

**Monday
16 March 2026**

**Volume 782
No. 262**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Monday 16 March 2026

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

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

*The term “Independent” may denote—

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

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

House of Commons

Monday 16 March 2026

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Defence Jobs: Scotland

2. **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase the number of defence jobs in Scotland. [908287]

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): Last Thursday, I was proud to launch the Scotland defence growth deal, which will increase the number of defence jobs in Scotland, invest in skills and make it easier for businesses—particularly small and medium-sized enterprises—to do business in defence. Alongside our commitment to increasing naval shipbuilding in Scotland, this will increase the number of high-skilled, high-wage jobs, and make defence an engine for growth in Scotland.

Douglas McAllister: I very much welcome last week's announcement of a £50 million defence growth deal for Scotland. It will make Scotland an engine for defence growth. Be it through building ships on the Clyde or new engineering and innovation facilities, it will create good, well-paid jobs for my West Dunbartonshire constituents and people right across Scotland, from the west coast to the east coast. Does the Minister agree that after two decades of SNP failure, it is time for a Scottish Labour Government who will actually back Scottish defence jobs?

Luke Pollard: I do indeed. It is noticeable that when the Scottish Government have had an opportunity to invest in defence skills, they have chosen not to. They chose not to when it came to the welding centre on the Clyde, but the Defence Secretary stepped in. Alongside the Secretary of State for Scotland, we have issued a challenge to the Scottish Government to match our commitment to creating two defence technical excellence colleges, one for the east coast and one for the west coast. We say: put the effort into investing in a whole new generation of young Scots, and get the benefit of a rising defence budget in Scotland.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): There was a pork-barrel stench when the first defence growth deal was awarded to the Minister's constituency. Over six months later, he has finally got around to making an award to Scotland, but for Scotland, the £50 million has turned into £20 million—and he wants

the Scottish Government to foot the bill. Can he be clear with the House today about why, while there are no strings attached to the £50 million for the Welsh defence growth deal, there are strings attached to the Scottish defence growth deal, and does he expect the Scottish Government to top up the £20 million that he has allocated, so that it becomes the £50 million that every other area has got?

Luke Pollard: This is just the politics of grievance from the SNP. This Labour Government have allocated £50 million to support growth in Scotland, including £5 million for the Arrol Gibb campus in Rosyth and—
[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. You have asked the question; at least listen to the answer, even if you disagree with it.

Luke Pollard: The hon. Gentleman did not want to hear about the £5 million for the Arrol Gibb centre in Rosyth, the £5 million for the Clyde engineering campus, and the extra funding for a defence technical excellence college that will create defence skills. I hope that, on reflection, he will ask his Government in Scotland to back what Scottish Labour has backed: the funding for two Scottish DTECs.

Defence Investment Plan

3. **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): When he plans to publish the defence investment plan. [908288]

6. **Ian Roome** (North Devon) (LD): What progress his Department has made towards the publication of the defence investment plan. [908291]

22. **Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): When he plans to publish the defence investment plan. [908309]

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): Before I answer, I want to thank our British personnel who are working 24/7 in the middle east, at home and around the world to protect British lives. For our part, we are working flat out to settle the defence investment plan, which is a plan for the 10-year transformation of Britain's defence, as laid out in the strategic defence review. We are fixing a military programme that, when we came into government, was over-committed, underfunded and unsuited to the threats and conflicts we now face.

Dr Shastri-Hurst: I draw the House's attention to my former role as the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for defence technology. When I was at Sandhurst, when we would talk about punctuality, the colour sergeant would often say to us, "Three minutes early is two minutes late." When it comes to the defence investment plan, it feels more like "on the bus, off the bus." Can the Secretary of State confirm whether it will be published before the House rises on 26 March?

John Healey: We will settle this defence investment plan. Unlike the plans we have seen recently from previous Governments, it will be affordable and deliverable. The hon. Gentleman knows from his time in service—he gave an anecdote from Sandhurst—that over 14 years, Tory Governments hollowed out the armed forces; we are

turning that around. We are putting £270 billion into defence in this Parliament, which is the biggest increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war. We are delivering for defence, and delivering for Britain.

Ian Roome: We are still waiting for the defence investment plan, and according to the strategic defence review, items should be deleted from that plan only on the advice of the national armaments director; service chiefs must advise the Secretary of State if anything is to be removed from the defence to-do list. Has the Secretary of State received any such advice? I understand that it is a draft plan at the moment, but it must be finished.

John Healey: This is a whole-of-Defence effort; we are working flat out to deliver the defence investment plan. It will put into practice the 10-year vision that the strategic defence review set out in June last year, as the hon. Gentleman mentions. When we have that completed, we will report that to the House.

Ben Obese-Jecty: The delay to the defence investment plan is obviously having a huge effect on our capabilities, and the plan is in danger of being overtaken by events. We are waiting for approval on the block 2 procurement of underwater uncrewed vessels and the mine countermeasures, hydrographic and patrol capability programme. The Prime Minister has confirmed that there are autonomous mine-clearing vessels in the Gulf. Are the vessels currently in the region deployable? What support ship will support them, given that HMS Stirling Castle left Portsmouth this morning, and will take at least three weeks to get to the region?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman is the last person in the House to expect me to set out the detail of those sorts of operational arrangements in public. The defence investment plan is not holding up important investment decisions. We have awarded more than 1,200 major contracts since the election, and we have seen a significant increase in defence investment in businesses in his region of the east of England. I think the House would expect him to welcome that.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): This Government are making a record investment in defence, and steelworkers in my constituency will want to be assured that we are committed to using as much UK steel as possible as we invest. Will the Secretary of State commit to that?

John Healey: A principle of the investment that this Labour Government are making is that we will direct British defence investment first to British jobs, British businesses and British innovation, and we will ensure that the supply chains reflect that policy and political commitment, because we are determined that this increase in defence investment will bring a defence dividend to all parts of the country, including Wales. That is measured in good jobs and future opportunities.

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): As a former Parachute Regiment reservist, I warmly welcome the Government's clear focus on strengthening our armed forces and their defensive capability. Although the appetite for service remains high, the bureaucracy we inherited is holding back recruitment. Will the Secretary

of State outline the steps that his Department is taking to support more working adults in joining the volunteer reserve forces?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have swept away some of the long-standing rules that got in the way of people being recruited into the forces. There is no shortage of those who want to join, including young people, but the system has too often been too slow and bureaucratic, and it has raised unnecessary barriers to getting a range of talent into our armed forces for the future.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend's comments about the defence investment plan, and his leadership on increased defence spending. Does he agree that a defence finance and investment strategy is key to unlocking the capital that firms across the supply chain need, if they are to deliver for the DIP? Will he therefore update the House on when the DFIS will be published?

John Healey: I agree that the strategy is key; my hon. Friend is entirely right. This capital is matched by the biggest increase in defence spending from public investment and the public purse since the end of the cold war. We are ensuring that it leverages in not just additional sources of private investment, but record foreign direct investment. We have had £3.2 billion into this country since the election, and have had the most successful British exports year on record, winning fresh business, fresh contracts and fresh opportunities for British innovators and businesses.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I am not sure that the Secretary of State heard the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst), which was incredibly simple: will the defence investment plan be published before the House rises on 26 March?

John Healey: We are working flat out to conclude the defence investment plan. The hon. Gentleman was the Minister for Defence Procurement who left defence programmes overcommitted, underfunded and unsuited to the threats and conflicts that we face, so he will be aware of the scale and significance of the challenge that we are determined to meet.

James Cartlidge: There is a reason why that date matters: it is the date when purdah commences before the Scottish elections. Then we will have the Welsh and local elections. It is our understanding—and the Secretary of State is welcome to correct this—that the defence investment plan cannot be published during purdah. If that is the case, and if it is not published before the rise of the House on 26 March, we will not see it until well into May. That is why this question is so important.

I ask the Secretary of State the question again, because he has failed to answer it so far. It is a very simple, straight question, and it needs a straight answer. Will the defence investment plan be published before the House rises for the recess—yes or no?

John Healey: As the Prime Minister said, it will be published as soon as it is ready. This is not holding up major investments; there have been more than 1,200 major investments in contracts awarded since the election—and 86% of those contracts were awarded to British-based businesses, so we are boosting British security and the British economy at the same time.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): Liberal Democrats share concerns about the whereabouts of the defence investment plan, and urge the Government to come forward with its publication. Last year's strategic defence review also promised a defence readiness Bill, which would give Governments the power to mobilise industry and reserves in a crisis, and would require proper reporting on our warfighting readiness, so that the House and the country were not in the dark. At a time when senior military figures have warned repeatedly that Britain is not ready for war, my question is this: if the threat is urgent, why is the legislation not? If the Secretary of State cannot tell us when he will publish the defence investment plan, can he tell us when he will introduce the defence readiness Bill?

John Healey: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's interest in the issue. He will recognise that, as was pointed out in the strategic defence review, this is a question for the whole of society and the whole of Government. Preparation for greater defence readiness, and greater societal and economic readiness, is going on at present, alongside the work that we are doing in defence with other parts of Government to ensure that we can deliver the defence investment plan. We will then be able to deliver, in due course, a defence readiness Bill.

Ukraine Air Defence: UK Support

4. Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase air defence support to Ukraine. [908289]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Al Carns): Alongside the conflict in the middle east, the war in Ukraine continues to rage. Russia is taking more than 1,000 casualties a day, and has launched more than 55,000 missile and drone attacks against Ukraine in just the last year. At the latest meeting of the Ukraine defence contact group, the Defence Secretary announced a new air defence package, worth more than £500 million, of missiles and systems to protect Ukraine from Russian attacks. In the coming months, the UK will deliver an additional 1,200 air defence missiles and 200,000 rounds of artillery through the air defence consortium.

Patrick Hurley: The Prime Minister's leadership on Ukraine has been exemplary. Does the Minister agree that that leadership has helped to secure US commitments on security for Ukraine, and that this demonstrates the importance of the US-UK defence relationship to international security?

Al Carns: The UK-US relationship remains stalwart. Our collective leadership on Ukraine has been second to none; the Defence Secretary's leadership of the Ukraine defence contact group has stimulated billions of pounds

of investment; and through what we are doing in Ukraine, we are delivering in support of not just UK security, but European security.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): In the last few weeks, the Prime Minister has been very clear about what he considers our role to be, under international law, if we believe that allies are being attacked. Does he see Ukraine as having exactly the same status as an ally? Does he believe that we are, of necessity, directly involved, given that it is under attack?

Al Carns: As the right hon. Member will know, we continue to support Ukraine with almost as much capability as we can. Through leadership of the Ukraine defence contact group, through capability and through industrial working groups backed by the United Kingdom and across Europe, we will continue to support Ukraine, and do everything possible to ensure the sanctity of Ukrainian sovereignty.

