stifle the British defence industry, we are forced into choosing one of two options, neither of them good. We could pay over the odds for equipment produced in this country. The compliance costs created by ESG rules and the disincentives to private investment created by the ESG ratings regime could force many defence firms to put up their prices, meaning higher costs for the British taxpayer, should we wish to rely on military equipment produced here. This situation also makes our kit more expensive and therefore less desirable to our allies; having fewer customers will drive up prices even further. Alternatively, we will have to rely on equipment from overseas, leaving us dependent on other countries.

Neither of those outcomes is acceptable. The status quo is bad for our armed forces and bad for the British taxpayer. The answer, of course, is to reject this dichotomy entirely. We should unleash the natural strength of the British defence industry, including by scrapping those ESG requirements that make life more difficult for British defence firms.

It would be remiss of me not to mention that, as heavy manufacturing firms, British defence companies are also likely to be disproportionately damaged by the

[Katie Lam]

energy policy that the Government are pursuing, which has produced the highest industrial energy prices in the developed world.

We know that our defence industry has the capability to be one of the best, if not the best, in the world. As recently as 2013, this country's defence industry was second in the world in the export of military equipment when measured by total value of new orders. Today, partly thanks to the growth of the regulatory burden on defence firms, we have fallen to seventh. That is bad for our own military, which must now choose between importing its equipment from abroad or paying over the odds for equipment produced in this country, and it is bad for our interests overseas. After all, militaries around the world will always need new equipment. I would much rather they were able to buy British than from competitors in Russia or China.

It is clearly true that the problems the British defence industry now faces did not begin under this Government, or even under the previous Government. But it does, of course, now fall to this Government to address them. I hope the Minister will be able to tell us whether the Government have any plans to exempt defence firms from existing ESG regulations or to make changes to those regulations for all companies. I hope she will also be able to offer us some insight into whether the Government have engaged with the FCA about the classification of defence firms for ESG purposes ahead of the consultation deadline on 31 March.

3.21 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is an absolute pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) for securing this important debate.

Private investment is the lifeblood of our defence industry—now more than ever. In an era defined by geopolitical volatility, from Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine to the unpredictable actions of global leaders, defence preparedness must be at the heart of the Government's agenda. The landscape is shifting. World leaders are recalibrating their strategies, and the private sector is doing the same. ESG-focused funds are increasingly recognising the strategic and ethical imperative of investing in defence. Since Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, exposure of ESG European equity funds to aerospace and defence has surged by a factor of 2.7. That is not an anomaly; it is a trend.

There is often confusion from some stakeholders who claim that ESG rules exclude defence companies from sustainable finance, but ESG disclosure and labelling rules do not require defence exclusion. Let me be clear: ESG rules do not exclude defence companies. The confusion is misplaced. Many sustainable funds invest in defence, and those that exclude it typically do so for voluntary ethical reasons or because of reputational concerns, not because ESG rules mandate it. I am pleased that the Government have been clear that they agree there is nothing contradictory between ESG considerations and defence. This position is shared by the Liberal Democrats, who see the industry's broader structural problems, such as political uncertainty over defence procurement, long production cycles, export controls and delays in Government payments, as the much bigger issue.

Having met many defence companies, including SMEs, I have heard how they are lacking long-term certainty, making it difficult to invest in capacity, innovation and workforce development. Take Labour's recent indecision on the new medium helicopter contract, which my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) recently alluded to. Delays risk jobs and investment. Meanwhile, the defence investment plan remains unseen. Will the Minister confirm when the plan will be published?

Defence companies, especially SMEs, need certainty. They need to invest in capacity, innovation and their workforce. The war in Ukraine has shown what is possible when industry and Government work together at pace. Yet our current system is failing them. Will the Minister commit to replacing rigid defence reviews with a flexible, continuous assessment of security threats? As part of this, the Government must look to improve collaboration with European and NATO partners to develop new technologies, equipment and training, including via the northern group. Will the Minister therefore give us an update on the UK's access to the Security Action for Europe fund? Prioritising interoperability with NATO allies and other strategic partners means that we can support each other during peace and war; in times like these, that is paramount.

SMEs are the backbone of the UK defence industry, providing flexibility, innovation and supporting high quality jobs across the UK. However, they face unique challenges that limit their potential to contribute fully to defence capability and UK prosperity. They receive just 5% of the procurement budget, with 42% of contracts going to the same 10 suppliers. That is not just unfair; it is short-sighted, so will the Minister update us on the defence office for small business growth?

We know that the previous Conservative Government bungled defence procurement in our country, overseeing budget overruns and insufficient equipment supplies. It is time for a concerted effort to get behind the defence industry. That means no more delays to vital contracts, and timely and relevant investment plans. That is why the Liberal Democrats will partner with industry to provide the confidence to boost private sector investment in research and development, training and facilities, securing key skills and employment opportunities and ensuring that the economic benefits build the prosperity of UK regions.

To incentivise defence spending, we have also shared our plans for war bonds. Members of the public could loan the Government money in the form of a bond that would run over a period of two to three years and pay out the same interest as standard Government bonds. The bonds could raise up to £20 billion for the military, and would give the public a chance to support our defence patriotically, so has the Minister reviewed those proposals and will she set up a meeting to discuss it in more detail?

The world is changing rapidly. We can no longer rely on old certainties, and thanks to Donald Trump, we can no longer depend on our closest allies. The UK's defence industry must come first. Will the Minister stand with defence businesses of all sizes and private investors and commit to making the UK a global leader in defence, innovation and resilience?

3.26 pm

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. We all know the world is becoming more dangerous. We talk about it all the time. We have these conversations in Parliament. We have them at home with constituents, family and friends, but we all know that words and conversations alone will not protect us.

We need to make the hard choices now to ensure that the state fulfils its most fundamental role: protecting its citizens and its borders. Failing to do so puts the rest of our country at risk: our NHS, our education system, our markets and our way of life. That is why this debate is so important. I am genuinely thankful to my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) for securing it, because it goes to the heart of a culture that must change rapidly if we are to stay safe. We must ensure that those countries that pose a threat to our democratic way of life are not inadvertently enabled by structures we have imposed on ourselves.

There have been a number of fantastic contributions. My hon. Friend set the tone for the whole debate. The world is becoming more dangerous, and the system of international law that we have lived under, as well as the processes that underpin it, are disappearing rapidly, and we need to change to keep pace. He talked about challenging the culture and the need for the House to push that cultural change, so that money is flowing into the defence industry. He made a number of points about how ESG is being used in different ways, from university campuses to pushing back defence industries from job fairs. I think we can all agree that that needs to change.

The hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) has deep knowledge of this issue. He has worked at the coalface of the industry to understand how these contracts are formulated across Government and industry. He talked about the distinction between funding for things that go bang—hard, single-effect capabilities—and for dual-use technologies. I thank him and the hon. Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker) for their work on the “Rewiring British Defence Financing” report. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about how that is impacting the work on the defence investment plan.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) adds to defence discussions in the House on almost a daily basis. He spoke again about Northern Ireland and about companies, such as Thales and Harland & Wolff, which are at the heart of shipbuilding and aerospace defence. He spoke about how ESG is being used by those companies to ensure that they stay on Government frameworks. I would love to speak to him afterwards to understand how those policies may be impacting their business outputs.

The hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) spoke powerfully about deterrence and about investing in defence now to keep us all safe. I think we can all agree that no one wants to go back to war. A number of the Members who have spoken in this debate are veterans who have experienced war, and they know that we do not want that for our country. To ensure deterrence, we must allocate capital to put ourselves in a strong position for the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) talked specifically about how ESG was used in the RAF to socially engineer certain outcomes,

for which the RAF apologised. It should always be a meritocracy of the best man or woman for that job and nothing else should get in the way. She went into the nuance of the national legislation, the FCA and the red tape wrapped around companies.

Lastly, I completely agree with the points raised by the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), about the need for the Government to give defence companies a firm contractual push so they know what is coming down the track. I would like to hear more about the bonds idea, which was raised in the Chamber two nights ago on Second Reading of the Armed Forces Bill. When we asked where the money would come from and what budgets would need to be cut to repay two to three-year bonds, we did not get a clear answer, so I would like to hear more.

Organisations that have a role to play in our collective national defence must recognise that investing in defence is both patriotic and necessary. Anything that prevents them from doing so should be stripped away. I truly believe that that cultural shift must begin in earnest in this place.

The three pillars of ESG examine how a company treats the environment, manages relationships with stakeholders, and governs itself. At first glance, that all makes sense. It is easy to see why those pillars send a signal to the markets about an organisation’s priorities, but here is the problem: the framework has evolved in a way that increasingly treats national defence as a negative, somehow signalling a bad actor. Defence-focused investments have been lumped together with industries such as tobacco and gambling. The hon. Member for North Durham added pornography to the list. How did we reach a position where we have forgotten that spending on defence and providing deterrence is the foundation on which everything else we value in society rests?

I often speak about this with my dad, who was born in 1942 in Plymouth, a city that was bombed heavily during the blitz. Some of his earliest memories are of being under the stairs listening to the drone of Luftwaffe bombs overhead. His generation was the last in this country to experience borders and national security as fragile and uncertain, but as was raised a few times today, if we fast forward a few generations, for young people, the idea that they might have to fight for what they love is an abstract concept at best. We have lost our emotive memory of war, which puts us in a precarious position.

I also fear that we draw the wrong lessons from history. When we mobilised during the first and second world wars, we did so with an existing industrial base. Factories could be repurposed quickly and critical resources were within reach. Closer to home, the lessons from covid further muddled the water. A debilitating pandemic was high on the national risk register, yet it was not given the seriousness it deserved. What followed was denial followed by urgency. Companies such as Dyson switched to producing ventilators and we scrambled internationally to source protective equipment for our NHS. In great British fashion, we muddled through.

With the risk of international conflict rising by the day, however, I do not want us to have to muddle through again. We all have a responsibility to ensure that the state fulfils its primary duty: keeping our countrymen and women safe. Everything else is secondary. I do not want to wait until we are punched in the face

[David Reed]

before we react. That is why this debate matters. It is about the practical steps, such as where the money for increased defence comes from and how we cut the red tape that is holding back our defence industry.

We also need to look hard at how we better align the capital allocation industry with defence. The Chief of the Defence Staff warned of the £28 billion gap between our current resources and our defence ambitions, so we must get serious. Concerns have been raised that only a small fraction of recent defence contracts have gone towards weapons and armour, fuelling fear in the defence industry of an effective procurement freeze at precisely the moment we should be accelerating rearmament.

The private sector and private capital are not a silver bullet, but they are a major part of the answer. The Government are reported to be exploring public-private partnerships, but those will not progress while markets continue to view defence as unethical or constrained by ESG stipulations. That must change through Government contracts removing such prohibitive clauses and the Government being seen as a reliable partner where returns can be guaranteed.

That means having defence spending that matches the rhetoric, and contracts awarded at the scale required to meet the growing threats. It is encouraging to see parts of the defence investment space already working to shift that culture. The UK Private Capital trade association has had a defence working group for nearly a year to educate the capital allocation industry about what national deterrence, both defensive and offensive, really means—a point raised by the hon. Member for York Outer—and why investment must include hard capabilities that keep us safe, not just dual-use technologies at the edges.

We must also be honest about the barriers that remain. Societal pressures and perceptions around defence, particularly under the S pillar of ESG, have led to real reticence. Many high-street financing providers maintain restrictive policies towards defence firms, often requiring higher levels of due diligence. Increasingly, investment funds are developing ESG policies that exclude defence under blanket terminology around weapons or nuclear and extend deep into the supply chain, rather than acting in a targeted way. These unregulated exclusions are inhibiting defence investment at exactly the wrong time.

I acknowledge that work is in progress to address that. As referred to by the hon. Members for York Outer, for Strangford and for North Durham, industry has developed initiatives such as the UK defence ESG charter and the HM Treasury and ADS trade body joint taskforce. However, I believe that more parliamentary support is needed to help investors understand the realities of the sector and encourage responsible investments. The Government must provide clear demand signals for both industry and finance. The outcomes of the defence industrial strategy and the strategic defence review will be crucial in setting the tone for where, what and how the UK intends to spend with the defence sector.

I do not want to fall into the trap of opposing the Government for opposition's sake. I want Labour to do well. I want the Defence Ministers to do well. If they do well, the UK does well, and we should all be on team UK. That is why I offer the following comments constructively. I hope the Minister receives them in that spirit.

My party has done some hard work over the last 18 months. We have set out clear plans to boost defence spending through a sovereign defence fund of up to £50 billion, funded by reallocating existing expenditure currently directed towards costly environmental projects. That would enable the procurement of drones and new technologies at a far greater pace and scale, transforming the capability and lethality of the British armed forces. Crucially, it would help to deliver the industrial capacity we need here at home.

To enable that ramp-up in domestic production, the sovereign defence fund would mobilise billions in public and private funding to overhaul the defence industrial base. There are practical steps we can take: taking stakes in UK defence start-ups, investing in dual-use companies, and building resilient supply chains to reduce reliance on hostile states such as China.

This is a fully funded plan based on repurposing existing Government expenditure towards this national priority. It comprises three elements. First, £6 billion would be reallocated from the research and development budget in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to the Ministry of Defence. As we all know, and has been touched on today, defence innovation has spillover benefits to other sectors, from communications to transport. Secondly, £11 billion would be ringfenced from the National Wealth Fund to become the national defence and resilience bank. That funding is currently allocated to a number of non-vital eco-projects; the remainder would stay focused on national resilience such as water and transport. Thirdly, approximately £33 billion would be mobilised from private finance through the same model already used by the National Wealth Fund, unlocking billions more in investment.

We all know that other countries are doing this. Countries such as the United States and Germany are already allocating huge funds for defence and bolstering their domestic manufacturing and technological bases. We must do the same, because if we do not we will become prey to those who do not value our way of life. The Government must act with urgency, match words with action and help to drive the cultural shift that will allow our country to be properly defended. That is why this debate matters so much. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor again for securing it. I look forward to working with colleagues across the House to progress this agenda.

3.39 pm

The Minister for Veterans and People (Louise Sandher-Jones): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McVey. I will take a minute to put on record my deep sadness about the death of Captain Philip Gilbert Muldowney on Sunday. My thoughts, and the thoughts of everyone here, are with his loved ones.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) for initiating this important debate, and for highlighting the unduly negative light in which defence can sadly sometimes be viewed in investment and academic circles. All hon. Members here, including me, care deeply about our society, environment and good governance, but I welcome this opportunity to set out why defence, rather than being incompatible with those values, underpins all three. I am sure that if we asked families in Ukraine whether greater spending on defence and deterrence over the last decade would have

had a positive or negative impact on their society, environment and governance, we would get only one answer.