Military Personnel: Pay

5. Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase pay for military personnel. [908290]

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): At the election, military morale had fallen to record lows, and we promised, as a new Government, to renew the nation's commitment to those who serve. That is what we are doing. We have delivered the biggest forces pay increase for two decades, and landmark investment to buy back and renew nearly 40,000 military family homes. Wraparound childcare has been extended for those serving overseas. When we say that we are a Government on the side of our forces, this is what we mean.

Luke Murphy: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his answer. As part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I was recently privileged to spend time in the High North, in Norway, with our Royal Marines and other armed forces personnel. It was a stark reminder of their service, and the sacrifice that they make to protect our national interests and our way of life. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the overseas allowance for personnel on temporary duty, like those in the Arctic?

John Healey: I will write to my hon. Friend with the detail, but part of the commitment that we have made to renewing the contract with those who serve has involved the extension of wraparound childcare to those serving overseas. It is part of making sure that we raise the quality of the experience of those in uniform. We can raise the morale of those who serve and, in doing so, we can help deal with the deep-seated, 14-year-long recruitment and retention crisis that we saw at the time of the last general election.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for his answers. Personnel and families from Northern Ireland face exceptional costs if they are stationed here on the mainland. If they want to meet up with their family or go home again, there are extra costs for them. What has been done to ensure that personnel from Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged because they live so far away from their family, and to ensure that families can have the family time that they need to ensure that they stay together?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman will have welcomed the “get home” allowance that we made sure every one of our serving personnel could access at Christmas for the first time. We have delivered the highest pay increase for forces personnel for 20 years. The more than 10% pay rise over the first two years of this Government is part of making service life more affordable, including for those in Northern Ireland. I am proud to be the first Defence Secretary of this country who can say that no one working full time in UK military uniform is paid less than the national living wage.

Mr Speaker: Will we look at the Royal Gibraltar Regiment as well, Secretary of State?

Middle East: UK Armed Forces Personnel

7. Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): What steps he is taking to protect UK armed forces personnel in the middle east. [908292]

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): Our outstanding armed forces are in the middle east, protecting our people, our interests and our allies. The Royal Air Force has now conducted over 550 hours of defensive operations in five countries, and drones have been shot down by UK forces almost daily. We now have more jets flying in the region than at any time in the last 15 years.

Lizzi Collinge: I thank the Secretary of State for his answer. About 10 days ago, we saw alleged attacks by both US and Iranian forces on water desalination plants in the middle east, which is in direct contravention of international law. Civilians in the middle east are reliant on desalinated water for survival, and targeting it is absolutely unacceptable. Can the Secretary of State confirm that UK forces operating in the middle east continue to operate fully under international law, and that we condemn operations that target civilian infrastructure?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right: Iran’s widespread strikes have shown a total disregard for civilian life. Because I strengthened British defences in the region ahead of this conflict with extra jets, radars and defence systems, from day one we have been co-ordinating defensive actions, with a sound legal basis, to protect British citizens and bases, and our allies in the region. I am proud of the skill and dedication that our armed forces are showing in the middle east.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I have constituents at RAF Akrotiri who have been deployed out of RAF Cosford in my constituency, and I have already had correspondence from concerned constituents and their families. The Iranian regime has a very potent chemical and biological weapons programme. I have asked the Defence Secretary this question before: will he confirm that there is CBRN—chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear—protective kit at Akrotiri and other UK armed forces military bases in the region? The Iranian regime also has a very potent submarine fleet—it may not be nuclear or Trident-led, as ours is, but it is nevertheless a significant threat in the region—so could he say what he is doing to address both those threats?

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman is right about the range of threats that the Iranian regime poses, especially, as we have seen, as it hits back after the first wave of strikes. Those hits are widespread, they hit countries not involved in the conflict and they are directed at civilian, not just military targets. I say to his constituents living as well as serving in Akrotiri that when I was out there about 10 days ago I made a point of asking our base commander if there was anything further he needed from us back in Britain, and he said, “I have got everything that I asked for to protect ourselves.”

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

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): After having insulted Great Britain for our response in not joining his war and then claiming that he did not need British help after having “already won” the war, President Donald Trump has now sent an SOS to the world, including to the UK and other NATO allies, to help him protect the strait of Hormuz. I think it is in our national interests to stop the disruption to global shipping, because otherwise that will drive up the cost of goods and the cost of living for my Slough constituents and others across the country. Will the Secretary of State clarify what the Government’s response will be to the US President’s request? How will my right hon. Friend ensure the safety of British armed forces personnel if they are to engage in any such operations?

John Healey: As the Prime Minister said this morning, in fact—my hon. Friend is right—the strait of Hormuz is vital. It is vital to the international economy and to security. We are in continued conversations with European allies and the US. These questions are complex, and any plans must be multilateral, with as many nations taking part as possible. Without going into detailed operational options or discussions, I have already said that we have prepositioned in the region autonomous minehunting capabilities. We have counter-drone systems in action in the region, pulling down drones. Looking ahead, alongside industry, we are looking at additional innovative options, including interceptor drones for the middle east.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Ministers were all over the airwaves this weekend saying two things: first, that they would like to see a de-escalation of the conflict in the middle east; and, secondly, that they would like to see the strait of Hormuz secured for shipping. Why on earth does the Secretary of State think that those two aims are mutually exclusive? If they are mutually exclusive, how can he achieve both?

John Healey: Quite simply, we will do so by making a major contribution, as we are, to discussions about any multinational plans that may be put in place to safeguard for the future the commercial shipping that is the lifeline both of the international economy and of international security.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): British personnel in Cyprus, Bahrain, Iraq and across the middle east have been attacked by Iran and its proxies. In such circumstances, we must act quickly to protect our people and interests. Having served on Royal Navy vessels, I know it takes time to ready a ship, yet nearly two weeks passed before the Government sent a single destroyer—

HMS Dragon—to help defend our forces in Cyprus. Why was that decision not taken sooner, and given that the Royal Navy had advised deploying assets earlier, which Minister took the decision not to act on that point?

John Healey: I strengthened UK defences ahead of the conflict. Once the scale and nature of the indiscriminate and widespread Iranian response became clear and the circumstances were changing, we altered and adopted further actions. The deployment of HMS Dragon was part of that. I took the decision to give that go-ahead on the same day the Chief of the Defence Staff offered that to Ministers as an option. The hon. Gentleman served as a reservist in the Navy—[*Interruption.*] Sorry, he served as a regular in the Navy. If he is concerned about the state of the British Navy, he really should look at the record of his own Government: they cut the total number of frigates and destroyers by a quarter; they cut minehunters by more than half; and they cut defence spending by £12 billion in their first five years. It is our job now to fix those problems. Whereas they were cutting and hollowing out our armed forces, we are rebuilding them for the future.

David Reed: This is an important point and, given the volatility of the international system, we must learn from our mistakes. In a written answer on 9 March, the Minister for the Armed Forces confirmed that discussions took place before the decision to deploy HMS Dragon. We know those conversations happened and that the Royal Navy put forward recommendations. When British personnel are under threat, those delays carry consequences. I ask again: will the Secretary of State tell the House which Minister chose not to act on that advice sooner, and, crucially, why?

John Healey: As I have said to the House more than once, and as the Chief of the Defence Staff said on the BBC the weekend before last, the day the deployment was put to Ministers as an option, in the circumstances of conflict that were changing at the time, we adapted our actions to protect British lives, to protect British allies and to protect citizens right across the region.

Defence Skills

8. **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): What plans he has to increase defence skills. [908293]

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): We are ending the hollowing out and underfunding of defence that we inherited from the previous Government and spending more with British businesses. To deliver that, we are investing in skills: five defence growth deals worth £250 million; a £182 million skills package; £50 million allocated for five DTECS—defence technical excellence colleges—across England, one in Wales and two in Scotland; and £80 million in strategic priorities grants available to universities to expand the number of places in courses that will support defence.

Ms Minns: I thank the Minister for his answer. He will be aware that my constituency was home to Europe's largest munitions factory during the first world war, a legacy that lives on in MOD Longtown. When the

Minister confirms that my constituency of Carlisle will be one of the locations for the six new munitions factories the Government are looking to build, what support will the Government provide to ensure that it is local people who will be able to take up the jobs at that new munitions factory?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for her lobbying in favour of Carlisle as a location. Having visited Longtown, I have seen her constituents' dedication and passion in supporting defence, as well as the opportunities there. We are making good progress on our commitment to allocate resources in this Parliament for six energetics and munitions factories. We hope to make a decision on the first wave of those in due course. I will be sure to keep all Members involved, including those who have made a good case in the Chamber today.

Mr Speaker: Including Chorley.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): On that Chorley and Lancashire theme, it will not be possible to increase the defence skills in this country if the defence jobs of the future are not secure in that pipeline. I was delighted to hear the Secretary of State talk earlier about British jobs, British industry and British innovation—he can probably gather where this is going, judging from the whispering on the Government Front Bench—so I was confused when there was bragging about ordering from British companies for defence as to why American F-35s were ordered, not British Typhoons. Given that we will need around 100 aircraft to maintain the workforce at Warton for Tempest in the future, I assume, whenever the defence investment plan is finally published, we will see an order of 25 Typhoons for the RAF within it.

Luke Pollard: In the hon. Gentleman's haste to make an attack on the Government, he forgot to welcome the multibillion-pound deal we secured with Türkiye to build Typhoons in his constituency. We have had a 15% increase in defence in the north-west of England since the first year of this Labour Government, but he is right that we need to make sure we are investing in skills to deliver the defence industrial base. That is precisely why the Government are investing in skills and why we are supporting British businesses. He will also know that the F-35, as well as the Typhoon, contributes many jobs to the north-west—I believe many of them very close to his constituency.

Defence Jobs: Wales

9. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase the number of defence jobs in Wales. [908294]

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): On 19 February, the Secretary of State and the First Minister of Wales announced a £50 million Welsh defence growth deal, making Wales a launchpad for the next generation of autonomous technology. Thousands of skilled workers in Wales will be involved in the design, testing and manufacture of these innovative technologies. This proves yet again that defence is an engine for growth in Wales and shows the power of two Labour Governments working together to deliver in the interests of Wales.

Gerald Jones: I welcome and fully endorse the Minister's comments about the benefits of two Labour Governments working together for the people of Wales. In the 19th century, ironworks in my constituency made cannons and cannonballs for the Royal Navy; in the 21st century, skilled workers and businesses in Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare, such as General Dynamics, are ready to continue our area's role in enhancing the nation's defences. I seek an assurance from the Minister that businesses in the supply chain across the south Wales valleys will continue to play a key role in providing those skilled jobs in our communities to ensure that investment in the defence sector gives a necessary boost to the confidence of areas such as mine.