I will speak quickly to some of the points raised in this debate. The hon. Member for Windsor rightly spoke about the importance of more money for SMEs in the defence industry. The Government have a target of spending £7.5 billion with SMEs by 2027-28, which is a 50% increase. As somebody who used to work for an SME that had some interest in defence customers, I know how difficult a challenge it can be in that space, without any unfair negative attention being paid to the industry we were in.

The hon. Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) spoke about the importance of support for Leonardo and for helicopters, and I will make sure that his comments are passed to the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry. The Secretary of State met representatives from Leonardo last week, and I know that the Minister will continue the dialogue with them and the hon. Member. I will also ensure that the comments of the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) are passed to the Minister.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) for his excellent work on this issue, and for working with other hon. Members across parties, including my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker), to highlight how important it is that we understand how defence is underpinning environmental, social and governance issues, rather than acting in opposition to them. He rightly highlighted the positive impact SMEs have in his constituency, and particularly noted Needles and Pins Aerospace and Edmund Optics. It can be difficult for the average person to understand exactly what we mean when we talk about defence SMEs, and he highlighted their work in areas as niche as helicopter insulation or lens manufacturing, and in training support.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer also rightly spoke about debanking. Whether it is access to funds, access to banking or access to any other financial services, it is important that we understand exactly the issues that SMEs may be facing. He was also right to highlight the particular challenges for SMEs that come from the long payment cycles of primes. Again, having worked in an SME, I know how frustrating it can be when an SME has a product that the customer wants and that the SME can provide, but what would be a good deal is prevented by a long payment cycle and difficulty with funding.

I will no doubt speak to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) after the debate about his point on Beyond the Battlefield. He noted the proud history of Northern Ireland and Belfast in the defence industry. I am delighted that the lightweight multirole missiles contract has further secured that industry, and I know that the future continues to be bright. He also highlighted the huge importance of the defence industry for apprenticeships and having those highly skilled, technical pipelines where young people leave education and start on fantastic careers where they learn skills and earn a decent wage. Apprenticeships are hugely important in his and my constituency, and in the constituencies of many hon. Members here, so he is right to note them.

Let me turn now to the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) on the impact on the planet. As he knows, the MOD

and our partners are absolutely committed to safeguarding our national security first and foremost. However, we must also recognise the impact of addressing climate-related risks, and when we look at the intersection of climate-related risks and defence, we know they are inextricably linked.

We must also look at reducing environmental impacts, and I know I am not the only Member of this House who has fond memories of doing their bit by picking up brass from training areas. However, we must make sure that the MOD is also doing work across the board to ensure we understand and consider its impact on the wider environment. My hon. Friend will know that our financial reporting is aligned with the Task Force on Climate-Related Financial Disclosures frameworks, ensuring that we understand climate risks to both the MOD and our supply chain, which are ultimately not acting in opposition, but are inextricably linked.

Let me turn to my hon. Friend's point on compliance policies. We are absolutely committed to mobilising private investors to take a fresh look at defence. That comes alongside the certainty of our own record long-term uplift in defence spending. That is particularly crucial for SMEs looking to scale up their concepts, ideas and prototypes. As with any bank-to-SME relationship, we recognise that there will be commercial considerations and compliance processes, which will include ESG and no doubt other regulatory considerations. None the less, we welcome the Financial Conduct Authority's statement, which confirmed that there are no rules in its regulations that prevent

“investment or finance for defence companies.”

The Defence Office for Small Business Growth—which the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry launched this week in Scotland—the £2.5 billion spending target by 2027-28 and the defence innovation unit all mean that, as well as proactively engaging the investor community to further build market confidence, we will collaborate on investment opportunities.

Turning to the points made by the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), I note her underlining of the importance of defence for the nation. It is not always helpful to conflate ESG and diversity and inclusion. None the less, I thank her for raising the previous Government's record of failure on recruitment and for highlighting their poor record on defence exports and their failure to improve our sovereign energy capability.

I thank the hon. and gallant Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for her strong statement that ESG and defence are not contradictory. As she rightly notes, there are challenges for the defence industry, and having stability is hugely important. She also raised the importance of continuously assessing threats, so I think she will note my comments about the need to balance long-term stability with assessing threats—there would be a balance and trade-offs between the two. Along with other hon. Members, she also mentioned the defence investment plan, and I can assure her that we are working flat out to deliver it as soon as possible.

Let me turn now to the hon. and gallant Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed). His commitment to this topic is plain to see, and he is evidently passionate about it. He rightly noted the importance of allocations of capital, and that we must act equitably in this space and underline the important role the defence industry plays in the security of this nation and the prosperity of

[*Louise Sandher-Jones*]

the individual nations within it. He also rightly noted the importance of defence industries being able to go into academic spaces such as universities. We of course note the right to peaceful protest, but companies should none the less be allowed to go into universities and show the huge opportunities they can offer those who seek careers in defence. Finally, he rightly noted that we should not equivocate between dual-use military technologies and core defence capabilities. He was right to say that weapons and ammunition are just as important as helicopter insulation, and we should not equivocate between the two. I note his call for us not to do that. I will make sure that his wider suggestions are passed to my colleague the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry for full consideration.

The Government believe that investing in defence, and the deterrent effect that that buys, provides the stable foundation on which everything else in this nation depends, from our economy to our ability to go about our daily lives. Across this House, we must never stop reminding people that defence investment prevents wars, and for only a tiny fraction of the cost of fighting one.

Therefore, in our more dangerous and unpredictable world, as we implement the largest increase in defence spending since the cold war, and move towards a footing of warfighting readiness, we must dismantle all barriers that might hold back defence investment. That is why we have come into government determined to forge a much closer partnership between industry, innovators and investors, and to work together to find ways to unlock that investment.

Although we acknowledge the debate raging about the extent to which ESG considerations can be a brake on investment in defence, it is important to note the FCA's statement on how its own rules do not prohibit financing investment in the defence sector. However, we have to note the anecdotal evidence that negative perceptions and a lack of understanding of the rules are acting as a drag on defence investment by individuals and financial institutions.

As part of our consultation on our defence industrial strategy, we heard from smaller defence suppliers about their difficulties with access to finance, whether in opening a bank account or securing a loan. That is wrong; it harms British jobs, British firms and our national security.

We have been loud and clear about the valuable economic and social contribution of the defence sector. Indeed, my colleague the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry is frequently heard to use the phrase "engine for growth" as he talks about the importance of defence investment. I have already spoken about the work he did on Monday in launching the Defence Office for Small Business Growth, which will work with small and medium-sized businesses to address the barriers hampering them at the time when we need them most.

Through the strategic defence review and the defence industrial strategy, we have been clear about the societal value of defence investment. We have been very clear—I say this on the record and as clearly as possible—that defence is an ethical investment. We have illustrated how defence investment has repeatedly led to huge leaps forward in dual-use technologies, from advanced materials and computing to clean energy technologies. In a high-tech age of artificial intelligence and quantum computing,

such dual-use opportunities are magnified, as in turn is the potential for defence investment to stimulate jobs and economic growth.

When we discuss ESG, it is important that we do not completely dismiss ethical concerns. We have only to look at Russia's bombardment of Ukrainian cities to understand that there can be a basis for legitimate concern about how weapons are used. This Government believe that the answer to such concerns in relation to UK-made equipment lies in robust export controls and international law, not in harming our own security by starving our defence industrial base of the investment it needs.

We have set in train an evidence-led approach to dismantling the barriers we have talked about. We have a much closer partnership with the financial sector, and are working together to find new ways to unlock investment. The Defence Secretary convened a first-of-its-kind meeting with venture capitalists last April. We brought together venture capitalists, private equity and other key financial services at our defence investment summit in September, and that group of experts is also helping to inform our defence finance and investment strategy. That will reflect the work we are doing with the FCA and the Pensions Regulator to explore the impact of all regulations on defence financing and investment.

We will also set out steps we can take to tackle the perception, which some hold, that defence is an unethical investment. Many of us have spoken about the importance of the pipeline of skilled and talented innovators, so we must make sure we address negative perceptions of defence in the education sector. To do so, we have committed to establishing the defence universities alliance, which will bring together a network of universities, the MOD, armed forces and the wider sector to promote defence careers and support defence research.

For too long, the defence sector has had an unearned and unfair reputation that is likely to have harmed defence investment. This Government are determined to change that narrative, and we are working hard to do so. Yes, war is brutal, but the best way of avoiding it is to invest in deterrence, which means investing in defence. In doing so, we fuel the virtuous circle of investment, jobs and growth, benefiting communities right across the country and making ourselves more secure at home and stronger abroad—something that I know everybody in this room can get behind.

3.53 pm

Jack Rankin: I thank all hon. Members from across the Chamber for their considered contributions, and particularly the hon. Members for York Outer (Mr Charters), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam).

Speakers have emphasised slightly different things, but we all support a safe and confident Britain and understand that the first responsibility of His Majesty's Britannic Government is the defence of the realm. Investment in defence is patriotic, it is necessary and it helps to make war less likely.

I thank the Minister for her comments. Given the increasingly dangerous world we live in, we should take action today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of environmental, social and governance requirements on the defence industry.

3.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

Ivanhoe Line: Restoration

4.6 pm

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I will call Amanda Hack to move the motion and I will then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with the prior permission of both the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention with a 30-minute debate.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered restoration of the Ivanhoe Line.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey.

I am pleased that colleagues have joined me for what I believe is the first ever debate solely about the Ivanhoe line—a train line that would reopen a direct passenger link between Leicester and Burton upon Trent. The line has a long history. Before the 1830s, Coalville did not exist; it was known as Long Lane and included the four medieval parishes of Whitwick, Hugglescote, Snibston and Swannington. When William Stenson, the proprietor of coalmines in Whitwick, returned from a trip on the Stockton and Darlington railway, he carefully studied the land between Long Lane and Leicester. Taking into account the mines in Ibstock and Bagworth, he planned the line of a possible railway.

Stenson enlisted the help of George Stephenson, “the father of railways”, who delegated the construction of the Swannington-to-Leicester railway to his son, Robert. It became the sixth steam railway in the country, linking Leicester and Long Lane so that coal could easily be transported between the two. Some estimate that around the same time the town became known as Coalville. The line traditionally transported coal before it was opened to passengers.

Fast forward to the 1960s, when what was then called the Ivanhoe line was closed during the infamous Beeching cuts of 7 September 1964. Since then, there have been many campaigns to get it fully back up and running, especially as it remained open to freight traffic until only recently.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing forward this matter. I spoke to her before the debate, and I now rise to support and encourage her.

I hail from a rural constituency that once had a railway line but now has none whatsoever. Sometimes the bottom line is not the financial one, and sometimes obligations need to extend to more than profit margins. Does the hon. Lady agree that there must be an obligation—if necessary, a statutory obligation—to provide a rail service in isolated areas?

Amanda Hack: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. Later in my speech, I will talk about how we can connect our communities, which is really important.

Lack of maintenance on the Ivanhoe line led to the gradual withdrawal of freight services, although the private section, from Bardon Hill quarry to the rail network, is still operational; in fact, the quarry has recently extended its lease. There was an opportunity to get the line up and running in the 1990s, but any hope of

[Amanda Hack]

doing so was thwarted by the break-up of British Rail when it was privatised. Throughout all this change, there has been continuous local pressure to deliver a passenger rail service for my constituents. The most recent business case was supported under stage 1 of the restoring your railway fund, of which Lord Hendy, the Minister of State for Rail, was the chair.

The project originated from a successful bid by the Campaign to Reopen the Ivanhoe Line, or CRIL, and was one of the 12 projects nationally to receive restoring your railway development funding. I want to take a moment to thank everybody from CRIL for all their hard work to get to this stage.

The project, which was in phase 1 of restoring your railways, was for a partial reopening from Coalville to Burton upon Trent, with stations at Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Castle Gresley and Coalville. That would have finally reconnected two of the largest towns not connected to the rail network: Coalville and Swadlincote. Those two towns have also seen the highest growth in homes and employment in the last decade. The east midlands has grown by 8%, yet my constituency of North West Leicestershire has grown by 12% and South Derbyshire has grown by 13%.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. She has been a fierce champion for this campaign since before becoming an MP and has been relentless since—and I love her for it. I also thank the members of the Campaign to Reopen the Ivanhoe Line who live in South Derbyshire.

Swadlincote lost its original Midland Railway station in 1947, leaving it a disconnected town. There are very few places the size of Swad in the UK without a train station. The nearest train station, for anyone who wants to get anywhere, is in Burton. Anyone who wants to get a train directly to our capital city would have to go to Tamworth, over 15 miles away and 30 minutes away on a good day. East Midlands Parkway is over 30 minutes away, and there are many others.

I want South Derbyshire to continue to grow, with great tech jobs and opportunities. Does my hon. Friend agree that reopening the Ivanhoe line for passengers, as well as the railway station in Castle Gresley, would help to create a two-way gateway and opportunity for people in Swadlincote and the surrounding areas?

Amanda Hack: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention and her support during the campaign. The main thing is that large towns need the infrastructure to match. There are certainly other examples of investments in railways to connect towns that are exceeding their passenger targets, such as the Northumberland line.

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): What my hon. Friend is talking about reminds me of an issue that affects my constituents. The line between Liverpool and Preston crosses the line between Southport and Manchester. Up until the 1960s, the two lines were linked by two curves at the town of Burscough, just outside my constituency. For 60 years, there has been a campaign to get the curves reopened and to reinstall the commuter link between Southport and Ormskirk, and also between Southport and Preston, which would add huge amounts

of GVA to the local area and create an economic powerhouse for the north-west. The cost of rebuilding and reopening the Burscough curves has been estimated at just £35 million. Does my hon. Friend agree that that would be £35 million pounds very well spent?

Amanda Hack: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I do not know a huge amount about his line, but that certainly seems to be good value for money, and it adds to the point about towns that need infrastructure. What does that infrastructure do? It gives those people opportunity.

On that point, I ask the Minister what work has been done to assess the impact on growth and investment in large towns like mine, and those of my colleagues, that are not connected to the rail network. North West Leicestershire, alongside other parts of the east midlands, is outside the East Midlands combined authority and does not benefit from the city region allocation, which, for Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, is £2 billion. Although part of the Ivanhoe travels through the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett), it ends in Burton, which is also outside the combined authority, yet the Ivanhoe line would give my constituents the opportunity to get to Derby via Burton and vice versa.

The money allocated to Leicestershire is limited to public transport and some long overdue road improvements. If Leicester and Leicestershire were allocated city region funding at the same rate as the combined authority, we would have £1 billion to invest in Leicester and Leicestershire. We cannot just accept that the mayoralty alone gets the increase, when we know that the east midlands lags behind in terms of funding.

Research has shown that, had the east midlands received the same funding as the UK average between 2019 and 2024, we would have had about £10 billion extra for transport. Will the Minister highlight how areas such as Leicester and Leicestershire, within the most poorly funded region for transport investment, will be supported to ensure that services can be provided?

Now I want to talk about the value of the train line for our communities—the exciting and most important bit. MPs can get really competitive when it comes to who has the prettiest constituency, but mine is at the heart of the national forest, and it really does not get much better than that. The National Forest Company transformed the post-industrial landscape into a thriving success story of environmentally led regeneration in the midlands. Reopening the Ivanhoe line has the potential to create a beautiful train line travelling through the greenery of the national forest. The National Forest Company reached out to me before the debate and shared its recent research. It found:

“The second highest contributor to CO2 emissions within the National Forest is resident travel, with car travel accounting for 14% of the residents’ consumption-based footprint—higher than the National Average”.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): My hon. Friend stressed the importance of rail freight. The Railways Bill, currently in Committee, will introduce a target to increase rail freight. Does she share the concerns relayed to me about the potential for this line to be closed to freight? Does she agree that we should be getting lorries and haulage off our roads and on to rail freight, as we are doing with Great British Railways?

Amanda Hack: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I will come to freight in a little while; he has pre-empted my speech.

The National Forest Company also shared that 99% of the over 200,000 annual visitors to Conkers, which is one of the key attractions in the national forest, travel by car. It feels counterproductive that the only option to make the most of our green spaces is driving, and there is certainly opportunity for investment along the line at Moira to assist with changing that.

The reopening of the Ivanhoe line through the national forest is critical if we are serious about reducing carbon emissions in this part of the midlands. There is also a local idea of changing the name from Ivanhoe to the National Forest line; I think that has a good ring to it. Last year, I did a survey, and about 400 people in my constituency responded: 90% said they travelled by car because of poor public transport, 72% said that they were prevented from travelling to where they want to go because there were no public transport options, and 97% supported the restoration of the Ivanhoe line.

My constituent Karen pointed out that there are many attractions and services in Ashby and that the rail line would be a valuable asset, bringing people to the castle, leisure facilities and the array of shops, pubs and cafes. Ashby is a pure market town. Unsurprisingly, a lot of respondents also said that the reopening of the line would help them to access job opportunities outside the area. One of my constituents told me that she is disabled and wants to work in Leicester but struggles on the buses to Ashby. Another told me how a train line would help him to see his young daughter more, connecting and putting his family back together. Another works for the management team at a homeless charity and explained on behalf of their clients that the reopening of the line would remove some of the barriers to accessing accommodation, attending appointments and securing local job opportunities.

It is fantastic to hear that the Government have stressed the importance of apprenticeships and fulfilling education and job opportunities for all, but how are my younger constituents going to get there? When I meet young people like William across my constituency, they tell me that public transport is a huge barrier to getting to the training opportunities and apprenticeships they deserve.

Buses are also leaving people stranded. Dave contacted me over the weekend. He went to watch a Leicester City match and got the last bus home to Ashby. However, the bus stopped in Coalville, and the passengers were told to get off and walk to another bus stop. They waited and waited for a bus that never arrived. He quite rightly says:

“where a simple bus ride can’t get people home, a train line would help enormously”.

North West Leicestershire also does not have a main hospital. My constituents travel to Derby, Leicester, Nottingham and Burton, and having to rely on services as unreliable as the one I just described is a real problem. As one constituent said in the survey:

“It’s harder to think of reasons NOT to reopen the line”.

I understand that, ever since we have come into office, we have had to battle to deal with the financial mess that the previous Government left behind. On that point, I want to segue on to another rail project: HS2,

which has been marred by significant delays and cost overruns. It would have literally just gone through my constituency—it would have moved a dual carriageway in my constituency, but it would not have brought us a train station.

HS2 Ltd owns 74 homes in my constituency, more than in any other. I have written to the Secretary of State on this issue, and would be grateful if my constituents could get a definitive answer on how that money can be reinvested. Can constituencies with assets purchased for HS2 be allocated the appreciated asset value as well as the rental income that is coming in? Setting aside that money for rail improvements would make such a difference.

HS2 was about providing capacity. For the east midlands, Ivanhoe was the only project to progress in restoring your railway, creating rail capacity for both passengers and freight. It is outstandingly different from many other rail infrastructure projects, because we already have a track in place, and therefore it is quick to deliver. I have been engaging with CRIL, Network Rail, Midlands Connect, East Midlands Railway, Siemens Mobility, the East Midlands combined county authority and the National Forest. I have had numerous meetings with Ministers in the Department for Transport, and have mentioned the Ivanhoe line whenever possible here and in the main Chamber.

North West Leicestershire has so much potential, and we have to make it count. We sit in the heart of the UK, with great people, an ever-evolving community, tons of aspiration and an industrial past we are proud of. We have a real sense of looking forward. Significant levels of investment in UK logistics have not gone hand in hand with as much infrastructure investment as our community needs. In fact, the line would go through the golden triangle freight logistics area, which has the most intense concentration of warehousing in the country, so we should take the opportunity to improve public transport to this important employment hub.

North West Leicestershire is in some ways a great set of contradictions. We have an international airport, yet poor public transport. We have the East Midlands rail freight terminal, yet no passenger rail. We have great road networks, yet local roads have been poorly invested in. We are enhancing our environment, with the National Forest planting more greenery and trees to tackle carbon emissions, but we are cancelling that out because we have only the car as an option. Siemens Mobility, the train signalling company, is based in my constituency, yet none of its staff can get to work on the train.

We have a line, and we have the stations reserved in the local plan. The delivery from start to finish would be very short. The biggest contradiction is that we have gone back on public transport connectivity since the '60s while growing exponentially. The reopening of the Ivanhoe line would be beneficial to investment and growth in public transport, but I also recognise that we have to prepare for the population growth that is already contained in the local plan, quite apart from the new growth in progress.

I promised my constituents that I would continue to push for the rightful restoration of the Ivanhoe line all the way from Burton to Leicester and I look forward to the Minister’s response.

4.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) on securing the debate, and thank everyone for their contributions, including my hon. Friends the Members for Southport (Patrick Hurley), for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier), and for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett), as well as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

On a practical point, may I say that I will chase the correspondence that my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire referred to in relation to HS2? More broadly, I thank her for her work in advocating on behalf of her constituents and championing their need to have public transport that serves their interests. She rightly points to the fact that this Government believe that transport is not just a means of getting from A to B; it is a key way in which we fulfil the lives of people in the United Kingdom and connect them to greater economic opportunity and to their families. We will use the transport network as a catalyst for economic growth and for making sure that we have the housing people need. My hon. Friend appears to be laser-focused on those principles in her work and advocacy, and I thank her for that.

I am grateful for the passionate case that my hon. Friend made for reconnecting the towns of North West Leicestershire in the heart of the National Forest, such as Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Coalville and Swadlincote, with passenger railway services to Burton-on-Trent and Leicester—bringing back services lost in 1964 where only quarry freight services still operate today. Transport connections such as the ones that she mentions underpin the core missions of this Government, whether that means kick-starting economic growth, unlocking housing delivery, or breaking down barriers to opportunity to transform lives.

Our objective is simple but ambitious: to build a stronger, more connected transport network that works for everyone, wherever they live. We believe that local authorities are best placed to make decisions about the investment priorities in their areas, but too often, places such as North West Leicestershire have faced fragmented funding and limited flexibility. That is why, from April, we are providing all local transport authorities with more consolidated funding settlements, giving them the ability to align transport investment with local priorities and wider regional objectives, accelerating projects that matter most to their residents, businesses and visitors.

The Ivanhoe route cuts through Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Staffordshire. In Leicestershire, for example, this means that a total of more than £251 million of vital investment—across highways maintenance, active travel, electric vehicles, bus services and other local transport—will be delivered through consolidated funding by 2029-30. Elsewhere along the line, Staffordshire will receive £342 million, and the Mayor of the East Midlands will receive more than £2 billion by March 2032.

That said, I will take away the point, which my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire made very powerfully, about the disparities between funding in mayoral combined authorities and the local authorities that directly border them. That is something that we are working on through the Railways Bill, to create more

democratic accountability, irrespective of mayoral arrangements. I think that point was very well made, and I will take it away from this debate. However, that settlement will support transport authorities, including those outside of MCAs, to strengthen their road, public transport, walking and cycling links between towns, cities and rural areas, and ensure that improvements are felt across the entire region.

Soon, we will embed that approach right across the country through our integrated national transport strategy. The strategy will champion transport that is designed, built and operated with people at its heart, recognising that different places face different connectivity challenges and therefore need different solutions, but also that they have different opportunities. My hon. Friend made an important point about the latent potential of the tourism industry in her constituency, and how the Government must work hard to realise it in partnership with her.

We want to focus on making transport safer, more reliable and more accessible, giving more people confidence in the network and confidence that it will work for them. Crucially, we will also align transport more closely with housing and with public services, recognising that poor connectivity entrenches inequality, while good connectivity expands opportunity.

I commend the work of my hon. Friend in championing the case for reinstating passenger services on the Ivanhoe line, building on previous work to assess the viability of the scheme. While the Chancellor took essential steps to help balance public finances in 2024, closing the previous Government's unfortunately unfunded commitments in the restoring your railways programme, we welcome transport authorities using local funding to develop the business case for their important local priorities. Indeed, authorities can work with Network Rail to develop and present business cases and investment proposals for consideration through the rail network enhancements pipeline, the Government's funding portfolio for rail upgrades, at any stage of development. That process ensures that funding decisions are affordable and represent good value for taxpayers.

The Government are also keen to facilitate third-party investment in railway infrastructure that could support local development and housing plans. I urge local transport authorities to make best use of the funding we are making available to them, and to make the right decisions for improving transport connections across all modes, for Ashby, Coalville, Swadlincote and elsewhere.

Recognising the importance of improving transport connections in the wider midlands region, the Chancellor committed in the July spending review to progress to the next stage of the midlands rail hub, which will unlock thousands of homes and drive economic growth, with better connections and more reliable journeys for passengers. The first phase will create capacity in central Birmingham to improve reliability and enable additional trains both locally and to Worcester, south Wales and the south-west. We are working closely with Network Rail to ensure passenger benefits as soon as possible. Depending on future investment decisions, the later phases of the rail hub would also mean major benefits for the east midlands, with extra trains between Birmingham, Derby and Nottingham, including possible stops at Burton-upon-Trent and between Birmingham and Leicester.

East Midlands Railway's new bi-mode Class 810 Aurora trains have already started to enter passenger service on the midland main line through Leicester and will continue with a phased roll-out through 2026. These new trains will bring a step change in the customer experience and will support growth. Once all those new trains are up and running, they will provide a 46% uplift in capacity, with more seats and carriages.

To conclude, today's discussion has been an opportunity to reflect not only on the case for the restoration of the Ivanhoe line but on this Government's priorities for improving transport connections to help people get about and to access the opportunities they deserve, and on how we can support local authorities in the east midlands to deliver on the transport priorities of their communities.

Although I feel that I may not have been able to answer the noble and ambitious aspirations that my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire has put forward today, I encourage her to keep the conversation going and to continue to hold DFT Ministers' feet to the fire on this most important of issues. She is a tireless champion on behalf of her constituents and of their ability to get where they need to go, realise economic opportunity and lead richer, more fulfilled lives. I encourage her to continue in those efforts and I will watch with interest as she does so.

Question put and agreed to.

Firearms Licence Holders: Mandatory Medical Markers

4.31 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of mandatory medical markers for firearm licence holders.

It is a pleasure to speak under your chairship, Ms McVey, and have the opportunity to raise such a critical issue.

In 2021, three-year-old Sophie Martyn was one of six people in Plymouth who lost their lives in a mass killing. At the inquest it emerged that the murderer's GP had not placed a marker on the medical notes when requested to do so by the police. The murderer had already had his gun taken away previously and concerns about his health had been reported by his mother, who was the first person killed. When it mattered most, the system failed. That cannot be allowed to happen again.

Almost a year after the anniversary of those horrific killings, the previous Government rolled out medical markers for new firearms licence holders. Medical markers, once applied to a patient's record, flag that an individual has a firearms licence and automatically alerts doctors if there has been a relevant change in their medical situation. That could include a change in their mental health or evidence of substance abuse. That allows the GP to have a conversation with the patient and, if necessary, inform the police. Here is the catch: those markers are not mandatory. There is currently no obligation on GPs to use the marker. Their use is left to the best endeavours of GPs. I have written to the Minister for crime, policing and fire to ask for the number of GPs who have downloaded the marker, but I have yet to receive a response.

That is a missed opportunity to save lives, to safeguard vulnerable adults with access to firearms, and to protect public safety. A survey carried out by the Association of Police and Crime Commissioners found that 87% of existing certificate holders believe that GPs should inform the police if they become aware of a change of health that could impact a certificate holder's ability to own a gun safely. Why are the Government dragging their feet?

In 2008, Christopher Foster shot his wife and teenage daughter. He then shot the family animals and burned his house down, dying of smoke inhalation. He had previously seen his GP on several occasions to discuss his depression and suicidal thoughts. Markers on medical notes for firearms owners were not then available, and there was no way that his GP could have known that he had licensed firearms. With medical markers still being optional, if that horrific attack were carried out today there is still no guarantee that a medical marker would be on his GP record.

Our country is home to proud rural communities and individuals who rely on gun ownership for their work. The shooting industry makes up a vital part of the rural economy.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this issue forward for debate. I, like others, always try to be helpful in my contributions. At a meeting with key stakeholders, the British Association for Shooting and Conservation in Northern Ireland met the Department of Justice and the Police Service of Northern Ireland. They routinely acknowledge that the

[Jim Shannon]

Northern Ireland firearms licensing system, which includes medical checks, is one of the most robust systems—if not the most—in the world. It is clear there is no need for change there. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is essential to liaise with shooting organisations such as the BASC and Countryside Alliance to get insight from their expertise? Could the Minister potentially look at the system in Northern Ireland as the catalyst that the hon. Lady is seeking to achieve?