Luke Pollard: Having visited my hon. Friend's constituency, I know what a champion he is, not just for large companies such as General Dynamics but for the wider supply chain. That is precisely why the Department has committed to increasing our direct spend with small businesses by 50% by 2028, ensuring that we are removing the barriers to small businesses being able to engage with the defence supply chain more and investing in the skills that those small and large businesses require to make the most of a rising defence budget. I look forward to meeting my hon. Friend and his constituents in relation to General Dynamics shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): The hon. Member for Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare (Gerald Jones) knows better than most that the Ajax programme is not only a national defence procurement issue, but specifically a Welsh one; around 400 workers in Merthyr Tydfil are connected to the Ajax factory. Workers have been hospitalised, troops have been put at risk and £6 billion of taxpayers' money has already been sunk into the programme. While Ministers deliberate, those workers are left completely in the dark about the future of the project and their jobs. I cannot imagine how that must feel for them and their families. Will the Minister tell us when a final decision will be made on Ajax and what he has to say to the workers in Merthyr Tydfil who are waiting for clarity about their families' futures?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the way he posed that question. What happened on Exercise Titan Storm was of serious concern to all Members of this House. It was for that reason that we paused use of Ajax and initiated a number of safety investigations into what happened and the impact on our people, and put in place measures to ensure that we could learn lessons. We have now received those reports and are analysing them, and I hope to be able to make further announcements in due course. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to talk about the workers and not just the soldiers in uniform. That is why we are continuing a strong dialogue with General Dynamics and the local Members of Parliament on this issue.

United Nations Charter

10. **Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): What steps his Department is taking to meet its legal obligations under articles 2(4) and 51 of the United Nations charter. [908295]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Al Carns): Let me be really clear: the UK's priority is supporting British nationals and our partners in accordance with international law. The Prime Minister has made clear that any UK action must always have a legal basis. On 7 March, the UK notified the UN Security Council of the relevant actions, including our defensive counter-air operations, taken under article 51 of the United Nations charter. Military credibility and legal credibility go hand in hand.

Ayoub Khan: When nations commit war crimes, the UN charter makes it plain that other nations must not provide any support or assistance. Trump and Netanyahu started this illegal war and, in welcoming US aircraft on British bases so that they can be loaded with 2,000 lb bombs, the UK is clearly aiding and abetting that, in breach of international law. Right now, we are helping to escalate this conflict, which is bringing us to the brink of global recession. That is why the British public do not support our involvement in this war. Would the Defence Secretary like to explain why they are wrong?

Al Carns: Let me talk a little bit about crimes: support to Hamas; support to Hezbollah; support to the Houthis; support to various armed groups with lethal aid that has been killing British forces for 20 years. Are we going to apologise for protecting UK nationals? Absolutely not.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): Last month, satellite imagery of the Gaza war cemetery showed that Israeli forces had destroyed more than 100 allied graves using heavy machinery. This is a Commonwealth War Graves Commission site, and these are graves of British and allied personnel who served in the first and second world wars and made the ultimate sacrifice. Has my hon. Friend raised concerns with his Israeli counterpart? What steps will he take to prevent future destruction of Commonwealth war graves?

Al Carns: I thank my hon. Friend for her really important question. I am absolutely dismayed by the reports of damage to the cemetery by both Israeli operations and Hamas fighters. Brave servicemen laid to rest overseas should not in any way, shape or form have their graves defiled; neither should the courageous men and women who tend to the graves have to experience that. Together with our international partners, we have raised our concerns with Israeli authorities. We will continue to support the commission as it looks to assess and repair the damage when it is safe to do so.

Iran: US Plan for Sustainable Peace

11. **Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): What assessment he has made of the potential implications for his policies of the US plan for sustainable peace in Iran. [908296]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Al Carns): We are studying developments very carefully and remain in close contact with the United States and other allies. The UK's position is clear: the best way forward for the region and the world is a negotiated settlement with Iran when it has given up its nuclear ambitions. Recent events have also underlined the importance of resilience,

strong alliances and credible military capability in a world where regional crisis can develop quickly. A sustainable peace must reduce the risk of conflict, not simply pause it.

Monica Harding: My constituents are deeply concerned about further escalation in the middle east and the UK being pulled further into a conflict with no clear objective. They are also concerned about the impact on their energy bills, inflation and interest rates. President Trump is attempting to pull us into his war of choice, urging UK deployments to the strait of Hormuz and asserting that NATO's future depends on allies committing to deploying assets. Will the Minister rule out the deployment of military assets to the strait of Hormuz, and will he do so as strongly as our German and Spanish allies have done? Does he agree that de-escalation is key, as any further military action threatens a sustainable peace? Does he also agree that a better way forward would be for the UK, as penholder on the UN Security Council, to present an emergency resolution to get the strait of Hormuz open through UN channels?

Al Carns: I have attended every staff college in the military—initial staff college, advanced command staff college and higher command staff college—and they all say two things: “First, you must have a legal mandate before putting people in harm’s way; secondly, you must think through to the end.” We will continue to work in a comprehensive and calm manner with our allies and partners to ensure that we can come up with a solution to the strait of Hormuz, and we will not rule anything out, because we cannot guarantee where this war is going to go.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Residents in my constituency are rightly worried about the ongoing events in the middle east, so will the Minister reaffirm for the avoidance of any doubt that this Government’s first priority is to keep their citizens safe, and that our decisions thus far and moving forward have been and will continue to be based on the collective self-defence of long-standing allies and on protecting British lives?

Al Carns: As we speak, there will most likely be fast jets flying in the middle east or around Cyprus, tracking, identifying and engaging with drones that pose a direct threat to our British interests, our allies and partners and, potentially, British citizens. I take my hat off to them, and I fully support them. We will maintain that defensive posture for as long as this conflict continues.

Royal Fleet Auxiliary: Merchant Seafarers

12. **Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to improve recruitment and retention of merchant seafarers in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. [908297]

20. **Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to improve recruitment and retention of merchant seafarers in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. [908306]

The Minister for Veterans and People (Louise Sandher-Jones): The Royal Fleet Auxiliary makes a unique contribution to defence. We thank the maritime trade unions for their commitment to resolving the current

pay dispute so that the RFA’s contribution can be recognised. The Ministry of Defence is implementing a workforce recovery programme for the RFA. This will improve the wider employee offer for those serving to ensure that the RFA can continue to perform its vital role. Since 28 February last year, officer applications are 30% higher and ratings applications are 26% higher. Outflow is down to 10.3% from a high of 13.4% in January 2023.

Kim Johnson: I welcome the Minister’s response. The RFA does play a very important role in the maritime sector. I welcome the Government’s progress in addressing the declining numbers in the RFA, but there is still a long way to go. MOD figures show that RFA seafarer numbers are still 12% lower than in 2019. Improving the pay and conditions of the RFA civilian seafarers is not only the right thing to do but essential to resolving the recruitment and retention crisis caused by the previous Government’s hostility towards public sector workers. Will the Minister commit to revisiting discussions with the Treasury if the current pay offer is rejected by RFA officers and ratings, particularly if they are drawn into the conflict in the middle east?

Louise Sandher-Jones: We are continuing close and productive conversations across Government and with the maritime trade unions, so it would not be appropriate for me to comment on ongoing negotiations. However, as I have said, this Labour Government recognise the extraordinary contribution and unique role of the highly skilled personnel of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary.

Grahame Morris: I support the points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson), but I acknowledge that the Government have made substantial progress in addressing the ingrained recruitment and retention crisis they inherited affecting the Royal Fleet Auxiliary—the Royal Navy support ships. However, having resolved the previous pay dispute, the RFA’s overworked and underpaid seafarers have had to wait seven months before receiving a formal pay offer from their employer. I appreciate that the Secretary of State and his Ministers share the RFA trade unions’ commitment to a positive future for the RFA’s civilian crews, which is encouraging, but what reassurances can the Minister provide to the seafarers whom we rely on?

Louise Sandher-Jones: As we are continuing to work closely across Government and with the maritime trade unions, I do not wish to comment on the ongoing negotiations, but I can assure my hon. Friend that, as I said, this Labour Government and I recognise the extraordinary contribution of our seafarers and are working hard to deliver for the highly skilled personnel of our Royal Fleet Auxiliary.

Defence: UK Allies

13. **Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to improve defence relationships with the UK’s allies. [908298]

14. **Michelle Scrogg (Barrow and Furness) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to improve defence relationships with the UK’s allies. [908299]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Al Carns): Strengthening defence relationships with our allies is a central priority for the Government. We do that through joint operations, exercises, intelligence co-operation, deeper industrial partnerships and close planning with NATO and joint expeditionary force allies and other key partners. We have recently signed landmark defence agreements with Norway, Germany and France and have forged closer capability partnerships, including with Norway on Type 26 frigates and Turkey with Typhoon. The upcoming defence diplomacy strategy will help further enhance our international relationships.

Gordon McKee: The war in Ukraine has shown that rapid innovation cycles are critical to success. Minister Fedorov and others in Ukraine have helped to build a defence technology ecosystem that connects start-ups, engineers and units on the frontline, even allowing some of those units to operate quasi-independently to test out new technologies. Given that the strategic defence review recommended that the UK learn from its allies, how is the Minister using the defence relationship with Ukraine not just to support the Ukrainians in their fight but to learn from them so that we can strengthen the UK's armed forces?

Al Carns: Since arriving in this House, I have been droning on about drones—it is one of the reasons I came into politics. There are three key lessons that we need to learn. The first is to adapt a process to give us a high-low mix of fifth-generation capability supported by cheap mass. That mass must be dumb hardware with sophisticated software. Finally, the software must be integrated across all domains and be driven by data and artificial intelligence. We will be able to achieve that only with a closer public-private partnership as we move forward.

Michelle Scrogham: The Government understand that “made in Britain” means good quality jobs for British people. Exporting those goods to international allies not only equips our allies with the best of British workmanship but puts billions of pounds into the UK economy. Barrow-in-Furness will build our AUKUS submarines, but what work is the Minister doing to ensure that UK small and medium-sized enterprises are well placed to benefit from AUKUS pillar 2 projects?

Al Carns: The first hundred pages or so of the SDR are about better industrial collaboration between the MOD and our industries. Work on AUKUS will create over 7,000 additional jobs at UK sites and across the supply chain, with over 21,000 working on the programme at its peak. We must do more to work with SMEs. The annual innovation challenge, for example, sees suppliers receive support for developing novel capabilities to demonstration phase. The UK winners in 2024 include two SMEs, one large supplier and one academic group.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): TEK Military Seating in Tunbridge Wells designs and exports military seating. It risks losing a £400,000 order to a customer in the United Arab Emirates because it lacks the permissions in the export licence, and my understanding is that the Department for Business and Trade is waiting for an answer from the MOD. Will the Minister please investigate?

Al Carns: I do not have the details of that specific case, but I am sure that the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry would love to do so.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): Following the drone attack at RAF Akrotiri earlier this month, there has been growing disquiet within Cyprus and the Cypriot community about the continuing existence of the sovereign base areas. Given the absolute necessity of this defence relationship between the United Kingdom and Cyprus, will the Minister update the House on the Secretary of State's visit to Cyprus earlier this month? Could he also say what reassurance the Cypriot Government need from us to ensure not only that the base is safe but that the future security of Cyprus is ensured?