Helen Maguire: It is interesting to hear that there is another system in Northern Ireland, and indeed, I urge the Minister to look at that and see whether it could be applicable here.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): I should perhaps clarify for the House that I chair the all-party parliamentary group on shooting and conservation. I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. Does she agree that one of the critical reasons that medical markers are not yet compulsory—I entirely agree that they ought to be—is that some doctors do not want to do it because they think it will put them in a decision-making position on whether a person should have a shotgun or firearms certificate? In fact, that is not the case; the decision maker is the relevant constabulary, and, in law, the chief of that constabulary is ultimately responsible for the decision.

Helen Maguire: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. This is about safeguarding the public. There are many other examples of doctors having similar abilities to use this information.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The hon. Member has prompted the second point that I want to make. Doctors and other medics are perfectly happy to do medical checks on people in relation to driving licences. That is an issue of public safety. Why is there inconsistency in doing it for firearms?

Helen Maguire: I absolutely agree, and I will be coming on to that further in my speech. Let me be clear that this debate is in no way about firearm ownership—the Government are consulting on that separately, and that is its own debate. Today's discussion is about how we can ensure that medical professionals have the information required to best support the individuals they serve.

Emma and her daughter Lettie Pattison, who lived in my constituency, were shot and killed by Emma's husband almost three years ago, before he turned the gun on himself. Before his latest shotgun licence renewal, George Pattison had used an online doctor to receive a "significant amount" of propranolol between 2019 and 2021. However, despite his change in mental health, the online doctor was unaware of his firearms licence, and the medication was not disclosed to his GP, which meant that neither professional was able to intervene. If they had, maybe Emma would still be working at Epsom college and Lettie might have celebrated her 10th birthday this year.

Robert Needham killed his partner Kelly Fitzgibbons, and their children Ava, age four, and Lexi, age two, in West Sussex in 2020. In Needham's case, as a result of changes to gun licence guidelines, a flag was initially inputted and then removed. A statement from Kelly's family following the inquest into their deaths described

the monitoring and sharing of information between police and medical professionals about Needham's shotgun licence as a "shambles."

Having corresponded with medical organisations, I recognise that balancing the need for patient-doctor confidentiality is paramount. In the first instance, the GP should always ask for the individual's consent before contacting another authority, such as the police, about how the issues they are facing may impact their ability to safely possess a gun. However, doctors can break confidentiality when it is in the public interest. According to the British Medical Association, public interest is likely to be justified where it is essential to protect other people from risks of serious harm or death.

GPs also must already abide by several safeguarding protocols and laws. The Care Act 2014 sets out six key principles of safeguarding, including prevention, noting that it is sometimes possible to act before harm has come to an individual. With those existing guidelines, mandatory markers are not an attempt to reinvent the wheel; they are simply a way of flagging vital information that is key to the patients and public safety. The Royal College of General Practitioners considers it valuable to have those digital markers in place, and notes that software systems should develop, implement and secure the functionality of the markers in patient records. The college recommends that the Government work with the providers of GP systems to resolve this issue.

The BMA also supports medical markers. They told me that doctors have a professional responsibility to share information that might impact on the safety of someone holding firearms in the community, and we need effective systems to do so. The Domestic Abuse Commissioner's office welcomes the digital medical marker and recognises the work of bereaved families who have lobbied tirelessly to ensure that action is taken to prevent future harm and further loss of life. The British Association for Shooting Conservation and the Countryside Alliance, who have a combined membership of over 200,000 people, both support the introduction of mandatory medical markers.

June 2010, March 2020, August 2021, February 2023—these dates are etched in the memories of families torn apart by gun violence: each one a failure of the system; each one a life that could have been saved. The Government have a choice: they can listen to the families of victims, to medical professionals, gun owners and the organisations working to end violence, or they can continue to leave the door open to tragedy. The Liberal Democrats believe that mandatory medical markers are a proportionate evidence-based safeguard. They allow concerns to be flagged early if someone's health changes, rather than waiting years until a licence renewal, and can save lives. So I ask the Minister today: will he finally release the data on how many GPs are using the markers and will he commit today to making them mandatory?

Several hon. Members rose—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members to bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

4.40 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I reiterate my congratulations to the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) on securing

this important debate. I have campaigned for medical markers for at least 20 years, long before the technology that now exists to do them digitally, which of course makes the whole thing far easier than having to put them on manually. In those early days, a few put them on manually, but now, with digital technology, there is no reason why the Government could not have an agreement with the BMA that all GPs and some other health professionals should put them on digitally. To add to what the hon. Member said in her excellent speech, I am chair of the all-party group on shooting and conservation. To make it absolutely clear where I am coming from, I have been a shotgun and firearms certificate holder for over 50 years.

I have been campaigning with the BASC on the issue of medical markers for many years, and have written articles and delivered speeches on the subject, so it is not a new one for me. I fully support a strict licensing system that works effectively for everyone—the police, firearms and shotgun certificate holders and, most importantly, the wider public, our constituency—because it is in no one's interest that we should have any of the tragic incidents that the hon. Lady so powerfully alluded to. If we had a proper firearms certificate system with medical markers, then clearly, as she demonstrated, some of the tragedies could possibly have been avoided, so I wholly support her in that.

The terrible incident at Epsom college highlights exactly why we need a robust system of medical markers. I will explain a little more how it works. The current two-stage system makes it possible without adding any financial burdens to the GP. When a patient comes in for a consultation with the GP, the medical marker automatically flags up on his or her screen that Mr X or Ms X has a firearms or shotgun certificate, and the GP considers what they have come to see them about. If it is a medical condition such as a propensity to wanting to commit suicide or manic depression, or if domestic violence is involved, that would automatically flag up in the GP's mind whether the person was a suitable person at that time to be holding either a firearms or shotgun certificate.

As the hon. Lady said, having had it flagged up in the GP's mind, he or she would have a conversation with that person: "I see you are a shotgun certificate holder. You tell me you are feeling terrible and that you sometimes have feelings of wanting to commit suicide. We're going to do our best to provide treatment for you, and it may be that in future you could return to a normal position where you could hold a shotgun, but at this particular time, do you think you are a fit person to be holding that shotgun certificate?"

One of two things then happens. If the patient is a belligerent sort of person, he or she would say, "Of course I'm a fit person." The GP would then be in the position of having to say, "Well, I'm very sorry, but I don't consider that you are, and I'm going to have to report your medical condition to the police."

On the other side of the coin, there could be a more sensible conversation with a more rational person, who would say, "Doctor, I hear what you say, and I think it is a concern. I will now take steps either to transfer the guns that I hold in my gun cabinet to a person who has a certificate, to a firearms dealer or to the police, until such time as you and the local constabulary think it is

fit for me to repossess those weapons." That is how it ought to work; that would have prevented a lot of these tragedies.

I think the Government have a role here. As the hon. Lady made clear, the lacuna in the system is that not all GPs currently operate a medical marker. She was quite right to ask what percentage of GPs operate a medical marker, and it would be really interesting to hear the answer from the Minister. If he and the Department of Health and Social Care do not know, they should send out an inquiry to all GPs to find out, and then he could begin to have a negotiation with the General Medical Council and the BMA about whether doctors should operate this service when the Government next sign a contract with them.

There are two principal reasons why doctors do not operate a medical marker—something that is actually very easy to do and involves very little work. As I said in my intervention on the hon. Lady, the first is that there is a widely held concern among the people who will not do so that they will be regarded as the decision maker. They do not want to be the decision maker because, at the margin, it will be quite difficult to decide whether a person should possess a shotgun or other firearm. But that is not the case, as I made clear in my intervention; the chief constable of the constabulary that granted the certificate is the final decision maker. Of course, the normal appeal rights apply to the chief constable. If he has decided that somebody's firearms licence should not be granted or should be revoked, the affected person has the right to appeal against that decision. It is quite clear that the GP is not the decision maker, and I therefore cannot see any reason why they would not want to operate the medical marker.

The second reason that GPs do not want to operate the medical marker is that they are very busy people—they are overworked—and it is another thing that they have to do. But if they are going to do it for driving licences, heavy goods vehicle licences and a number of other categories, I cannot see why they would not do it in the public interest for firearms.

My sister was a GP and the senior partner of a GP practice. One of her partners was a conscientious objector to people having guns, and she ended up having to do all his casework to do with firearms. Even if a GP is a conscientious objector, they still ought to be interested in public safety as an overall priority of their work, so it would be reasonable to require them to just look at a person's medical notes and take account of whether their medical condition made them a suitable person to hold a firearm.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making those really important points. I am the chairman of the British Shooting Sports Council, which brings together 15 leading shooting sports organisations, and an enthusiastic shooter, and I wholeheartedly agree with him. I have yet to find anybody who disagrees with the points that he is making.

My hon. Friend made a point about the wider licensing regime. This issue is partly about the licensing regime for firearms, but there is an interesting carry-over. I also have a pilot's licence, and the pilot's licensing regime—particularly the commercial pilot's licensing regime—takes into account medical fitness to fly, which includes

[Mark Garnier]

mental health. There are examples out there of how this can be done if we get the licensing regime right and get the buy-in of GPs.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend for that intervention. I was coming on to the wider firearms licensing regime. BASC thinks that there are about half a million shotgun certificate holders and about 150,000 firearms certificate holders, so this is a large and costly job for the 43 forces to undertake.

There have recently been increases of 250% in the fees for firearms and shotgun licence renewals and grants, so I understand—and I am Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee—that the system is largely self-financing at the moment. I make one plea to the Minister. That big 250% increase came as a great shock, particularly to some firearm and shotgun holders of modest means. When the PAC had our hearing on recovering fees and charges, we found that it is much better to gradually update them each year rather than leave them with no update, as has happened for 12 years, which is why that very large increase was needed. An update every year would be appreciated.

It is a large task to license 650,000-odd firearms and shotguns. There is an opportunity here, with the announcement of the White Paper this week on reforming our police forces. One would need to think carefully about this, but there is a case for considering more centralisation of shotgun and firearms certificates. The centralisation of the police would be an opportunity to consider that. It would relieve the local police, who often struggle—

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I will just make this point first. Local police often struggle to have well-trained people in their firearms department. It is quite an onerous task; they have to know a lot about guns to work out whether a gun is the one on the certificate or not, and there are a number of other questions. Centralising the processing part of firearms and shotgun licences could make a lot of sense.

There would still need to be a local inspection regime. The local firearms officer came round recently, because I have just renewed my certificates. She talked to me at some length, to make sure that I was a sane person with no obvious mental problems, but equally she looked at the guns and she jolly well thoroughly checked that the guns on my certificate were the guns in my cabinet. She looked at the cabinet and at the amount of ammunition I had, and she questioned me about how much I had used and where I had used it. This was under the firearms regime, which is a different subject, but the Government are consulting on aligning the shotguns regime with the firearms regime. There are a considerable number of problems with that, and it needs to be very carefully considered.

I happily give way to my fellow member of the Public Accounts Committee.

Rachel Gilmour: Thank you, darling Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee.

As vice-chair of the Country Land and Business Association's rural business and rural powerhouse APPG, I fully support the idea of a centralised licensing system. It is interesting that the chair of the APPG is a Liberal Democrat MP like me, so I am pretty confident that it is a sensible and practical idea and that it would prevent the awful sort of deaths that we had in Plymouth a few years ago. It is a very good idea, and the Chair of the PAC obviously agrees with me; I thank him for raising it.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am very grateful for the support from my fellow Committee member. She is dead right: it is a sensible idea that the Minister and the Government should seriously consider.

This complex process, with a very large number of shotgun and firearms certificates, could be made considerably more efficient—the best forces do this already—by proper IT. The problem is that the best forces have the IT and do it really efficiently, but the worst are really not geared up properly with that IT. That is why, in the discussion about fee increases, we wanted to make sure that they were based on the best performance and not the worst.

In our recent PAC hearing on police productivity, as the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) knows—our report is out shortly—we found that a lot of forces, particularly the smaller forces, could not afford to upgrade their IT properly. That is a really serious issue, because as our Committee has found, if police forces do not have properly upgraded IT, that not only makes processes such as shotgun certificate licensing more expensive, because it is more inefficient and they have to do it manually, but makes the police force more liable to cyber-attacks. It cannot operate the proper AI learning systems and so on if there are not the proper systems to operate them on.

All in all, this is a really sensible proposal. We know that the number of homicides by licensed shotguns and firearms is very low in this country. Nevertheless, every death and every wounded person is one too many and is a tragedy for that person and their family. It is incumbent on the Government to take this proposal seriously. I congratulate the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell again on bringing it before the House.

4.55 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this debate. We have all watched with great sadness the recent shootings in the United States—scenes that should have shaken any civilised society. Thankfully, Britain is not a trigger-happy country, nor do we aspire to be.

Let me be absolutely clear: this is not about restricting lawful firearm ownership. As a liberal, I am not in the business of banning things for the sake of it. As a rural MP, and having spent almost all my life in the west country, I am a creature of the countryside. I know that guns are part of rural life, but they are tools, not toys.

Balancing responsible gun ownership with public safety is a delicate dance. Gun owners already undergo rigorous checks and we should avoid excessive bureaucracy, but the system is inconsistent and leaves gaps. Mandatory medical markers would close those gaps. Shooting organisations themselves recognise that: the British Association for

Shooting and Conservation, among others, supports the use of medical markers because it reinforces what they know from experience, which is that licensed gun owners are overwhelmingly responsible and pose no risk to the public. That is precisely why their call for compulsory markers reflects a desire for a system that is robust, consistent and trusted by all.

We must also consider the wider context. Mental health is a growing concern in rural communities such as mine. Farmers are among the most resilient people in the country, but resilience does not make anyone immune to pressure. Rural life can be hard and isolating; it involves long hours and financial uncertainty. That is not to pathologise farmers—quite the opposite—but acknowledging the pressures they face is important.

The introduction of mandatory medical markers would be quite simply a win-win for gun owners, the public and the medical professionals who play such a vital role in the licensing process. It would strengthen trust, enhance safety and reinforce the responsible culture that already exists in our shooting communities.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I missed a really important point in my speech: at the moment, there is no check between the renewing or granting of a shotgun or firearms licence and the re-grant five years later. Does the hon. Member agree that introducing medical markers would, in a sense, introduce a check between grant and renewal if somebody turned up to their GP with one of the health conditions that would be prejudicial to holding a gun?

Rachel Gilmour: I thank the hon. Member for his intelligent and incisive comment.

Mandatory medical markers help to support the rural community. They ensure that if someone is struggling, the licensing process is equipped to respond swiftly and sensitively. The public understand that. Some 70% of firearms licence holders support mandatory markers. Among the wider public, support shoots—pardon the pun—to 86%. Crucially, these markers are not a barrier to gun ownership. They do not make the process more difficult; they simply make it safer. I say to the Minister that it is common sense.