Al Carns: Our sovereign base in Cyprus is not in question. When the Secretary of State for Defence visited Cyprus, the Cypriot national guard reaffirmed that our relationship is closer now than ever before. We must always remember the complexity of dealing with air defence. When it involves high and fast ballistic missiles combined with slow and low drones, it is a very complex problem for anyone to deal with, but we are trying to ensure that we come as close to 100% as we can.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): Given the present focus on the war in the middle east, there is concern that we should not lose focus on what is going on in Ukraine. On developing and strengthening our relationships with our allies, what are the Minister and his fellow Ministers doing to ensure that Putin does not take advantage of the current situation in the middle east, and that we ensure that Ukraine continues to get the full support, weapons and assets that it needs?

Al Carns: We continue to lead, both in the coalition of the willing and in the Ukraine defence contact group, which the Secretary of State attended recently, raising billions of pounds-worth of equipment support in weapons, air defence systems and everything through to female body armour. Ukraine absolutely remains a focus. This is not just about UK security; it is about European security, and that will not change.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I build on the excellent supplementary question asked by the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Gordon McKee) about Ukraine and counter-drone warfare? Thanks to the support given by this Government and the previous Government to Ukraine, it has become a world leader in inventing and deploying cheap responses to cheap drones. As a result, there is now an opportunity for it to assist our allies that are under threat from drone attacks in the middle east and in particular in the Persian gulf. Will the Government do everything they can to facilitate that, and thus show that Ukraine does indeed have some cards to play?

Al Carns: The Secretary of State has been in discussions with the National Security Agency and with key individuals in Ukraine. I am a firm believer that the Ukrainians need the west now and that in the future we will need them, given some of the technological advances they have made. It is also worth doubling down on some of the capabilities and initiatives moving forward, ranging from the hybrid Navy to the Army 20-40-40 programme,

the Defence uncrewed centre of excellence, the NMITE drone degree to enhance and increase education, industry and the military forces' move towards uncrewed systems and, finally, the £4 billion on uncrewed systems within the SDR.

Topical Questions

T1. [908310] **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey): With all eyes on the middle east, this House expects, and I am determined to ensure, that we will continue to confront the growing threats in the High North, to fulfil our obligations to NATO and to step up support for Ukraine. I can confirm today that over the last month, we have delivered to Ukraine 3,500 drones, 18,000 artillery rounds and 3 million rounds of small ammunition. We face two conflicts on two continents, supported by an axis of aggression with similar tactics and similar technologies. I say this to the Ukrainian people on behalf of the UK: we will not forget the war in Europe, and our total determination to stand with Ukraine remains steadfast. We will welcome President Zelensky to this country tomorrow.

Bill Esterson: Evidence presented to the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee shows that if the war in Europe is expanded, Russian submarines pose a significant threat to oil and gas tankers, pipelines and installations in the North sea. What is the Government's plan to address this significant threat to our oil and gas supplies?

John Healey: I praise my hon. Friend's chairmanship of the Committee. He is absolutely right: as the strategic defence review said last year, Russia poses an immediate and pressing threat to this country. The UK and allies' navies monitor, shadow and surveil activities of the Russian navy, and we are stepping up our surveillance of any activity close to our oil installations and pipelines.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): There are growing rumours that the Government plan to bring back their ill-fated Northern Ireland Troubles Bill to the Commons next week. If that is true, it will give us the perfect opportunity to debate the Prime Minister's links with Phil Shiner, the disgraced lawyer who was convicted of fraud and struck off for making multiple false allegations against British soldiers. The Northern Ireland Secretary has told the House repeatedly that there is no such thing as a vexatious prosecution. Do MOD Ministers now agree that that is not just naive but simply untrue, especially after the case of Phil Shiner—a man universally hated across the British Army?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Al Carns): There are two key roles that the Ministry of Defence plays within this legislation. The first is to ensure that we protect veterans throughout any legal process to do with Northern Ireland, and the second is to ensure that no one corrupts the system to try to rewrite history with a different narrative. There is a third role, which is to ensure that those families who have lost loved ones who were in the armed forces or the security services get the truth, reconciliation and justice they deserve.

Mr Francois: I was asking about the current Prime Minister, not the next one. After previously denying that the Prime Minister was instructed to act in a case against veterans by Phil Shiner, on 24 February the Veterans Minister had to come to the House and correct the record because the Prime Minister did, in fact, act for Phil Shiner in the al-Jedda case before the Appellate Committee of the House of Lords. That case effectively opened the floodgates for prosecutions against British Army veterans, which the troubles Bill now threatens to do all over again. To save the Veterans Minister having to come back here again and correct the record twice, can she or this Minister simply tell us why Labour is led by a man who partly made a living out of helping to put British Army soldiers and even their commanders in the dock?

Al Carns: I thank the hon. Member for the field promotion—he, obviously, has not had one. We have two roles: protecting veterans and ensuring that no one can rewrite history through the courts. We will push hard on that and deliver it for the veterans who deserve it.

T2. [908311] **Dan Carden** (Liverpool Walton) (Lab): Our history is as a naval power, and immediate threats to the UK include threats to undersea cables, the activities of illegal Russian shadow tankers and the closure of the strait of Hormuz. For the shipbuilding industry to thrive on our shores, it needs consistent contracts throughout the year to ensure that we have the skills and workforce in place. What is the Minister doing to ensure that we get to that position?

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): I thank my hon. Friend for his advocacy for shipbuilding. That is precisely why this Government have brought together all Departments with a shipbuilding interest in a cross-Government effort to refresh our shipbuilding process, and why Defence is leading that work by delivering more orders for our shipyards, which includes not only the frigates being built in Rosyth and on the Clyde, but the fleet solid support ship. Work on that has started in Appledore in north Devon as well.

T3. [908312] **Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): Successive Governments have refused compensation to the nuclear test veterans, but now the *Sunday Mirror's* investigative journalist Susie Bonifase has revealed documents showing that, in fact, levels of radiation were known to be much higher than the court was led to believe in a case in 2016. Will Ministers address this matter with the seriousness it deserves, while veterans are still suffering and the widows of veterans still lack any recognition or compensation?

The Minister for Veterans and People (Louise Sandher-Jones): The Government have reset the relationship with our nuclear test veterans and the organisations that support them, and we appreciate the vital contribution that they made to keeping this country safe. We remain absolutely committed to listening to their concerns and working collaboratively to address them.

T4. [908313] **Alan Strickland** (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): Having worked with the Defence Secretary to save the semiconductor plant in Newton Aycliffe in my constituency, I was proud the other week

to meet Sam and Evan, two new apprentices who owe their opportunities directly to Government investment—but we want to go further. Can Ministers confirm that the MOD will continue to push hard to expand the number of jobs, apprenticeships and training opportunities, so that world-class factory delivers for local growth, as well as delivering sovereign supply for our nation?

Luke Pollard: Absolutely. Oetric does a superb job in keeping our country safe, securing an essential supply of gear for our military. Since Oetric came into MOD ownership, it has already recruited 33 additional staff, and we continue to support the company as it seeks to grow and build, in support of our national security.

T6. [908315] **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): A Ukrainian family that we managed to reunite visited my office on Friday. During the conversation, it became clear that they are concerned for the future of Ukraine, given the war in the middle east and the US now loosening the sanctions on Russia. What representations have been made to the American Government to underline the seriousness of that step and our commitment to Ukraine?

John Healey: I hope the hon. Lady's constituents and other Ukrainian families will be reassured by the response this afternoon in the House. Despite all eyes being on the middle east, we are determined to continue to stand with Ukraine and to step up our support for Ukraine alongside allies including the US.

T5. [908314] **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): As the ongoing conflict in the middle east is demonstrating, drone technology is an essential military capability. Businesses around Saltaire and Baildon in my constituency are at the cutting edge of both space technology and radio frequency, which I know the Minister will understand are critical to drone warfare. What support is available to young people in my constituency and across West Yorkshire to gain the skills they need for those vital industries?

Luke Pollard: I am grateful for the conversation that my hon. Friend and I had last week about the importance of more skills for her constituency. We are investing £182 million in a defence skills package and rolling out defence technical excellence colleges across the United Kingdom. I am very happy to meet her to talk about this further, because we want to see more British companies invest in skills.

T8. [908317] **Ian Roome** (North Devon) (LD): Last week, HMS Dragon left Portsmouth bound for Cyprus, having been prepared for deployment inside six days. The Royal Navy says that preparation would normally have taken six weeks. What can the Government do to ensure that more of our surface fleet is available when urgently needed?

Al Carns: The hon. Member is absolutely correct. We took a six-week programme of deep refit and rearmed in six days—a remarkable effort from both the industry and the Royal Navy. I doff my cap to what they have done. That ship is now sailing to the middle east. At times of crisis, we can move things faster. We made a decision as quickly as possible, and if we need to, we

will do the same again. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members will recognise that an air defence destroyer is designed to protect a moving aircraft carrier. We may want to look into the investment in ground-based air defence over the last five to 15 years, and the lack of capability that we were left with. *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. I need to hear the next question. I will not be able to if there is chuntering across the Chamber.

T7. [908316] **Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): Last week, the United Nations independent international commission of inquiry on Ukraine concluded that Russia has been committing crimes against humanity in the forcible deportation of Ukrainian children. Last night, the film “Mr Nobody Against Putin” won best documentary feature at the Oscars for exposing how Russia seeks to turn Ukrainian children into Russian soldiers. Will my right hon. Friend outline what further work he is undertaking with colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to ensure that children are not used as weapons of war?

John Healey: First, on behalf of the House may I congratulate my hon. Friend on receiving in Ukraine earlier this month the presidential Order of Merit for her work on this area? We are supporting a new tracing mechanism being used in Ukraine, and since September it has already identified an extra 600 children stolen by the Russians and forcibly held, and attempted indoctrination of the exact kind that my hon. Friend is campaigning against.

T9. [908318] **Mr Andrew Snowden** (Fylde) (Con): Earlier I asked the Secretary of State if he would confirm an order of 25 Typhoons for the RAF after claiming the Government were backing British jobs, but the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry deployed the power of waffle to avoid answering the question. Just to be absolutely clear, I did welcome Turkey's order of Typhoons, but, as I know and as he knows, it will not come anywhere near close to closing the skills gap between now and Tempest. Would the Secretary of State like to clarify this: will there be an order of 25 Typhoons for the RAF in the defence investment plan?

John Healey: My hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry did not just mention the record export deal that we managed to secure with Turkey—£8 billion-worth that will be boosting the British economy, principally in the hon. Gentleman's part of the north-west. The hon. Gentleman also fails to welcome the investment of half a billion pounds in new radars for the Typhoons. This is part of building up our UK defence base and part of a 15% increase under this Government in defence investment going to his region.