4.58 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) on securing this important debate, on her hard work on the topic and on her very moving speech.

This debate is about lives that should not have been lost. It is about a system that failed, when it could have made the difference between safety and tragedy. When warning signs exist but are not seen, when safeguards are optional rather than embedded and when responsibility is fragmented across an overstretched system, the consequences can be fatal, as we have heard. I support my hon. Friend's call for change. The Liberal Democrats want to ensure that firearms licensing in this country protects public safety while remaining fair, workable and, most importantly, proportionate for those who hold licences responsibly and lawfully.

I want to begin by acknowledging the unimaginable loss suffered by the family and friends of Emma and Lettie Pattison. It should not take such a tragedy for us

to act, but we owe it to them and to the public to learn lessons and make changes that will prevent further harm. The inquest into their deaths found that George Pattison was legally permitted to hold a shotgun licence despite having concealed relevant medical information. He had obtained significant quantities of medication for anxiety through online services entirely outside his GP's knowledge, and when he renewed his licence there was no effective mechanism to identify that risk. The senior coroner issued a clear warning that unless gun ownership laws are tightened, the risk of future deaths will remain. That warning must be taken seriously.

Mandatory medical markers for firearms licence holders are a proportionate and evidence-based safeguard. They are not about punishing responsible gun owners; they are about ensuring that when someone's health changes in a way that may affect their suitability to possess a firearm, that risk is identified early, rather than years later at the licence renewal or not at all. Effectively, as the hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) outlined, it is an ongoing safety check against changes in an individual's circumstances.

The legal framework already recognises the importance of medical fitness. Under the Firearms Act 1968, police must be satisfied that a person can possess a firearm

"without danger to public safety or to the peace."

Medical information is already part of that assessment; the question before us is whether the system is robust enough.

In 2022, an important step forward was taken when GPs in England were given access to interactive medical markers that can be placed on medical records for firearms certificate holders. Making those markers mandatory would help to better identify individuals whose medical conditions may temporarily or permanently impair their ability to handle a firearm safely. Current guidance includes

"post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal thoughts or self-harm or harm to others, depression or anxiety, dementia, mania, bipolar disorders or a psychotic illness"

and neurological conditions such as alcohol or drug abuse. When assessed, that marker alerts a GP that a patient holds a firearms licence and allows concerns to be flagged to the police where appropriate.

The system works. It respects professional boundaries. GPs do not decide who holds a licence; that decision rightly remains with law enforcement. It imposes no financial burden on surgeries. It enables safeguards throughout the life of a licence, not just at the point of renewal. But there are flaws in the system: its use is voluntary, it may not account for online workarounds, which people are adept at using, and there is no obligation on GPs to apply the marker. That is because under the previous Government, the Home Office declined to make it mandatory. As has been outlined, we do not even know how many practices actually use it.

The evidence strongly supports change. The police support mandatory markers. The Countryside Alliance supports mandatory markers. The British Association for Shooting and Conservation supports them, and has suggested that they be incorporated into GP contracts. The British Medical Association now recommends their use. Perhaps most compellingly of all, 70% of firearms certificate holders support the change, according to a survey by the Association of Police and Crime

[Edward Morello]

Commissioners, and among the wider public that support is at 86%. It is a sensible proposal enjoying widespread support among the public and the sector.

In 2016, Christopher Foster killed his wife and daughter before taking his own life. He had discussed depression and suicidal thoughts with his GP, but there was no way for the GP to know that he owned a firearm. In Plymouth in 2021, six people were killed with a licensed firearm. The inquest found that a marker had not been placed, despite the police requesting one. Thankfully, in the UK, murders, suicides and deliberate injuries by licensed firearm owners remain mercifully low. The reality is that the overwhelming majority of licensed gun owners in this country are responsible gun owners, but there is no ignoring the fact that lives could have been saved in those cases if medical markers had been mandatory.

Medical markers are about early intervention. They protect the licence holder as much as anyone else. They ensure that when someone is struggling with their mental or physical health, support and safeguarding go hand in hand. Having safeguards in place is important because of the wider issues at play. The process for approving or refusing a firearms licence is currently slow, inconsistent, expensive and, in large parts of the country, under huge strain. The processing time varies wildly depending on where a person lives, fees differ, and huge backlogs exist in some places.

Firearms licensing is a specialist function delivered by local police forces, yet rural police forces such as mine in Dorset, which are responsible for areas with high levels of gun ownership, are under the greatest financial pressure, struggling with overstretched resources. Firearms in farming communities are not recreational; for most farmers, they are an essential tool of their trade. When renewals are delayed, livelihoods are affected.

There are further challenges. The Home Office is consulting on merging section 1 and section 2 licensing. This may be well intentioned, but it risks adding complexity, cost and delay to an already fragile system unless carefully handled. Licensing is already expensive, and delays already undermine confidence. That is why I believe we must look seriously at proposals for a dedicated firearms licensing agency. The Government's recent police reform White Paper acknowledges that firearms are a specialist area and that concentrating such functions in centres of excellence could improve effectiveness, consistency and value for money.

A centralised body could standardise fees, reduce waiting times, ensure the consistent application of medical markers and take the pressure off local police forces, freeing them to focus on their job—frontline policing. A specialist agency would be better equipped to process licences efficiently, apply safeguards properly and respond to risks swiftly. It would also ensure that reforms such as mandatory medical markers were implemented consistently and effectively, rather than, as at the moment, unevenly across the country.

The Liberal Democrats are proud champions of rural communities. We support responsible gun ownership. We are also clear that safeguarding must go hand in hand with support. We will always stand up for people experiencing mental ill health or addiction, but that is precisely why early identification and intervention matter. Mandatory medical markers are about not punishment but protection.

At a time when mental health services are under immense strain and online medical services can be used to bypass safeguards, it is more important than ever that our licensing system is joined up, informed and proactive. Will the Minister release the data that my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell has requested? Will he give consideration to centralised licensing systems and to making medical markers mandatory? Will he ensure that public safety measures are not undermined by a system that is slow, inconsistent and overstretched?

5.7 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey.

I usually respond to matters related to the Department of Health and Social Care, but it is a pleasure to be here to debate a more rural point. I represent Farnham and Bordon, which is a semi-rural seat. It will be no surprise to hon. Members that I must declare that I am a supporter of the Countryside Alliance and a member of the Conservative Rural Forum.

I thank the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this debate and for her expositions of very many tragic cases, especially her powerful remarks about the appalling case of Emma and Lettie Pattison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) for his very practical approach to this debate; I think the Government should take on board the number of issues he raised.

Likewise, my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) discussed the synergies between gun licences and other licensing regimes—in his case, for pilots. I look forward to him taking me on a trip at some point. I also thank the hon. Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) for her, as ever, interesting contributions, drawing on her rural experience.

Whenever we decide to create new rules that restrict the behaviour of the many in response to the actions of the few, we must be extremely careful. Where genuine loopholes exist because of data silos, or because of how long-standing rules interact with novel cases, it is right that they are closed. As has been mentioned, while the firearms marker is not mandatory, a digital version has been rolled out to all general practices in England, with implementation completed in May 2023.

The key point that the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell mentioned was that the Government must continue to monitor the efficacy of the current system to ensure that only those who are suitable are able to hold a firearms licence and, more especially, to publish the data surrounding that. As has been mentioned, many organisations are supportive of mandatory markers, and I have a lot of sympathy with that, but we must have the data to take an evidence-led approach.

Protecting the integrity of the firearms licensing system is essential for public safety, but any measures must remain proportionate and avoid placing unnecessary burdens on medical professionals or responsible licence holders. As we have seen so often in recent years, the net result of successive, well-intentioned changes to the law can be a system that makes life unduly difficult for the vast majority of law-abiding people, while failing to stop the criminal minority.

Unfortunately, under this Government, we have seen a renewed assault on civilian firearms ownership, which is set to directly punish those in rural communities who

rely on firearms as tools of the trade. For farmers, land managers and pest controllers, firearms are part and parcel of everyday life, and access to those tools is vital. Without them, it would be impossible to protect livestock and manage the local population of certain animals, as farming communities have done for centuries.

None the less, without any particular justification, and without ever proving that it would actually prevent criminals from getting hold of firearms, the Government have announced that they plan to regulate section 2 firearms, such as shotguns, under the more stringent regime that previously applied only to section 1 firearms. We have heard vague gestures in the direction of public safety, but no clear case has been made for the substantive measures proposed, and we certainly have had no indication from the Government that they have considered the particular needs of rural communities.

If shotguns are to be regulated like long-range rifles, how do the Government expect farmers and pest controllers to continue their work? Given that, as we have heard, many police firearms licensing departments are overwhelmed by the volume of applications, has there been any consideration of the delays that extra work for these departments would create?

One of my constituents recently submitted a renewal application within the timeframe recommended by the police, allowing more than six months for processing. The only response received was, by return of post, an extension of the existing licence, as the department acknowledged that it would be unable to issue a new licence within the six-month period. The routine use of licence extensions is concerning because it allows firearms to remain in circulation without a timely, full reassessment of suitability. Meanwhile, some of the Government's proposals will not help with public safety, but will put additional burdens on the police force or make them more likely.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Throughout this debate, we have talked about proportionality. Everybody who has spoken has agreed that compulsory medical markers would be totally proportionate to try to make the public safer. However, the proposal to move shotguns from section 2 to section 1 is totally disproportionate. The current law was framed as it is because a shotgun is lethal at only a relatively short range, whereas a firearm, even a .22 if shot straight, is lethal at up to a mile with high-velocity bullets. They are two totally different tools of the trade and are used for different things.

Gregory Stafford: My hon. Friend is entirely right. It seems to me that this is a knee-jerk reaction from the Government, without them understanding the logistics or the mechanics of the difference between the long-range rifles and shotguns used by our rural communities—*[Interruption.]* And, as my hon. Friend says from a sedentary position, without actually seeing the evidence for it. Whether we are talking about medical markers or the changes to the shotgun licensing regime, the key thing is that it must be done on the basis of evidence.

I therefore ask the Minister: has there been any consideration of the disruption that these delays will cause to those in rural communities who rely on firearms for work? Have these questions been asked at all within the Home Office or, as in so many other cases, have the Government simply failed to consider the needs of rural communities? It is clearly true that, wherever

possible, our firearms licensing rules should prevent weapons from falling into the hands of those who wish to use them only to do harm to others, but any new changes to the law must account for the fact that life in the countryside is very different from life in our largest cities. We must afford some space for discretion and for recognising the particular needs of certain communities.

We must also always be sure that new rules would actually make life more difficult for wrongdoers, instead of allowing good intentions to lead us into making life more difficult for the law-abiding majority. Far too often it is the law-abiding who are punished by rules that are created in this place, even when those rules were designed with the most sincere intention of targeting the criminal few.

Can the Minister provide clarity on when we can expect the consultation on the proposed changes to shotgun licensing? Can he assure us today that the final verdict of the consultation will take full account of those across rural Britain, whose livelihoods will be rendered impossible by these proposals? Can he further assure us that, before considering any new regulations, the Government will first consider a renewed focus on enforcing the law as it already stands?

I think there has been clear agreement in this debate on the need for a licensing system that protects the public, does not overburden the police or the NHS, stops and punishes wrongdoers, and recognises the special need that people in rural communities have for responsible gun ownership. Therefore, I urge the Minister to approach this issue with an evidence-based, proportionate and fair attitude, protecting the public and protecting our rural way of life.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) for securing this debate, and I thank all the other Members who are here today for their well-argued, compelling, considered and sensible points. I will address those points as best I can in my response, then I will move on to address the shotgun issue near the end.

As we know, firearms licensing controls are crucial to minimise the risk of harm and to keep the public safe. Medical checks and the use of firearms markers are an important part of those controls. Although I understand why there are calls for such markers to be mandatory, the Government do not consider that to be necessary at this point, and I come on to the reasons why. It should be recognised that the decisions in all firearms application cases are taken by the relevant police force. Medical information provided by GPs is very important, but it is just one part of the information that is considered by the police.

Before I address the specific points that have been raised during the debate, I reassure Members and their constituents that work continues to make the firearms licensing system as robust as it can be. Although public safety is and will always be the priority, it is also right to acknowledge that the large majority of firearms licence holders—there are some in the Public Gallery today—do not cause any concern. The challenge is to have an effective system in place to identify individuals who might cause harm.

[Mike Tapp]

Of course, the tragedy at Epsom college in February 2023 shocked us all. In discussing these issues today, I know that we all have the victims of that crime—Emma Pattison and her seven-year-old daughter, Lettie—and the victims of other such crimes well and truly at the forefront of our minds. The perpetrator at Epsom college was Emma's husband; he was a licensed shotgun owner, who then killed himself. He had suffered from anxiety, but his GP and the police were unaware of that because he had sought treatment from an online doctor, as was explained earlier. He did not disclose that information when he applied for his certificate renewal.

The medical checks for firearms licensing have been significantly strengthened in recent years. Medical information for firearms licensing has been a requirement for every firearm and shotgun licence application since November 2021, when the new guidance for chief officers of police on firearms licensing was introduced. An applicant's doctor must now provide details of any relevant medical conditions, such as depression, dementia, mental health issues or drug or alcohol abuse, that the applicant has experienced. A firearms licence will not be granted without this information.

A digital firearms marker is placed on the GP patient record when a certificate is granted. This means that if a certificate holder has a relevant medical condition during the five years' validity of the certificate, their GP can alert the police, who will then review whether that individual is still suitable to have a firearms licence, and—if necessary—revoke the licence. Initially, the marker was in the form of a paper marker on a person's medical record. However, because of concerns that a paper marker could easily be overlooked by a busy GP, work has been done to replace it with a new digital firearms marker.

Use of the digital firearms marker is not a core health requirement for GPs and is not part of the GP contract, nor is it a legal requirement, but the British Medical Association and the Royal College of General Practitioners support its use, and the BMA issues guidance to GPs about it. Therefore, any GP who fails to engage with the process would be going against the advice of their professional associations, as well as taking a significant risk.

The available data indicates that most GPs in England are applying the digital firearms marker as they are expected to. We have received very encouraging data from NHS England about how the marker is being used by doctors, and we continue to work with NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care to assess whether there are any regional variations that could signpost whether greater engagement between police and doctors at local level is needed in certain areas.

The data provided by NHS England gives figures for the number of active digital firearms markers applied by GP surgeries in each of the last three years, and—

Helen Maguire *rose*—

Mike Tapp: And I will go through the data now, before the hon. Member intervenes and asks for it. If there are any gaps in it, I will welcome an intervention at the end, and I will take note and we can write back.

In 2022-23, 93,700 new digital markers were applied, in 2023-24 that figure was 85,650, and in the latest year for which data is available, 2024-25, 98,690 new digital markers were applied to medical records. Those are broadly the numbers we would expect when compared with the data for the number of firearms licence applications and renewals made each year.

We also have data on the number of cases where a GP has notified the police of a medical concern about a certificate holder following a review prompted by the digital marker. In 2022-23, 1,180 cases were referred by GPs to police forces as a result of the digital marker, in 2023-24 that figure was 1,040, and in 2024-25 it was 1,140. That data is also broadly where we would expect it to be when compared with the annual figures for revocations of licences by police forces, and it gives us confidence that GPs are using the digital firearms marker as it is designed to work.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am sad to hear that the Minister is not following the logic for making the digital marker compulsory. Without compulsion, the system is weak and public safety is undermined, as is demonstrated by the tragic cases that have been mentioned today. A quick google tells me that there are 38,000 to 39,000 fully qualified GPs. I think the Minister said that the number of GPs using the medical marker is around 18,000, which means that 20,000 GPs are not using it, so the system is not anything like as effective as it should be. As I said, if a compulsory system were introduced, there would be a check between the granting and renewal of shotgun and firearm licences.

Mike Tapp: I thank the hon. Member for his comments. I cannot comment directly on the data that he provided from his quick google—GPs may be qualified but not practising, and I would not want to jump to any conclusions—but that can certainly be taken away. It is the Government's position that it is not necessary to make use of the firearms digital marker mandatory. If there was compelling evidence of systemic failure by GPs to engage with the digital marker, the case for mandatory requirement would be stronger, but that is not the picture painted by the available data. In fact, it shows that the digital marker is already being applied and used by most GPs.

Helen Maguire: I am listening intently to the Minister, but if he is saying that the number of people who have been referred to their GP with potential conditions and the number of markers are as expected, I cannot understand what difference it would make if the marker were mandatory. It seems as though it is sort of happening already, and if there were no additional cost to making it mandatory, then I struggle to understand why it is difficult for the Government to change their position.

Mike Tapp: We need to bear in mind that the governing bodies that oversee GPs are against this, given the potential for liability if a GP failed to disclose something to the police. I assure the hon. Member that the Home Office will keep our approach under review, as we do with all aspects of firearms licensing control, but we believe that the data available at this time shows that mandating is not necessary, and that the digital marker quite simply is being applied and used by most GPs.

Edward Morello: Without wishing to labour the point, and accepting that the data may in fact show that we are getting the level of penetration that we would expect, there is undoubtedly an unquantifiable risk of another tragedy happening. Given the level of uptake in a mandatory system, and given the requests of the sector—and, in fact, the BMA—for use of the marker to be made mandatory, it seems to me, purely from the perspective of de-risking it for the Government, that that would be a logical and relatively simple thing to do, so that, when we inevitably return, at some point in the next three to five years, to talk about another tragic death, it is not laid at the feet of this Government for following the mistake of the previous Government and not making it mandatory.

Mike Tapp: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very well-made point. This is of course being kept under review. Today's debate is important and will of course be listened to by the Home Office, but as it stands our position is that the evidence is showing us that GPs are using the marker as we would expect them to.

I am conscious of time, so I will move on to the points made on shotguns, because I am sure that the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) would not want me to miss them. We know that shotguns are used for a range of legitimate purposes, such as target shooting and hunting, and that the vast majority are used safely and responsibly. We also recognise that shooting contributes to the very important rural economy.

However, legally held shotguns have been used in a number of homicides and other serious incidents in recent years, including the fatal shootings in Plymouth in August 2021. That is why we have committed to a public consultation on strengthening the licensing controls on shotguns, to bring them more into line with the stringent controls on other firearms, in the interest of public safety. We will publish the consultation shortly—I do not have the exact date today. We will carefully consider all the views put forward in response to the consultation before taking any decisions on whether—and what—changes may be necessary in the interest of public safety.

Gregory Stafford: I do not want to prolong the debate, but I do want to impress something upon the Minister. When he spoke about the uses of shotguns, he talked about target shooting and hunting. I gently say to him that these firearms are needed for far more than sport; they are used for land management and for farming. I encourage him, if he has not already, to meet the organisations that represent rural communities to understand how vital shotguns are for rural land management.

Mike Tapp: I thank the hon. Member for his points. I think that was covered in my point about the rural economy—the maintenance of land and pest control, for example, feed into that—but I take the point.

We will also provide an assessment of the impact of any changes that we intend to bring forward, including for policing, certificate holders and rural communities, at the relevant time.

In closing, I thank all Members who have contributed to what has been a thought-provoking debate—I mean that—on an issue that is central to public safety. I am

grateful for all contributions. We have strong firearms licensing controls, and we are taking action to improve them further where the evidence shows that that is necessary. As I have said, we do not believe at this point that there is a compelling case for making the digital firearms marker mandatory. However, it is very important that all aspects of firearms controls are as effective and strong as possible, and our controls are kept under constant review.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Will the Minister give way?

Mike Tapp: I am conscious of time, but I will.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I can assure the Minister—and you, Ms McVey—that this will be the last time. What is the equivalence between not making medical markers mandatory, when doing so would not cost anything, and yet going ahead with the consultation to move shotguns from section 2 to section 1, which will cost the industry a significant amount of money? The shooting community is all in favour of medical markers being compulsory, but it is opposed to moving shotguns from section 2 to section 1. These actions seem designed to make the shooting community very discontent.

Mike Tapp: This is about evidence, and the evidence that I have presented today suggests that GPs are abiding by the digital marker. The evidence that shotguns have been used in violent crime also exists. But of course, as I laid out, this will go to consultation. The Government are committed to public safety, and we remain open to any steps that could aid us in that effort.

5.30 pm

Helen Maguire: I am disappointed that the Minister will not be considering making use of the medical marker mandatory. I hope that he will go away and reconsider, particularly because, as many hon. Members have alluded to, there would be no additional cost to doing so. There is a lot of consensus here; making the medical marker mandatory would be common sense and improve public safety. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) said, it would be a win-win.

I thank the hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) for his personal insight and his continued campaigning on the issue, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Minehead for the valuable points that she raised about the rural community. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) said, there is evidence, and the police agree with the proposal, as do the Countryside Alliance, the BMA, police and crime commissioners and firearms certificate holders. I do not want to be here again talking about another incident. I truly hope the Minister will go away and really consider the matter.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of mandatory medical markers for firearm licence holders.

5.31 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 28 January 2026

CABINET OFFICE

Windsor Framework Decision: Northern Ireland Act 1998, Schedule 6B

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): On 2 February, I will be meeting with the European Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security, Maroš Šefčovič, for this Government's second meeting of the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee. As part of this important meeting, the UK and the EU will take decisions to support our commitment to the Windsor framework.

At that meeting, the Government will agree to add one new act to the Windsor framework. The Government are committed to tackling barriers to trade for businesses across the UK. Northern Ireland obviously has a special trading relationship with the EU under the Windsor framework and it is therefore only right that the Government review all elements of Northern Ireland's regulatory arrangements to ensure it can make the most of its unique dual market access, with data from 2024 showing that NI exports to the EU of goods in scope of the regulation totalled £247 million.

In accordance with paragraph 18(3) of schedule 6B to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, I am setting out in this statement why I am of the opinion that the conditions are met for this particular measure to be agreed on the basis that it would not create a new regulatory border between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The condition in paragraph 18(2)(b) of that schedule is therefore met.

Type-approval framework for non-road mobile machinery used on roads—Regulation (EU) 2025/14

Regulation (EU) 2025/14 establishes a harmonised framework for road safety type-approval of mobile machinery that is occasionally used on public roads, complementing the current individual national rules. This regulation will not create a new regulatory border. This is based on the fact that most affected products in Northern Ireland are likely to be traded on a pan-European basis and manufacturers have indicated that they intend to continue to do so. The regulation is designed to ease access to the EU single market for this equipment and has been supported by industry. As such, manufacturers and traders are unlikely to face additional barriers to placing products on the Northern Ireland market or an incentive to cease doing so. This conclusion is based on a detailed assessment of existing vehicle registration data and detailed engagement with industry.

In order to provide additional confidence that manufacturers and traders will not face new regulatory barriers to placing goods on the Northern Ireland market, the Government commit to taking any necessary steps to protect the UK's internal market, including considering equivalent measures in Great Britain where necessary.

In line with the Government presumption of alignment with EU vehicle regulations, the Government recognise the value to industry of maintaining equivalent standards in the UK and the EU, and will follow this principle in

respect of non-road mobile machinery. This will have the added effect of avoiding barriers between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and delivering on the Government manifesto commitment to protect the internal market. We will continue to engage with industry throughout the remainder of the year, before consulting on how best to achieve these objectives once further technical details are published.

Next steps

The Government will shortly publish an explanatory memorandum on gov.uk pertaining to the decision referred to here. It will set out in further detail the Government view on any impacts that the above mentioned regulation would have on Northern Ireland, as well as additional evidence I considered when reaching my conclusion that it would not lead to a new regulatory border.

[HCWS1280]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Consultation on Reform to the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): My hon. Friend the Minister for Biosecurity, Borders and Animals, Baroness Hayman of Ullock has made the following written statement:

We are a country that cares deeply for animals, whether they are our pets and companions, our farmed animals, or our wildlife. Veterinary professionals play a vital role in safeguarding our high animal health and welfare standards, supporting animal disease control and maintaining food security and public health, as well as supporting trade agreements.

Today, we are launching a consultation which proposes reforms to modernise the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966. In the intervening 60 years since the VSA was implemented, the profession and wider views around animals and their welfare has changed beyond recognition. It is imperative that legislation is transformed to continue to maintain high standards of animal health and welfare, protect the public and consumers and uphold public trust in the veterinary professions.

Throughout the years, the VSA has been adapted through many statutory instruments and supported by changes using the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons' royal charter. However, there is a limit to what can be changed through secondary legislation. Wholesale reform of the VSA could ensure the law, and related frameworks, are fit for purpose, flexible and forward-facing, allowing for the continuing changes of modern society and the veterinary profession.

For many years, there have been calls from the RCVS, the profession and the public to reform the VSA. These calls for legislative reform have been echoed by the ongoing Competition and Markets Authority market investigation into the provision of veterinary services for household pets.

The key aims of the proposals for VSA reform are:

Uphold animal health and welfare: Vets are pivotal to safeguarding and ensuring animal welfare and this relies on adequate vet capacity. Currently, only veterinary surgeons are subject to full regulation, with regulation in place for registered veterinary nurses to work under the direction of veterinary surgeons. By allowing vet nurses to work more independently from veterinary surgeons, vets could focus more on tasks that require their specific skills and knowledge. This would improve retention, with the aim to reduce vet shortages. Regulation of veterinary businesses is also required to ensure that standards of animal health and welfare, as well as consumer protections, are upheld across the veterinary sector.

Break down barriers to opportunity: Currently, there is no legal protection for the titles of veterinary nurses or the allied veterinary professionals; the consultation proposes reform to introduce this. Proposed reforms would also bring all members of the veterinary team under the same regulatory umbrella. This would support career development alongside animal welfare by ensuring allied veterinary professionals are qualified, further strengthening the profession and providing clarity to the public. The proposed legislative reforms could also remove barriers to the profession that currently exist for disabled people.

Strengthen the workforce: Proposed reforms to the VSA also aim to address some of the challenges of recruitment and retention, through measures such as providing increased support to new and returning veterinary surgeons and nurses. Additionally, reforms aim to improve the work satisfaction of veterinary nurses by allowing them to work with greater independence.

Economic growth and consumer protection: Reforming regulation so it more effectively supports consumers and promotes competition would help pet owners make informed choices about the services they choose. Proposed reforms would require vet businesses to be transparent on prices and the range of options available, better meeting consumer needs and allowing them to look around for the best value before seeing a vet. Where competition leads to lower prices, higher quality and better choices for consumers, this helps ensure that animals are better cared for. With vet nurses being able to work more independently and adding regulation of allied veterinary professionals, owners will more easily be able to find qualified people to treat their pet, giving more options for treatment at different price points.

Food security and enhancing biosecurity: The manifesto states that “food security is national security”. Veterinary professionals are crucial to ensure food security and high standards of public and animal health are maintained. Equally, vets play a crucial role in biosecurity by providing official controls in the agri-food chain, particularly within abattoirs and for trade purposes. Proposed reforms to the legislation could further safeguard these important areas.

This consultation seeks views on the following aspects of veterinary regulation that would contribute to achieving the aims of reform set out above:

- a licence to practise model, including the wider veterinary team ensuring professionals are fit to practise
- regulation of veterinary and animal healthcare businesses, and
- the governance of the veterinary regulator

The proposed UK wide changes laid out in the consultation are crucial in ensuring the regulation of the veterinary team, and the wider sector in which they operate, is fit for purpose and fit for the future.

[HCWS1281]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Syria

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): Recent events in Syria have been deeply concerning, with violent clashes in Aleppo and across north-east Syria, mass displacement of civilians, and a deteriorating humanitarian situation. I wanted to update the House on the latest developments, and the action the UK is taking alongside our international partners.

On 6 January, clashes broke out between Syrian Government forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northern Aleppo. The violence quickly spread into the north-east, with Government forces taking control of swathes of former SDF territory. This escalation led to an estimated 146,000 people being displaced from

their homes and a severe deterioration in the humanitarian situation across north-east Syria, including Kobane. It also threatened the security of facilities holding Daesh detainees.

UK actions

The UK has been actively engaging with the Syrian Government and the SDF, calling for both sides to stop the violence, resume dialogue, protect civilians and facilitate humanitarian access. The Foreign Secretary has relayed these messages directly to Syria's Foreign Minister, Asaad al-Shaibani, and highlighted the importance of protecting the rights of Kurdish and other minority communities.

At the UN Security Council, on 22 January, we reiterated this position and the need for a permanent ceasefire, whilst pressing council members to offer their collective support to ensure that Syria continues to work towards a more stable and peaceful future. Following a number of US brokered ceasefires between the Syrian Government and the SDF, the latest ceasefire has now been extended to 8 February.

Humanitarian corridors have also been established to the Kurdish towns of Kobane and Hasakah which means that lifesaving humanitarian assistance, including UK supplies, can now get in. Through our humanitarian partners, we have so far provided £2.74 million of aid to those affected by violence and displacement in both Aleppo and north-east Syria, which is supporting the deployment of medical teams and the delivery of shelter and relief items, fuel, winter supplies and cash transfers.