T10. [908319] **Yuan Yang** (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): Reading is home to a large diaspora of Gurkha veterans; we are proud of their service and grateful for their sacrifices. Following the recent elections in Nepal, will the Minister work with the new Nepalese leadership to address collaboratively the issues these Gurkha veterans still face in the UK, and will she visit with me their community centre in Reading—The Forgotten British Gurkha—to assure them that they are far from forgotten?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that point. I know from my own time of service in the Army just how vital the Gurkhas are and their hugely high standards of professionalism. We in this country have a special relationship with them, which we must never, ever forget. I have met regularly, including recently, with representatives and will continue to do so, and I would love to visit her constituency.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): In Devon and Somerset, we are home to some of the finest units of the British armed forces, from Devonport to Lympstone to 40 Commando at Norton Manor and to Royal Marines Barracks Chivenor in north Devon. The geopolitical tectonic plates are shifting, and President Trump's latest comments about NATO only underline the importance of a strong UK defence capability and strategic autonomy. It is often said that if you want peace, you must prepare for war, so after years in which successive Conservative Governments hollowed out our armed forces—QED—will the Minister outline how the Government intend to ensure that this country is properly equipped to defend itself in the event of a major conflict? *[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. The answers will come from the Government side, not the Opposition.

John Healey: We invested £8 billion more in defence in our first year than the Conservative Government did in their last year, with a total of £270 billion into defence in this Parliament alone and a vision for the next 10 years set out in our strategic defence review.

Michael Payne (Gedling) (Lab): In just 18 months this Government have ended the disastrous 1996 Tory privatisation of military housing, which cost the taxpayer billions of pounds. We have repaired 1,000 military homes in the poorest condition ahead of schedule, and we have kick-started a landmark £9 billion repair and renewal of 36,000 forces homes. Does the Minister agree that this is more action in 18 months than the last lot managed in 14 years?

Louise Sandher-Jones: The last Government had 14 years to fix defence family housing and failed, delivering instead record low levels of satisfaction. We have reversed that disastrous privatisation of our military housing, we have a landmark housing strategy to renew or repair nine in 10 homes, and we are creating a new defence housing service. That is how to put the interests of British service personnel first.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): My constituent, Vijay Odedra, has been telling me how his small business, CapnoTrainer, has been working with the Royal Navy to improve the fighting capacity and resilience of our sailors. While we wait for the defence investment plan, will the Secretary of State tell us what steps he has in mind to harness the innovation in our small and medium-sized enterprise sector?

Luke Pollard: I welcome the hon. Gentleman promoting a defence SME. There are defence SMEs in every constituency that do a good job. We created the Defence Office for Small Business Growth to support more SMEs in gaining defence contracts and to increase the

direct spend that the Ministry of Defence has with them. I am very happy to meet him to discuss the SME that he mentions.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): The Office for National Statistics has confirmed that it is considering taking the veterans question off the census for 2031. Witnesses before the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill clearly thought that question provided important data about where our veterans are. Will the Secretary of State engage with the ONS to emphasise the importance of the veterans question?

Louise Sandher-Jones: My hon. Friend is exactly right to point out just how valuable that question is. It should be asked. It is valuable in setting out data to enable us to go forward. I will absolutely take up that issue.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): In 2020, the now Prime Minister proposed legislation to ensure that any UK military action could take place only if there were a legal justification, a viable objective and the consent of the Commons. Does the Secretary of State endorse the principles outlined by his party leader, and will he therefore support my Armed Conflict (Requirements) Bill?

John Healey: I am very happy to look at the hon. Lady's Bill, but in recent weeks the Prime Minister has reasserted exactly the basis on which any UK military forces are committed into conflict.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Many United States service personnel from RAF Lakenheath and RAF Mildenhall live off base in Bury St Edmunds. Three planes from Lakenheath were shot down in friendly fire over Kuwait last week. Fortunately, the pilots were rescued. Mildenhall is home to a large fleet of aerial refuelling tankers. I do not know whether it was a tanker from Mildenhall that was lost, but I do know that there are six grieving families right now. Will the Secretary of State join me in extending our support and sincere condolences to our brave United States families? Wherever they are, they are in our thoughts.

John Healey: I will indeed. My hon. Friend speaks for the House, and it is a message that I made sure the Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth, heard directly from me on behalf of the UK people.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): The Secretary of State is a former distinguished Treasury Minister. Government is about taking decisions when things change. It is welcome that the Chancellor has addressed the heating oil crisis, but what will the Secretary of State do to make the Chancellor come to terms with the changes over the last few weeks, and to provide some additional support so that the defence investment plan will do justice to his ambitions?

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman is right about the rising demands on defence. That point was reflected in the Prime Minister's speech to the Munich conference last month, in which he said that

"hard power...is the currency of the age".

We know that we need to spend more faster.

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): Last month, I joined several Members from across the House in Ukraine for the fourth anniversary of Putin's illegal invasion. The mood was very different from the previous year, after an extremely harsh winter and Putin's bombardment of the power networks. Can the Secretary of State give assurances that we will not only stand by Ukraine with everything going on in the middle east, but help them and support them in fixing key infrastructure, so that 400,000 people in Kyiv are not living without power?

John Healey: My hon. Friend is right, and I welcome the visit that he paid to Ukraine. We are indeed doing what we can to help Ukraine defend its critical civilian infrastructure targeted by Putin, and we are stepping up our military support to Ukraine in the way I have reported to the House today.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I have just returned from visiting Ukraine last week. It is clear to me that Ukraine still needs help with procurement of missiles, interceptors and sanctions on the shadow fleet, but the role of the US also remains critical. Does the Secretary of State think that it really helps persuade the US to stay strong on Ukraine, when, as a close ally, the UK U-turns over the use of our air bases to attack Iran?

John Healey: The decision to accept the fresh US request to use our bases in order to strike Iran's missile location was clearly set out at the time. I welcome—the House welcomes—her visit to Ukraine. In our support of Ukraine, it is enormously encouraging that Members from both sides of the House are regularly in Ukraine to reinforce this country's continued support for its fight against Putin.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): Following last week's welcome announcement of defence investment in Scotland, will the Minister provide an update on the plan to take forward Programme Euston at Faslane? Does he agree that the skilled workforce at the Methil yard in my constituency, which was saved by this Government, will provide excellent capacity to deliver that vital contract?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for his continued advocacy. I have met him—and will no doubt meet him again very soon—to discuss this. We will continue to invest in shipbuilding infrastructure across the UK. As we approach decisions on Programme Euston, we will be sure to keep the House informed.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): There is widespread concern about the Government sticking to the decision made in 2016 to shut Army Training Regiment Winchester, which trains 20% of our troops. Has an impact assessment been carried out, and have the Government spoken with commanders at Pirbright and Winchester to ensure that they can not only maintain training capacity but increase it if necessary?

Louise Sandher-Jones: The Government undertake detailed impact work. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that there is no impact on training capability. I am

pleased to say that we are increasing the number of people who are starting training—no thanks to the previous Government.

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): A new partnership between New College Lanarkshire and Cairnhill Structures—a steel-fabricating company in Coatbridge—begins today. The Engineering Futures programme aims to give local people a start in engineering trades such as welding, fabrication and computer-aided design, which are all essential to strengthen our skills base and increase the number of defence jobs. What steps will my right hon. Friend take to promote similar schemes across Scotland?

Luke Pollard: I praise New College Lanarkshire for its work. That is precisely why we wanted to invest in not one but two Scottish defence technical excellence colleges. I hope that the Scottish Government will be able to match the commitment that this Labour Government have made to deliver for young people in Scotland, as my hon. Friend says.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Further to the question from the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee, the hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson), offshore energy infrastructure needs to be protected. The strategic defence review did not specifically mention moveable assets such as platforms, floating production, storage and offloading units, or rigs. Can the Secretary of State confirm that they will be considered as part of our energy security, and what will the Ministry of Defence do to ensure their security now and in the future?

John Healey: On the contrary, the strategic defence review placed greater emphasis on the need to step up our homeland security and defence. That includes the critical undersea infrastructure on which we depend.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry mentioned Exercise Titan Storm in the context of Ajax. On 1 January, I asked the Ministry of Defence a named-day question—which was due an answer by 7 January—about how many noise and vibration injuries had been sustained up to Exercise Titan Storm. Before Defence Ministers leave the Chamber, may I ask for your advice on how best to elicit an answer, which is now over two months late?

Mr Speaker: Does a Front Bencher wish to respond? No? I will deal with it, then.

This is totally unacceptable. A named-day question should be answered: I cannot believe that something asked in January has still not been answered. May I ask the Secretary of State to look into that and ensure that questions are answered? It is not good enough. Members are representing their constituents, including people who are serving and those who may be serving in this contract. Please, I say to the Government, take this House more seriously. Members of Parliament are having a very bad time from Government, who seem to have a total disregard for us.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Is it similar to the previous point of order?

Mark Pritchard: It is. May I thank you for your comments, Mr Speaker?

The next Defence questions will be on 10 May. We are all aware of the recess, but our armed forces personnel will be in harm's way during that period—many of them are my constituents, and they are all represented

across the House. May I look to you, Mr Speaker, to allow for urgent questions and particularly statements where necessary, as you always do, to be given by the Defence team in that period? There is a very long period of time until 10 May, given that we have armed forces personnel on duty right now.

Mr Speaker: I am not going to carry on the conversation. I think the right hon. Member has put his point on the record.

Speaker's Statement

3.49 pm

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the next item of business, I should note the recent death of Phil Woolas, who served as the Member of Parliament for Oldham East and Saddleworth between 1997 and 2010 and held several ministerial posts. The thoughts of all of us former colleagues are with Tracey, his sons and the rest of his family and friends. I have to say to the Secretary of State for Defence that I know how close you were to him, and we really appreciated how you kept us all informed with your regular visits.

Strait of Hormuz

3.50 pm

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if she will make a statement on the steps she is taking to secure the reopening of the strait of Hormuz.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her question. I should say that the Foreign Secretary will provide a wider update to the House tomorrow morning on the UK's approach to the situation in the middle east, including the conflict in Iran, escalation in Lebanon, our consular response and her diplomatic engagement, including her recent visit to Saudi Arabia over the weekend, which will provide the possibility for further questions on a much wider range of issues.

Let me turn to the right hon. Lady's question. Iran's reckless actions in the strait of Hormuz are having damaging consequences for the global economy and putting the lives of those aboard civilian vessels in danger. Iran has struck several commercial ships in the last few days, and its actions have put a fifth of the world's oil supply effectively on hold. A ministerial colleague will shortly update the House on the steps that this Government are taking to provide help to those affected in the UK who most need it.