We have been in regular contact with our international partners to discuss the situation, and agree plans to mitigate shared security risks, support ongoing dialogue and respond to the humanitarian crisis. The Foreign Secretary spoke to her American, French and German partners on 26 January, and agreed a joint statement, which is reproduced in full below:

“We welcome the 15-day extension of the ceasefire between the Syrian Government Forces and the Syrian Democratic Forces announced on 24 January. We call upon all parties to strictly adhere to the ceasefire and to exercise their utmost restraint. We urge all external parties to join us in pursuit of peace and de-escalation of violence.

We reiterate the obligation of all parties to protect civilians and civilian infrastructure. We welcome the establishment of humanitarian corridors to ensure the safe and unimpeded delivery of humanitarian assistance. We emphasise that these corridors must be maintained, and basic services resumed in the city of Kobane.

We also welcome the vital role played by partners, including Iraq, the Kurdistan Regional Government, the Syrian Government and the Syrian Democratic Forces, in addressing the challenges posed by ISIS.

We urge all parties to swiftly agree to a permanent ceasefire, and to resume as soon as possible negotiations aiming at the peaceful and sustainable integration of North-East Syria into a unitary and sovereign state that effectively respects and protects the rights of all its citizens, based on the 18 January 2026 agreement, as the most effective path to stability in Syria.

We reiterate the need to maintain and focus collective efforts on the fight against ISIS. We call upon all parties to avoid any security vacuum in and around ISIS detention centres. To address these concerns, we agreed to promptly convene a meeting of the international coalition against ISIS.

We reaffirm our support for an inclusive political transition in Syria, which protects the rights of all Syrians, and emphasise that the stabilisation of North-East Syria through peaceful means constitutes a central priority for preventing a resurgence of terrorism and for regional security.

We underline readiness to support and monitor, together with regional and international partners, the implementation of agreements between the parties which aim at a peaceful and sustainable integration of North-East Syria into a unitary, inclusive and sovereign state, effectively protecting the rights of all its citizens.”

Conclusion

This is a significant moment for the future stability of Syria, and we are using every diplomatic lever to press both parties to agree to a permanent ceasefire and resume formal negotiations to integrate north-east Syria into a unified sovereign state. In our engagement with the Syrian Government, we have consistently advocated for an inclusive political transition, and we will continue to do so, underlining the importance of protecting the rights of all Syrians, including the Kurdish community.

We always knew that Syria would face significant challenges as it sought to transition to a new path after almost 14 years of conflict. However, as I said in my statement to the House more than 10 months ago, stability in Syria is still firmly in the UK's interests, and we remain committed to standing with the Syrian people as they seek to build a more stable, free and prosperous future.

[HCWS1284]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Funding Settlement 2026-27: England and Wales

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has today laid before the House the “Police Grant Report (England and Wales) 2026-27” (HC 1638). The report sets out the Home Secretary's determination for 2026-27 of the aggregate amounts of grants that she proposes to pay under section 46(2) of the Police Act 1996. Copies of the report are available from the Vote Office.

Today, the Government have set out the final police funding settlement for 2026-27, providing forces with the certainty and investment needed to strengthen neighbourhood policing, modernise frontline capability, and ensure policing can meet the demands of today and the future.

Overall funding for the policing system in England and Wales, including to police forces and wider system funding, will be up to £21.0 billion, an increase of up to £1.3 billion when compared to the 2025-26 funding settlement, representing a cash funding increase of 6.7% and a real-terms increase of 4.4%.

Total funding for territorial police forces and counter-terrorism policing will be up to £19.6 billion in 2026-27, an increase of £848 million compared with the 2025-26 police funding settlement. This represents a 4.5% increase in cash terms and a 2.2% increase in real terms for policing. Within this, total funding to territorial police forces will be up to £18.4 billion, an increase of £796 million compared with the 2025-26 settlement, representing a 4.5% cash increase and a 2.3% real-terms increase for police forces.

Of the overall increase in force level funding, £432 million is additional Government grant funding to police forces. This includes an additional £50 million to support the Government's neighbourhood policing objectives above that announced at the provisional police funding settlement in December 2025.

The overall increase in territorial police funding also includes up to £364 million in additional funding for forces in England and Wales from council tax precept, compared to 2025-26. As confirmed in the provisional local government finance settlement published on 17 December 2025, police and crime commissioners in England will have the flexibility to increase the police precept by up to £15 for a band D property in 2025-26. This assumes PCCs make use of the full precept flexibility of £15 for English forces.

Funding for counter-terrorism policing will increase by at least £52 million to £1.2 billion in 2026-27. PCCs will receive separate, confidential notification of force level CT allocations, which are not published for security reasons.

The priority of the 2026-27 settlement is to boost visible policing and ensure forces can shape their workforce to meet modern crime demands. Every community deserves visible, proactive and accessible neighbourhood policing, with officers focused on the issues that matter most locally.

In 2025-26, the Government made £200 million available to kick-start delivery of 13,000 additional neighbourhood policing personnel by the end of this Parliament. As part of the neighbourhood policing guarantee, every neighbourhood now has named and contactable officers dedicated to tackling local issues, with forces increasing patrols in town centres and other hotspots in line with local demand.

We have listened to the concerns raised by policing, and it is clear that the officer maintenance grant, as currently designed, has become a barrier rather than an enabler of more visible policing. A funding mechanism that, in some cases, has encouraged a higher share of officers in back office roles is no longer fit for purpose and limits forces' ability to build a workforce with the right mix of specialist staff and warranted officers.

The Government will therefore remove the overall officer headcount target and replace it with a neighbourhood policing target in 2026-27. Forces will retain the flexibility needed to maintain operational capacity while shaping their workforce to meet changing crime demands.

The Government remain committed to the national objective of 13,000 additional neighbourhood policing personnel by the end of the Parliament. This includes expected growth of up to 3,000 full-time equivalent by March 2026 and a further 1,750 FTE in 2026-27, bringing total neighbourhood policing growth to 4,750 FTE by March 2027.

To simplify the police funding settlement, there will be only one conditional workforce grant in 2026-27: the neighbourhood policing ringfence grant, totalling £363 million. Forces can receive this funding if, by March 2027, they increase the number of officers and PCSOs working in neighbourhood policing including those in training, in line with their locally set neighbourhood policing target.

We will make further progress to deliver the £354 million cashable savings target by 2028-29 through the police efficiency and collaboration programme. This will be achieved through focused efforts to increase policing's ability to buy once and buy well and increase the amount of costs policing can recover for the services they provide.

The Government have published their police reform White Paper, which sets out our ambitious plans to modernise the policing system and ensure it is better structured and equipped for the future. This settlement underpins these plans with £1.4 billion of Home Office investment in the wider policing system which will:

Kick-start delivery of our programme of police reform with a £119 million investment in 2026-27. This first-year investment will deliver new police capabilities: establishing a new national centre for AI in policing—Police.AI—which will enable the rapid and responsible adoption of AI across policing, national roll-out of live facial recognition, and investment to strengthen the use of data across policing.

Support the delivery of major law enforcement programmes which will modernise national mission-critical systems, tackling a range of threats and make our streets safer and without which policing cannot operate effectively.

Invest in tackling knife crime, through continued funding for serious violence reduction programmes in every force area, including in 20 violence reduction units, and over £28 million dedicated investment to policing through our county lines programme which has closed thousands of county lines, protected thousands of criminally exploited children and is delivering significant reductions in knife stabbings in key force areas.

A reformed policing system will need a funding model that is fit for purpose. Changes to police governance, force mergers and the creation of the National Police Service require a new way of allocating funding between forces, aligned with these new structures. Through the police reform White Paper, we have committed to reviewing the police funding formula once police reform is under way and reconsidering the distribution of funding between local forces. The next steps of this work will be informed by the independent review into police force structures later this year.

This funding settlement reaffirms the Government's strong support for policing and our commitment to empowering officers and staff to deliver safer communities and investing in a modern infrastructure and new technologies. By providing the resources needed to strengthen neighbourhood policing and maintain visible patrols, we are backing the frontline and enabling forces to respond effectively to local priorities. We are proud to stand alongside officers and staff in our shared mission to protect the public and make every street a safer place to live and work.

An attachment containing tables that document funding to police and crime commissioners for 2026-27, including police precept, can be viewed online at: <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2026-01-28/HCWS1285/>

[HCWS1285]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Planning: Section 106 System

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government have a manifesto commitment to deliver the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation, and to strengthen planning obligations to ensure new developments provide more affordable homes.

Section 106 agreements are, and will remain, an essential mechanism for delivering social and affordable housing. They account not only for a significant proportion of affordable home completions, but also a significant share of total new home delivery. Without them, the development pipeline as a whole is at risk of contracting sharply.

However, in recent years, the negotiation of section 106 agreements has become synonymous with inefficiency and delay. To ensure the developer contributions system secures the supply and affordability outcomes we seek in the years ahead, we need to reduce its complexity and minimise negotiation friction.

In the short term, we also need to act to deal with the detrimental consequences of a declining market for section 106 affordable homes. A complex range of factors has led to the sharp drop-off in demand for section 106 units over recent years, with the result that thousands of constructed or consented section 106 units are currently uncontracted. This state of affairs is delaying the build-out of development sites across England, and disrupting both affordable and wider housing supply.

To this end, today the Government are announcing a comprehensive policy package that will lay the foundations for a simpler, more transparent and more resilient section 106 system, and deal with the legacy problem of existing unsold and uncontracted section 106 units.

Immediate action to unlock unsold and uncontracted section 106 homes

Estimates vary, but it is not in dispute that thousands of unsold and uncontracted section 106 affordable homes have built up over recent years. They have done so as a result of the complex interplay between a range of factors. These include:

Registered providers of social housing facing mounting pressures from severely constrained financial capacity, higher costs of finance, rising building costs and commitments to remediate existing stock to meet building safety and decarbonisation requirements, all of which have led to a scaling back of section 106 acquisitions.

Concerns among RPs that some section 106 homes do not meet the quality and other standards required. Examples include section 106 homes not meeting described space standards or not being in conformity with the, now updated, decent homes standard and minimum energy efficiency standard, as well as anticipated higher new standards (e.g. changes to building regulations, future homes standard).

Negotiations on section 106 agreements can create delays in the planning process and increase costs for local authorities and developers, which can disproportionately impact small and medium-sized enterprise developers. A lack of capacity and capability at the local authority level in terms of legal resource, in comparison to larger developers, often means that local authorities are at a disadvantage when negotiating contributions at the planning application stage.

RPs deciding to prioritise other routes to development, mainly land-led grant funded development, where they can have greater influence over specification and design and avoid management challenges stemming from their more limited control as an intermediate leaseholder of small numbers of homes in blocks managed by an external managing agent or freeholder (e.g. service charges for tenants can pose barriers to managing these homes as social housing); and

RPs and developers being unable to agree on section 106 unit pricing.

The Government have already taken a number of steps to support demand for section 106 units, not least spending review measures designed to rebuild the capacity

of RPs. As a result, we are seeing tentative signs of an improvement in appetite for acquiring section 106 homes. However, despite this positive shift in sentiment post spending review, we know that there are still housing schemes where developers remain unable to secure an RP buyer for the affordable homes set out in the original section 106 agreement, and where local planning authorities and developers have not discussed or reached agreement on variations to planning obligations, with the result that many of these sites are stalling.

For this reason, as of today, we expect all LPAs to take advantage of existing planning flexibilities to renegotiate section 106 agreements, and to allow the tenure of homes to be varied in order to secure a buyer where affordable homes secured in section 106 agreements remain uncontracted or unsold. This can be effected by a deed of variation—making amendments/revisions to existing section 106 agreements—either by agreement of the parties to the section 106 or by formal application under section 106A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

To ensure we target sites that are genuinely stalled, the following section sets out the conditions that LPAs should ensure are met, and the approach to negotiation they should take, where it is necessary to agree a deed of variation with developers holding uncontracted section 106 units that have not found any suitable RP buyer.

This measure is intended to support LPAs in exercising their ability to renegotiate planning obligations. It will be strictly time-limited, in order to target those section 106 homes already built or very close to completion but unable to find an RP buyer. This policy is also laid out in the section 106 road map published on gov.uk.

Conditions for accessing this time-limited process

LPAs are expected to consider renegotiating section 106 agreements when the following conditions are met:

Developers should have exhausted all reasonable endeavours to find an RP buyer based on the affordable housing marketing, and any other relevant requirements set out in the original section 106 agreement.

Developers should have uploaded any uncontracted section 106 homes onto the Homes England clearing service by 1 June 2026 to give a final opportunity for RPs to bid to purchase these homes. Any homes not uploaded onto the clearing service by this point will be outside of this process.

Homes should be live on the clearing service for a period of six weeks from the date of the unit being uploaded.

The section 106 homes should be due for completion on or before 1 December 2027, to be eligible for this time-limited approach; completion defined as when a home is ready for occupation or when a completion certificate is issued. Expected completion dates should be registered on the clearing service to guide LPAs on whether all above conditions are met.

LPAs should seek to avoid tenure renegotiations for uncontracted section 106 homes that have received reasonable offers from willing and suitable RP buyers, as is current practice, to avoid the loss of social and affordable housing to private sale.

As is currently expected, developers should inform LPAs of any, and all, bids they receive from RPs seeking to buy uncontracted section 106 units. LPAs are actively encouraged to request that these details are provided.

Assessing the reasonableness of bids is ultimately a matter for individual LPAs but, where available, they are encouraged to consider the following evidential sources: site level viability evidence; published commuted sums policies; grant rates; surveyor data; and recent section 106 purchases in the locality.

Given the clearing service will have provided an opportunity for RPs to identify and bid for unsold and uncontracted section 106 homes, LPAs are encouraged for this temporary period to take a pragmatic, time-limited, and light-touch approach to assessing bids, and any further information requests, for example evidence of marketing efforts or details of contact with prospective buyers in the locality. In instances where there is a dispute between the LPA and developer over whether bids received are reasonable, they may also wish to seek a third-party view to support a resolution, as per an existing alternative dispute resolution procedure.

Guidance for LPAs on proceeding with a deed of variation

LPAs should confirm their decision on proceeding to renegotiate the section 106 agreement as quickly as possible—with a guideline of no more than twelve weeks from the end of the six week period on the clearing service, and consider the following in negotiating to alter the tenure of eligible homes:

LPAs are encouraged to take the following approach:

- (i) seek alternative affordable housing or discounted market tenures in the first instance where possible;
- (ii) if there is no buyer for such tenures, proceed through to private market rent or sale—with an equivalent form of affordable housing provided on an alternative site within the LPA's area or, where this is not feasible, a financial payment made in lieu of onsite affordable housing.

LPAs should include stipulations that make clear that if homes are not completed on time and by the deadline of 1 December 2027, schemes will revert to the tenure mix set out in the original section 106 agreement. Renegotiated section 106 agreements should provide for this without the need for a further deed of variation to be made.

When considering phased development, LPAs and developers should agree a tailored approach with regard to the circumstances of the specific phases i.e. if the first phase will be completed by 1 December 2027, then a deed of variation should be considered in line with the policy set out in this statement. However, where phases contain units that are not expected to complete by this point, the terms set out in the original section 106 should continue to be expected to apply.

In line with planning practice guidance on viability, site-specific viability assessment should not be used on schemes subject to the golden rules for the purpose of reducing developer contributions, including affordable housing. The Government are currently consulting on a revised national planning policy framework, <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/national-planning-policy-framework-proposed-reforms-and-other-changes-to-the-planning-system> which seeks views on the limited instances in which site-specific viability assessment may be justified.

Laying the foundations for a more effective section 106 system

While this immediate action is necessary to overcome current challenges facing the section 106 market in order to reduce disruption to house building and sustain supply, we are clear that this is a time limited, emergency intervention. The Government's primary focus remains on long-term reform to reset the section 106 market and support effective section 106 delivery of social and affordable homes, and thereby honour our manifesto commitments.

We intend to work closely with LPAs, RPs and developers to deliver a series of measures that will provide for a simpler, more transparent and more resilient section 106 system, including:

Supporting LPAs to negotiate section 106 agreements. We want to simplify and strengthen the process for agreeing developer contributions through section 106 agreements at the application

stage of new developments. It is our intention to publish a template section 106 agreement to speed up the process of drafting and concluding new section 106 agreements.

Setting clear sector expectations to guide section 106 delivery. We want to provide greater clarity and certainty to facilitate the more effective delivery of section 106 homes. Through new guidance we will seek to foster early engagement and collaboration between developers and RPs; provide greater clarity on the standards section 106 homes must meet and the role that should be afforded to RPs in ensuring section 106 homes meet the standards required of social and affordable housing; and encourage standardisation across the market in respect of how pricing is negotiated so as to provide more certainty for RPs and developers on what they can expect to pay and accept for section 106 units.

Expanding financial capacity to revive the market for section 106 homes. Low-interest loans will be made available to private registered providers of social housing. They will be administered by the national housing bank outside London and the Greater London Authority in London. Up to 10% of the £2.5 billion low-interest loan scheme for private registered providers will be available to support the delivery of social and affordable homes via section 106. Further detail on low-interest loans is set out in our decade of renewal update. We will also build on the recently extended affordable homes guarantee scheme 2020, and confirmation of its use for section 106s. We will continue to explore how Government can crowd in additional private investment to enable the purchase of unsold section 106 units. This is with the aim of bringing them into use while retaining them as regulated affordable housing, for example through an affordable housing acquisition vehicle supported by debt guarantees which is able to buy section 106 homes.

We will set out further detail in due course with the intention of this full reset being in force in spring 2026. The Government's full policy statement has also been published today.

[HCWS1286]

Social and Affordable Housing Renewal

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): On 2 July 2025 we published a five-step plan to kickstart a decade of social and affordable housing renewal and set out this plan to the House in a written ministerial statement—HCWS771.

Today I am providing a progress update on the implementation of the plan, as well as confirming next steps in respect of grant funding, regulation, rebuilding sector capacity, and the reinvigoration of council house building, so that registered providers have the clarity and certainty they need ahead of bidding opening for our new social and affordable homes programme—SAHP—next month.

The biggest boost to grant funding in a generation

In July we confirmed headline parameters for our new 10-year £39 billion SAHP. Prospectuses for London and the rest of England were published by the Greater London Authority and Homes England respectively in November 2025. Bidding for the programme will open next month.

Rebuilding the sector's capacity to borrow and invest in new and existing homes

We remain committed to providing a stable rent policy for social and affordable housing that supports investment in new and existing homes, with the right protections for existing and future rent payers and for public spending.

The 10-year settlement of CPI + 1% announced at the spending review gives the sector the long-term certainty it needs. We also confirmed at the spending review that

we would implement a convergence mechanism as part of the new long-term settlement, not least because we believe that doing so is right in principle to address the disparity between actual social rents and formula rents.

Following consultation, I am today confirming that registered providers will be able to increase weekly rents for social rent homes that are below formula by up to an additional £1 on weekly rents each year over and above CPI + 1% from 1 April 2027, and by up to an additional £2 on weekly rents each year over and above CPI + 1% from 1 April 2028, until formula rent is reached.

Convergence will only result in a tenant paying more where their rent is below formula rent—i.e. below the maximum that could be charged if their social rent home was re-let to a new tenant. We believe that this approach strikes a fair balance between the need for increased investment in new and existing homes, the interests of existing and potential social housing tenants, and the consequences for public spending and our fiscal rules.

To help providers build more social and affordable homes, we announced at the spending review that we would make available £2.5 billion of low-interest loans over four years—2026-2030. The loans will be made available to private registered providers of social housing and will be administered by the National Housing Bank (Homes England), and by the Greater London Authority in London.

Today I am announcing that 60% of the £2.5 billion—i.e. £1.5 billion—will be allocated to London, in the light of the acute challenges facing providers in the capital. The loans will be available at an interest rate of 0.1% and will have a duration of 25 years. They will be used to deliver the same social and affordable tenures and strategic priorities as funding under the SAHP.

They will be made available via a competitive bidding process, following confirmation of initial grant allocations made through the SAHP. We expect providers to submit ambitious grant bids for the SAHP when it opens next month, with the loans intended to secure additional homes over and above those delivered with SAHP grant funding alone. There will also be an opportunity to bid to use low-interest loans to acquire section 106 homes. Up to 10% of the £2.5 billion will be available to support the delivery of social and affordable homes via this route. We will confirm further details in the near future.

I am today also publishing a road map detailing how the Government intend to deal with the legacy problem of existing unsold and uncontracted section 106 units and how we will prevent the problem recurring by laying the foundations for a simple, more transparent and more resilient section 106 system. I will publish a separate written ministerial statement setting out further details about this policy package.

Establishing an effective and stable regulatory regime

Building new social and affordable homes must go hand in hand with ensuring that our 4 million existing social homes are safe, decent and warm for tenants. To support registered providers to invest in existing homes, we are implementing a modernised regulatory framework that puts tenant safety and experience at its heart but is proportionate for providers.

I am today confirming details of the new, modernised decent homes standard. This new DHS will apply to social and private rental tenures from 2035, allowing landlords time to plan carefully to implement the changes. It has been designed to reflect modern expectations of rented homes and improve health outcomes for tenants. It prioritises safety, decency and warmth, and it will act as a common standard for both private and social rented housing.

Following consultation, the new DHS will focus on condition as the primary factor when determining compliance of building components such as windows and roofs, rather than age. It will go further in ensuring that rented homes are provided with good-quality facilities such as kitchens and bathrooms, and it will introduce safety measures such as mandatory child-resistant window restrictors—this will help to prevent tragic falls and will give parents greater peace of mind. It will also establish a more proactive and preventive approach to addressing damp and mould.

Having carefully considered feedback to the consultation, we will not introduce enhanced home security regulations, a mandatory floor coverings requirement, or an obligation for landlords to meet repair standards within the public realm. We recognise that some landlords are already providing floor coverings, but many residents struggle to provide their own basic furnishings. As such, we intend to work with landlords and tenants to rapidly identify cost-effective ways in which landlords can better support tenants in need.

The new, modernised DHS necessarily balances the cost implications of improving the quality of existing rented homes with the need to increase social and affordable housing supply, given the importance of the latter to moving people, including many vulnerable children, out of unsuitable temporary accommodation. Guidance will be published in due course to support early action and compliance. A full Government consultation response and policy statement has been published today, setting out details of the new standard.

We have also published today the final standard to provide direction to the social rented sector on a new minimum energy efficiency standard and will publish a full Government response to this consultation shortly.

Following consultation, we have decided that all new and existing social rented properties must have an energy performance certificate C, using reformed EPCs, in a choice of fabric performance, smart readiness or heating system metric, by 1 April 2030. The compliance date to meet a second metric has been extended, so that all new and existing social rented properties must meet the equivalent of EPC C in a second metric by 1 April 2039. This recognises the unique role that social landlords play in both improving the energy efficiency and decency of homes and in increasing the supply of social and affordable housing, ensuring that social landlords have the confidence to invest now towards meeting our shared objectives to reduce fuel poverty, decarbonise the sector and increase supply.

This new standard will encourage building improvements that make homes warmer and energy bills cheaper, and that lead to lower emissions. We will publish further guidance to support social landlords with the implementation of the new standard in due course.

We have received extensive feedback from registered providers over many months, making it clear that confirmation of the future homes standard is key to unlocking ambitious development plans across the sector. The FHS will include high levels of fabric efficiency, low-carbon heating and solar by default. We will publish the consultation response, full specification, alongside laying a statutory instrument in the first quarter of 2026. This will set out the policy detail and transitional arrangements.

On 27 October 2025 we brought into force phase 1 of Awaab's law, specifying fixed timescales to address damp and mould hazards and requiring all emergency hazards to be addressed within 24 hours. We are now undertaking our "test and learn" approach before extending the requirements to other housing health and safety rating system hazards. Last year we also introduced regulations requiring social landlords to carry out checks on electrical installations, and any appliances they have provided, at least every five years. This already applies to new lets and will be phased in for existing tenancies over the course of this year.

Reinvigorating council house building

Over recent years, councils have once again begun to build new affordable homes. Annual completions by councils have increased year on year for the past five years, and in 2024-25 they completed 10,480 homes—the highest number since the current reporting period began in 1991-92. We want to support councils to build upon the progress already made. We will continue to work with the sector to ensure that councils have the confidence, capacity and capability to deliver affordable homes at scale once again.

To provide councils with greater certainty and to support ambitious supply plans, I am announcing today that we will extend the "preferential" borrowing rate for council house building from the Public Works Loan Board rate for a further year until the end of March 2027. It will continue to be set at gilts + 40 basis points, and will be available for house building through the housing revenue account.

Additionally, I can confirm that the threshold for when a council must open an HRA will be increased from 200 to 1,000 homes from today. This will ensure that councils always have enough homes to make opening and operating an HRA financially sustainable. It will also provide councils without an HRA with greater flexibility to increase delivery, including through SAHP and the acquisition of resettlement homes through the local authority housing fund.

Finally, in July we launched the council house building skills and capacity programme. In its first year, CHSCP has engaged with 81 councils through the council house building support service to expand their delivery capability. As part of the expanded pathways to planning programme, CHSCP will recruit and train up to 50 graduates for placement with councils in 2026-27 to become qualified surveyors or construction project managers.

In November, CHSCP's council house building support fund allocated £5.5 million to 29 councils to aid the development of SAHP bids. Today I am confirming that, due to strong demand, we are allocating a further £3.5 million to 15 additional councils. In total, this should enable these 44 councils to deliver up to 9,850 new homes and accelerate the delivery of a further 1,700 homes across the course of SAHP.

A renewed partnership with the sector

A decade of social and affordable housing renewal will only be delivered by Government working in close partnership with the sector. That is why in the coming weeks we will work with the National Housing Federation, the Local Government Association and other sector bodies to agree a compact. Once agreed, that compact will be overseen by a taskforce comprised of representatives from a range of sector organisations and interests. More detail about the terms of reference and membership of this group will be set out in the coming weeks.

At the heart of the compact will be ambitious social and affordable house building commitments, evidencing how the grant funding support and regulatory certainty and stability that this Government have provided has translated into ambitious delivery plans and bids into the SAHP from housing associations, councils and other registered providers. It will also be premised on strengthened joint governance and accountability mechanisms, including agreed supply, decency and other metrics that will be tracked and monitored, with oversight provided by regular reporting back to the Secretary of State.

[HCWS1283]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn):

I wish to provide an update to the House regarding the Identity and Language (Northern Ireland) Act 2022.

The New Decade, New Approach deal, which was instrumental to the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive in 2020 (after a three-year absence) included an agreed legislative framework for progressing identity and language commitments: the Act.

The Act received Royal Assent in December 2022. Specific provisions in sections 1, 2 and 3 of the Act were commenced in May 2023, establishing the following roles: (1) director of the office for identity and cultural expression; (2) Irish language commissioner; and (3) commissioner for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British tradition.

I warmly welcome the Northern Ireland Executive's decision in October 2025 to appoint Pol Deeds as the Irish language commissioner; Lee Reynolds as the commissioner for the Ulster Scots and Ulster British Tradition; and Dr Katy Radford as the director of the office of identity and cultural expression.

In order that they may now carry out their duties, I am today commencing further provisions in sections 1, 2 and 3 of the Act, following a request from the Executive Office.

Provisions being commenced in section 1 relate to the principles of national and cultural identity to which public authorities must have due regard, as well as the functions and responsibilities of the director of the office of identity and cultural expression.

Provisions being commenced in section 2 outline the functions and responsibilities of the Irish language commissioner in developing and promoting best practice standards in relation to the Irish language.

Finally, provisions in section 3 relate to the functions and responsibilities of the commissioner for Ulster Scots and the Ulster British tradition in promoting the language, arts and literature associated with Ulster Scots, as well as developing and promoting guidance in relation to Ulster Scots.

In commencing these provisions, we are continuing to ensure respect and tolerance for all of Northern Ireland's diverse identities, cultures, languages and traditions.

[HCWS1282]

Written Correction

Wednesday 28 January 2026

Ministerial Correction

TRANSPORT

Northern Powerhouse Rail

The following extract is from the statement on Northern Powerhouse Rail on 14 January 2026.

Heidi Alexander: ... the Department for Transport has invested over £13 million in Carlisle station, Cumberland has received an £18 million multi-year bus funding deal, and £10 million has been spent on a Borders rail viability study.

[*Official Report*, 14 January 2026; Vol. 778, c. 935.]

Written correction submitted by the Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Swindon South (Heidi Alexander):

Heidi Alexander: ... the Department for Transport has invested over £13 million in Carlisle station, Cumberland has received an £18 million multi-year bus funding deal, and **up to £10 million has been committed to** a Borders rail viability study.

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**not later than
Wednesday 4 February 2026**

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