Last week, we joined 31 other countries and the International Energy Agency in agreeing a co-ordinated release of 400 million barrels of oil, including 13.5 million barrels from the UK, which is the biggest-ever release in the IEA's history. As the Prime Minister said this morning, we are working with all our allies and partners, including our European partners, on how we can restore freedom of navigation in the region as quickly as possible and ease the economic impacts. That is not a simple task, but we have to reopen the strait of Hormuz to ensure stability in the market.

The Prime Minister spoke with President Trump yesterday on the importance of reopening the strait of Hormuz. The Foreign Secretary was in Riyadh in recent days, showing support for our partners across the region who face continuing strikes. She discussed the impact of Iran's actions with Gulf Co-operation Council Foreign Ministers and the importance of maintaining energy security and supply. As we speak, she is on a call with Secretary of State Rubio on this very crisis, and the Defence Secretary has just been answering questions on these issues.

I assure you, Mr Speaker, and the whole House that the Government will continue to work towards a swift resolution of the situation in the middle east to protect our people and our allies and to reduce the cost of living for working people in this country.

Priti Patel: This is a moment for Britain to stand tall and work intensively with our allies. With the despotic Iranian regime continuing to attack international shipping in the strait of Hormuz, urgent action is required to reopen safe shipping routes, protect lives and support trade and economic stability.

We all feel the economic cost of Iran's actions. This morning, the Prime Minister told the press, not the House:

"We are working with all our allies...to bring together a viable collective plan that can restore freedom of navigation in the region as quickly as possible."

I recognise that this is not straightforward, but where is that plan? What measures are being considered? The British public need to know what the Government are doing to protect our economic and national security.

There are currently no destroyers in the middle east. They can operate at a very long range and can take down projectiles, and they can also provide cover for minehunter vessels. When will the Government send one?

Under this Government, there are no minehunters at our naval base in Bahrain—a base designed to host a fleet of minehunters. Are the Government working urgently to bring minehunters back to Bahrain to strengthen capacity and capabilities at that base and in the region?

Are the Government working with our allies to assess the viability of striking targets that threaten international shipping, just as happened against the Houthi targets in Yemen?

What action is being taken to protect critics of the Iranian regime and journalists from acts of transnational repression by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps?

Will the Government lead a diplomatic effort to ensure that Russia does not profit from this crisis? Will the Minister reaffirm that Britain will continue going further in its actions on Russia and oil refineries fuelling the war?

With our friends in the Gulf being so brazenly under attack from Iran, what assurances did the Foreign Secretary give them during her visit about Britain's presence in the region and actions to protect our bases? Did she make any progress on increasing the number of British nationals who can return home, bearing in mind the disruption to flights that has taken place today?

This is a hugely consequential moment for the world. Britain cannot stand by and sit on the fence.

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Lady asks very important questions about the safety of British nationals, our allies and others, and about the economic impact. She has also rightly raised the issue of Russia and Ukraine. We cannot allow this situation to in any way become a bonanza for Putin in his war against Ukraine. I can assure her that we are absolutely committed to continuing our economic pressure on Russia. I spoke to my Ukrainian counterpart just last week to reassure him of that.

The Prime Minister has set out very clearly that the strait of Hormuz is vital, both to the international economy and to security. We are in continued conversations with European allies and with the United States. These questions are very complex, and any plans must be multilateral, with as many nations as possible taking part. I am not going to get into detailed discussions in the Chamber, but the Defence Secretary has already spoken about the resources that we prepositioned in the region—the Prime Minister has been clear about that, as have the Foreign Secretary and I. There are capabilities, such as autonomous minehunting, and we have been taking substantial actions to support allies and partners. After the GCC's meeting with the Foreign Secretary,

it set out very clearly that it thanked the UK for our solidarity with the countries in the GCC and our strong and long-standing commitment to their security, stability and territorial integrity. That was in the statement issued by Ministers after they met the Foreign Secretary at the weekend.

We have been very clear about our objectives. The first of those is to protect our people in the region. Secondly, while taking the actions necessary to defend ourselves and our allies, we will not be drawn into the wider war. We will continue working towards a swift resolution that brings security and stability back to the region, but crucially also stops the Iranian threat to its neighbours. We all want to see an end to this war as quickly as possible, because the longer it goes on, the more dangerous the situation becomes and the worse it is for the cost of living back home. That is exactly why the Prime Minister has set out decisive action today.

We are taking measures to support UK citizens who will be affected by energy prices, whether on heating oil—which a ministerial colleague will speak about shortly—the energy price cap, or our continued investment in energy security and capability in the UK. We cannot allow our energy security to be at the whims of the ayatollahs, Vladimir Putin or anyone else. As I have set out, we have acted alongside other countries to release emergency oil stocks at a level that is completely unprecedented, but ultimately we must reopen the strait of Hormuz to ensure stability in the market. That is not a simple task, so I repeat that we will work with allies, including European partners, to bring together a viable and collective plan to restore freedom of navigation.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The Joint Maritime Security Centre has designated the Persian gulf situation as critical, and Nautilus International, the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers and the UK Chamber of Shipping have designated the strait of Hormuz, the Persian gulf and the gulf of Oman as a warlike area way into next month. Protecting the safety of seafarers and UK-flagged vessels is paramount, so will the Minister continue to commit to upholding the international convention for the safety of life at sea?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise these issues. The extraordinary, reckless actions that Iran has been taking threaten not only those international shipping routes but the crews serving on board those vessels, who should be foremost in all our minds. Coming from a city with a proud merchant navy tradition, I am only too aware of the sacrifices made across multiple generations. I have been speaking closely with a range of partners in recent days, including across the Mediterranean—with our partners in Malta, Cyprus, Greece and elsewhere—and we are working very closely through the Department for Transport and other agencies to ensure that the safety and security of shipping is maintained and restored.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Households across the UK are fearful of rising prices at the pumps and for heating their homes. The closure of the strait of Hormuz by Iran will worsen the serious situation, yet it should have come as no surprise. In response,

[Calum Miller]

President Trump's position is both irresponsible and inconsistent. One week, he says that he has no need for UK warships to support his unilateral action, because he has already won; the next, he says that we must send ships. One day, he suspends sanctions on Russian oil in a desperate, dangerous attempt to bring down oil prices; the next, he says that he might bomb the Iranian facility at Kharg island "for fun". The UK should be leading on the world stage at a time like this, not following Trump like a poodle, or succumbing to his bullying, as the Conservatives and the Reform party have advocated. Can the Minister state what specific actions the UK is taking with our reliable allies to press the US, Israel and Iran to scale back hostilities? Will the Minister commit to seeking agreement at the UN Security Council on a collective approach to open the strait?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman has clearly set out his concerns. The Prime Minister has taken a clear and level-headed approach, in Britain's national interest, to this crisis, taking each decision as it comes and always prioritising the protection of our people, our allies and our interests. That is the approach he will continue to take in this crisis. He has been clear that we have to reopen the strait of Hormuz to ensure stability in the market for the very reasons that the hon. Gentleman has set out, but that is no simple task. That is why we are working with all our allies, including European partners, to bring together a viable and collective plan to restore freedom of navigation.

The hon. Gentleman raises issues relating to Ukraine, as did the shadow Foreign Secretary. I need to be clear that decisions made by the United States about its own sanctions are a matter for the US. We are clear that we will continue to ratchet up our own measures to put pressure on the Kremlin to change course and to support Ukraine in the pursuit of a just and lasting peace. To be clear, the US has announced a temporary waiver of some sanctions on Indian refiners to purchase Russian oil, but the US Treasury Secretary made clear that that licence was deliberately short term. Matters for the US are obviously for the US. We will continue to strengthen our measures.

With regard to the impact on people here at home, the Prime Minister has announced the capping of energy bills until the end of June, the extension of the fuel duty cut and the £53 million of support we are giving to rural communities with the cost of heating oil. We are continuing to invest in our energy security, which is crucial.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Given Iran's reckless behaviour, it is of course right that the Prime Minister has made sure that our brave forces are protecting our allies and our people, and that UK bases are used for defensive operations. With regard to the strait of Hormuz and any further action that we may or may not take, can the Minister confirm that we will not get drawn into a wider conflict that we did not start?

Stephen Doughty: I simply refer my hon. Friend to the comments that the Prime Minister made on this very issue this morning. He said that we will not get drawn into a wider war, but we want to see the strait of Hormuz reopened. We will work with our allies, including European partners, to bring together a viable and collective plan to do that, but I will not hypothesise about that today.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): For centuries, the United Kingdom has been willing to commit its naval resources to defend free movement on the seas. Does the Minister agree that now is another such occasion when we should do so, and that if we fail to do so, we will pay the price here in higher oil prices and overseas in terms of the perception of the United Kingdom being willing to stand up for the interests of its friends and allies in the Gulf? Furthermore, can he assure the House that this will be considered by the Government as a totally separate question from the United Kingdom's participation in Operation Epic Fury?

Stephen Doughty: The Prime Minister set out clearly this morning the approach that he will take to this issue, and the Defence Secretary has just been answering questions on these matters. The Prime Minister set out clearly what steps we are taking to mitigate the impact on UK citizens and the steps we are taking globally. We all want to see the strait reopened, but we must have a viable plan, and we will work with allies on that.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his detailed responses. He will know, as many of us in the Chamber do, that many residents across our country are really concerned about the conflict in the Persian gulf. Can he reassure me and the House that discussions are ongoing with the Department and Cabinet colleagues in assessing the different scenarios of the conflict?

Stephen Doughty: I entirely understand the concern that is felt by my hon. Friend's constituents, and indeed many other constituents up and down the country, including my own. That is exactly why the Prime Minister has set out the decisive action that we are taking in relation to energy bills, fuel duty, support on heating oil and, of course, our continued investment in energy security in this country. Iran could of course stop its reckless and dangerous attacks on shipping and reopen the strait of Hormuz, and we will continue to engage with allies on what we can do.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Do the Government not realise that this nation is already at war? Iran is firing on sovereign British territory, and Russia has already proclaimed that it is at war with the United Kingdom. Is it not time to put the whole Government on to a war footing, because otherwise we will carry on running behind the curve as we have over this recent matter of the strait of Hormuz?

Stephen Doughty: I simply do not accept the hon. Gentleman's assertion that we have been running behind the curve. We have set out in the House on a number of occasions the measures that we took before this conflict happened and the resources that were pre-deployed to the region, in the defence of Cyprus and other key allies and partners. The Prime Minister has described very clearly all the support that we are putting in place, whether it is our Typhoons, our F-35s, our anti-drone measures or our air defence systems. That is why, speaking to the Foreign Secretary at the weekend, the GCC welcomed the support and solidarity that we have shown, and it is why we continue to work with allies and partners on a daily basis.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): The Prime Minister was right when he said today that

“we will not be drawn into the wider war”.

But the US President is now requesting UK military assets to police the strait of Hormuz. This is exactly the sort of mission creep that many have warned against. Discussing NATO this morning, General Sir Nick Carter said that it was

“not...for one of the allies to go on a war of choice and then oblige everybody else to follow.”

Can the Minister confirm that the UK will not provide further military assets for this US war, on which President Trump did not consult the UK and which the UK public do not support, or that the House will be able to vote on any such proposal?

Stephen Doughty: The Prime Minister has set out very clearly the decision-making process that he and the Cabinet have been through. He has been very clear about the need for us to defend our allies and partners, but he has also been clear about the fact that, in relation to the strait of Hormuz, this is not a simple task. We will be working with allies, including European partners, to bring forward a viable and collective plan.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): Given the fate of the Russian Black sea fleet from maritime drones and that of ground forces from first-person view drones, does the Minister agree that there is unlikely to be a military solution to reopen the confined waters of Hormuz, and that we therefore need to find a diplomatic solution as quickly as possible?

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree that we need further diplomatic action, and that is exactly what the Foreign Secretary and others, including the Minister for the middle east—my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer)—the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and me, have been engaged in during recent days and weeks. The hon. Gentleman raised the importance of different drone capabilities; when it comes to the wider situation and the threat that we face from drones, we work with partners, such as those I saw in Latvia just a few weeks ago, to develop the very best in capability and to learn the important lessons of Russia’s brutal war against Ukraine.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): As has been said, Trump and Netanyahu launched this war without consultation. They did it unilaterally, and recklessly and irresponsibly, and it was absolutely predictable that the strait would be threatened in this way. Yet some shipping is moving, is it not? Some shipping is going to our ally, India, because it is not engaged in the war, because it is at peace with Iran. Does that not teach us the lesson that we need to bring about peace, that that should be our main and prime purpose in negotiating a peaceful settlement, and that the first step towards that is de-escalation?

Stephen Doughty: Let me first make it absolutely clear that Iran’s regime has been appalling, and that what it has done to its own citizens has been reckless. It cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear weapon. Its reckless attacks, not only on shipping but on civilians,

and on our allies and partners across the Gulf, and indeed across the wider region, are absolutely appalling. It could stop this right now. However, the Prime Minister has been very clear about the fact that our decisions—the decisions of the United Kingdom—will be based on a calm and level-headed assessment of the British national interest at every stage.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What is the Minister’s latest assessment of the threat of transnational oppression carried out by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps?

Stephen Doughty: I am obviously not going to get into a detailed assessment on the Floor of the House, but the right hon. Gentleman will know that we have faced transnational repression threats, not only from Iran but from other countries. The Security Minister, other colleagues and I are absolutely united in doing everything we can to defend the UK against that. We cannot allow Iran, or indeed other hostile states that seek to do harm outside their borders, to operate on our streets in this way.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): This Government are absolutely right to refuse to take part in the war being waged by the United States and Israel. Will the Minister confirm to the House that we are going to put British interests first in everything we do? That includes protecting the global economy, and protecting all our constituents’ energy bills.

Stephen Doughty: I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend on that. That is exactly what the Prime Minister has set out today: not only how we will take these decisions in the British interest, but the measures we are taking to meet the needs of the British people, who are particularly affected by the energy consequences of this war.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): The Government previously said that the United States could use UK airfields only for the specific and limited purposes of defending against Iran’s reckless attacks, yet we know that RAF Fairford has been used by the United States to launch B-52 bombers carrying up to 24 cruise missiles at a time. Given President Trump’s reckless and dangerous language about Kharg island at the weekend, when he said that “we may hit it a few more times just for fun”,

what guarantees can the Minister give this House that none of the missions coming from the UK will target civilians or civilian infrastructure?

Stephen Doughty: I am simply not going to get into hypotheticals on the Floor of the House. What I can say is that, as the hon. Gentleman well knows, the Prime Minister has been very clear about the principles on which he took the first decision and the principles on which he took the second decision. He has been very, very clear about that.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): A number of Arab ambassadors attended a meeting in the House of Commons last week. They were clear that the military action undertaken by Israel and the US emanated from the action that we have seen over more than two years in Gaza, and that the solution

[Debbie Abrahams]

needed meaningful peace in the area. What are Ministers doing specifically about Palestine, given its importance in securing a lasting peace in the region as a whole?

Stephen Doughty: We continue to engage closely with the Palestinian authorities and, of course, with the Palestinian ambassador here in the UK. As I said, the Foreign Secretary was in the region at the weekend and engaged closely with Foreign Ministers from across the region. We will continue to work with all partners in the pursuit of stability, security and peace across the whole region.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Closing the strait of Hormuz is Iran's most predictable threat, yet it appears that no plan to reopen it was ready to be enacted. Equally, on Cyprus, it appears that there was either an intelligence or a planning failure, which underestimated Iran's intent or capability. Will the Government review whether adequate planning and assessments are taking place, and will the Minister give a firm commitment that direct representations will be made to both the US and Israel to make sure that no action takes place around Evin prison? The Foremans and other British nationals are still being held hostage there, and we have heard nothing from the Government on making sure that they are protected—unlike the action last summer, when Evin prison was bombed.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Lady will know that the Minister for the middle east, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), spoke about the case of the Foremans the other day, and I am sure that the Foreign Secretary will do so tomorrow if she is asked about it. I have been very clear about the importance of protecting not only our interests and bases in Cyprus, but the defence and security of Cyprus, and I am in regular contact with Foreign Minister Kombos and colleagues in Cyprus. Just for the record, I can confirm that the sovereign base areas on the island of Cyprus are not being used, and have not been used, by US bombers for strikes on Iran, but we will continue to work with partners across the region. It is simply not correct to say that we were not prepared. We had resources and capability in place, and we have provided further capability and resources in recent days.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Rather than adopting the Conservatives' hokey-cokey, in-out policy on this conflict, does the Minister agree that any commitments to UK military support in the strait of Hormuz must be subject to time-bound operational objectives? Can he confirm that the clarification of such time-bound operational objectives for this conflict is being pursued with the US Department of War?

Stephen Doughty: I will obviously not go into the detail of specific conversations, but I can say that the Prime Minister has been very clear about the way he approaches these issues. He does so in a way that is in the British national interest—in a calm, level-headed and lawful way that is in the interests of our people and our allies. The Opposition have been all over the place on this. As for the Reform party, its Members are again conspicuous by their absence; they are not even in the Chamber.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): The US President has suggested that the future of NATO may depend on countries falling into line with him, and supporting him on reopening this shipping channel. Does the Minister believe that it is acceptable for that type of pressure to be applied to sovereign nations, when there is still no evidence that this war has a legal basis, or that there is a plan for it?

Stephen Doughty: This country remains absolutely committed to NATO—we have a NATO-first policy—and the President has made very clear his commitment to article 5 and to NATO; that is not in any doubt. As I have said, we continue to engage with allies, including European partners, on viable and credible options for reopening the strait of Hormuz, but I will not go into further details at this time.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): The reality is that Trump's warmongering and illegal war not only risk plunging the middle east into a dangerous conflict, but are now impacting people here at home. Does the Minister accept that the only lasting and right way forward is to continue to push for de-escalation and an immediate end to this illegal war?

Stephen Doughty: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that we need a swift resolution. We all want peace, stability and security in the region. Of course, Iran could end this by ending its reckless attacks on shipping, on allies in the region and on civilians, and it could do that right now.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Surely the problem we have is that the Government, having decided not to be involved in this, and then literally a day later deciding that they would be involved by granting America the use of our bases, have brought us into a war. Like it or not, that is where we are. I do not understand what "the wider war" means, when we are in the war; that is what is happening with the strait of Hormuz right now. The Government are playing with words in a sort of tautological tap dance because they have no idea what they should be doing, as they did not want to be here in the first place, but they are. The Minister should be honest: we are in the war. The question for him really is: what are we going to do about the strait of Hormuz, and what assets will we put there?

Stephen Doughty: I have been very clear: we have to reopen the strait of Hormuz to ensure stability in the market, but that is not a simple task. To suggest that it is simple would not be doing it justice. [Interruption.] No, I mean the tenor of the questions that have been asked. As I have said, we are working with all our allies, including European partners, to bring together a viable, collective plan.

David Baines (St Helens North) (Lab): The shadow Foreign Secretary said that this was "a moment for Britain to stand tall", and I agree with her, which is why I was pleased to see the Prime Minister and this Government stand strong, instead of running blindly into another middle east war with no clear plan. Can the Minister assure me and the House that we will continue to act in the British national interest, and the interests of British nationals in the region?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely can assure my hon. Friend of that. I must say that I thought the shadow Foreign Secretary asked some very reasonable questions, but I have been surprised by some of the tone and commentary coming from the Opposition Benches and the media. At times like these, when we have British armed forces bravely defending allies and taking action, I would hope to see more unity and coming together on such a crucial issue. These are complex and difficult issues, and to suggest otherwise, or engage in party political point scoring, is not the right way forward.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The Minister and the Prime Minister have talked about the UK being willing to participate in a “viable, collective plan” to reopen the strait of Hormuz, but does the Minister really think that President Trump has a viable plan, given that he had no plan for the illegal war, nor any legal justification for the war he has launched? Given that, will the UK be absolutely unequivocal that we will not give in to Trump’s bullying demands, but will instead stand up for British interests, and will we make it absolutely clear that we will not be dragged into a catastrophic, illegal war in the middle east?

Stephen Doughty: Perhaps the hon. Lady could tell us how her party would defend the British national interest without spending money on defence, or indeed by leaving NATO—absolutely crackers.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): My constituents consistently say to me that they support the Prime Minister’s decision not to take us into this war. My thoughts—and, I am sure, those of the whole House—are with our brave service people who are stationed in the middle east and across the Mediterranean. Will the Minister please update the House on discussions he has been having with his Cypriot counterpart on the defence of the Akrotiri base and the wider island?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I think all our thoughts are not only with our brave armed forces personnel in action in defence of allies and our interests, but their families and all those affected, including British civilians who remain in the middle east, and merchant shipping crews. She is absolutely right to ask about Cyprus. I am in regular contact with Foreign Minister Kombos and the Cypriot Government. I am also in regular contact with our administrator of the sovereign base areas. I can absolutely assure her that the protection of our bases, and the defence and security of Cyprus, are foremost in my mind and that of the Government.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Some things never change in naval warfare, and one of the things that never change is the unsuitability of surface vessels for forcing a way through narrow, contested straits. Over 100 years ago, the French and the British learned that when, between them, they lost three battleships in an afternoon to a single German submarine in the Dardanelles. Will the Minister therefore advise President Trump that while we would like to help him reopen the strait of Hormuz, the way to do it is not with a billion-pound warship escorting vulnerable tankers, but with counter-drone technology of the sort that Ukraine can help him to supply, providing he has the decency to ask President Zelensky for some help?

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman asks a question with his usual thoughtfulness and experience, and he rightly sets out the complexity of the situation. That is exactly why we must approach this issue with a credible and viable plan. We all have a shared objective; we need to see the strait reopened, and we are engaging with allies, including European partners, on that very issue.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Following on from the question by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), what discussions is the Foreign Secretary having in the Gulf on the future viability of convoys, and on other actions? Can the Minister assure me and the House that plans will be put in place for such convoys, when it is safe to do so?

Stephen Doughty: I will not get into specific hypothetical scenarios, but we are engaged with a wide range of partners across the region. That is why the Foreign Secretary was speaking with Gulf partners this week at the Gulf Co-operation Council. She was engaged with Saudi counterparts and Foreign Ministers. They expressed their thanks for Britain’s solidarity and engagement on these crucial issues, which have an impact on their economies, and on the wider defence and security needs across the Gulf.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Since there is no plan to reopen the strait, it seems that the price of fertiliser will skyrocket. What advice does the Minister have for farmers in the northern hemisphere who would normally be buying fertiliser at this time to support spring plantings? Many are making a decision on whether to go ahead with those plantings. He will know that if they do not, that will have dire implications for food prices and the cost of living.

Stephen Doughty: The right hon. Gentleman rightly sets out a very important issue for rural communities across this country. If I may, Mr Speaker, I will get one of my colleagues in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs to write to him with the detail. The issue is not only the direct impact on oil and gas prices, but the impact on inflation, fertiliser and supply chains more generally. He is right to raise those issues, and I will come back to him with further details.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Israel and the US started this illegal war, but Trump is now demanding that NATO allies support him in opening up this critical waterway. European countries are not bending. Can the Minister give an assurance that this country will not bend, and that we will be given a vote on any military action?

Stephen Doughty: The Prime Minister set out the clear, calm and logical approach that he has taken in all the decisions that he has had to take on these important issues, and I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend that that approach will continue. We all want to see the strait reopened to ensure stability in the market, but for the reasons that were just expressed, that is not a simple task. That is why we are working with all our allies, including our European partners, on this issue.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Given that the British public abhor the idea of being drawn into another war, and that some Members of this House are already

[Mr Adnan Hussain]

calling for an escalation into military involvement without addressing the potentially catastrophic consequences, will the Minister reassure the House that the Government will prioritise diplomacy and de-escalation over drawing this country into deeper military involvement?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman will have heard quite clearly what the Prime Minister had to say on these issues this morning.

Michael Payne (Gedling) (Lab): The Minister will be aware that alongside the escalation of closing the strait, the repressive regime in Iran continues to target female activists relentlessly. Will he ensure that the work being spearheaded by the Foreign Secretary in the Foreign Office to tackle violence against women and girls globally includes specific initiatives to support the brave women and girls of Iran?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is right to raise the absolutely horrific circumstances for women and girls in Iran; this has, of course, been going on for many years. He knows the priority that the Foreign Secretary, and indeed all Ministers, give to this issue. The situation inside Iran is obviously extraordinarily difficult, and we do not have a full picture of what is happening there, but I can assure him that this will continue to be a priority.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): It is a known known that the Iranian regime will close down the strait of Hormuz in a period of conflict. Back in June 2025, I asked the former Foreign Secretary, now the Deputy Prime Minister, what contingencies we had in place to offset against that happening. He responded:

“I assure the hon. Member that these issues are of course under consideration,”

and that—this is the key part—

“All contingencies are in place.”—[*Official Report*, 23 June 2025; Vol. 769, c. 842.]

I have listened to the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and the FCDO Minister, and those remarks just do not add up. What has changed?

Stephen Doughty: I have been very clear today, as has the Prime Minister. We have to reopen the strait of Hormuz to ensure stability in the market. That is not a simple task, as the hon. Gentleman will know well, given his experience. That is why we are engaged with our allies on forming credible and viable plans.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Fresh from the doorsteps of Arthurs Hill, West Denton and Blakelaw, I can confirm that this is an issue of real concern and some fear across Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West, and that there is overwhelming support for the Government’s decision not to join Israel and the US in initiating an un-thought-through war in one of the world’s most complex and unstable regions. The Foreign Secretary has emphasised how closely Iran and Russia are allied; Iran provides the drones for Russia to use in Ukraine. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact of the US lessening sanctions on Russia on Russia’s ability to support its ally Iran?

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the connections between Russia and Iran; having been in Kyiv when bombardments, likely from Iranian-made drones, were going on, and having seen the devastation that they cause, I think it is clear that that alliance has been in place for some time. It is causing devastation not just in Ukraine, but now across the Gulf. What Iran has been doing is appalling. I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to put maximum pressure on Russia economically—I spoke to my Ukrainian counterpart about this just last week. Obviously, US sanctions are a matter for the US, but I have set out that the Treasury Secretary has announced that the measures in question were temporary and related to oil that was already at sea.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Contrary to what some less well-informed voices from the Conservative Benches have been saying, short of putting ground troops into Iran, there is no military solution that enables us to open the strait of Hormuz. The Iranians are effectively placing civilian shipping at risk with missiles, drones, subs and fast boats; it is very difficult to come up with a military solution to that problem, and Iran can therefore decide whether it wants to reopen the strait. Will the Minister tell the House whether we are getting together with our European allies to deliver a message to the Americans that they need to step down and step away from this to enable Iran to reopen the strait?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman sets out the complexity of the challenge. It is why we need a calm and level-headed approach, which is exactly the approach that the Prime Minister is taking. We are in conversations with European partners on that point and with partners across the Gulf, and as I said, the Foreign Secretary has been speaking to Secretary Rubio while I have been answering this urgent question.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): The Government have learned from the missteps of Iraq, whereas the Conservatives and Reform would repeat them. The Prime Minister is de-escalating in line with the national interest, whereas the Conservatives and Reform would blindly follow President Trump into a war of choice. Will the Minister state for my constituents that he will continue to de-escalate this conflict and to bring down the cost of living, and that he will do that by keeping to the path that the Government have set, which has brought inflation down from 3.4% to 3% and put it on track to hit 2%?

Stephen Doughty: As I said, I have been baffled at times by the position of the Conservatives, let alone Reform, who yet again are not here in the Chamber. I can assure my hon. Friend that the Prime Minister is focused not only on the international aspects but on the domestic aspects. That is why he set out very clearly today the measures to support British people who are worried about their energy bills. Whether it is the energy price cap, addressing the heating oil issue, investment in energy security in this country or fuel duty cuts, the Prime Minister set out very clearly what we are doing to support people here at home.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Minister has insisted that he does not want to get drawn into a wider war, but with the targeting of our civilians and

bases and our economy being strangled, how much wider could the war get? Does he not recognise that Iran has been able to close off the strait of Hormuz as and when it wants to, using its proxies and its geographical position? It is only once Iran learns the lesson that that tactic will not be accepted and that blackmail will not be accepted that that will not be repeated. What is this reluctance? Is it because we do not have the ability or we just do not have the political will?

Stephen Doughty: I am not clear what the right hon. Gentleman is suggesting our policy should be, but I can tell him that the Prime Minister has been very clear about the decisions he has made. The defence of our allies and our interests will always be at the forefront of his mind, as indeed will measures to support citizens who are affected by these issues, including those in Northern Ireland and those who are reliant on heating oil.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his detailed responses on an issue that we are all, across the House, keen to get resolved. On the issue of British nationals returning to the UK—I am pleased to say that those I made representations about to the Prime Minister a couple of weeks ago have been safely returned to my constituency—will the Minister outline what work the Government are doing to support the British airline industry to ensure that all UK citizens are returned home? Last week I had conversations with representatives of the Manchester Airports Group about that.

Stephen Doughty: I am glad that the situation that my hon. Friend raised on behalf of his constituents has been resolved, and I can absolutely assure him that we remain focused on bringing British nationals home. Yesterday, 35 flights arrived back in the UK carrying more than 8,000 British nationals from the region. More than 92,000 British nationals have returned since the start of the war. We have chartered six flights from Muscat and Dubai and we continue to work with airlines, as my hon. Friend requests, to ensure that people can be brought home safely and quickly.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The strait of Hormuz is a narrow body of water, but so is the Red sea. The Houthis have previously set ballistic missiles and drones on commercial ships and caused a lot of damage and disruption, which again has an impact on the global economy. Thus far in the current conflict, the Houthis have been on the sidelines, but that could easily and readily change. What are the Government doing in anticipation of the Houthis getting involved, and what naval assets are in the region or could be deployed to the region quickly in order that there is not a repeat of what we saw with HMS Dragon? If the strait of Hormuz is closed, and then the Red sea is closed, we are going to see a double crisis.

Stephen Doughty: I can assure the right hon. Member that we keep a range of threats and risks under close monitoring. We will always take the steps that we can to protect shipping and our interests and allies in the region, but I am not going to get into the specifics of any individual location.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Over the weekend, France and Italy opened talks with Iran to allow their ships to pass through the strait of Hormuz.

France has limited America's use of its bases to non-combat missions only; Italy has refused to help altogether. With this Labour Government giving a licence to American assets on British bases, there is no hope of our striking a similar deal to let our ships through at present. Will the Government confirm that they will keep all options on the table—including suspending American military operations from our bases—because British citizens must come first, and they must be shielded from bearing the brunt of America and Israel's illegal war?

Stephen Doughty: British citizens do come first. The Prime Minister has set out clearly the basis for the decisions he has made, which includes, of course, the defence of our allies and partners in the Gulf, which I am sure the hon. Member would agree is important, and indeed British citizens and interests in the Gulf. Again, I am not exactly sure what policy he is suggesting we should follow. The Prime Minister will continue to approach this in a calm and level-headed way in the British national interest.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): In January, with impeccable timing, the US withdrew its Avenger class minesweepers from the Arabian gulf and replaced them with littoral combat ships; at roughly the same time, we withdrew HMS Middleton, our last minehunter in the region. As of yesterday, two of those littoral combat ships were seen in Malaysia, several thousand miles away, leaving only one, the USS Canberra, which potentially has the ability to deploy autonomous vehicles. This morning, the Prime Minister said that we would deploy autonomous ships to help clear the minefields, but HMS Stirling Castle—potentially the support ship for that—left Portsmouth only this morning, so it is three weeks away. What is the earliest date when the Minister thinks the strait of Hormuz could begin to be cleared, irrespective of the conversations he is currently having with our allies?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Member will know that it is not for me to answer at the Dispatch Box about US operational matters. He has just had a chance to ask the Defence Secretary questions on detailed UK operational matters. I will not go into the details of specific deployments—where they may or may not be or timelines—because that simply would not be appropriate. This is an extraordinarily complex situation. What we need is a credible and viable plan.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): Given the vital role of Lloyd's of London in underwriting global trade and providing war risk cover to vessels currently stuck in the Persian gulf, what conversations has the Minister had—or what conversations is he aware of—with Lloyd's to ensure that its extraordinary expertise in this area is factored into the Government's developing thinking? What conversations have been had across Government to protect and defend the reputation of Lloyd's against shameful attacks from the MAGA movement in the United States?

Stephen Doughty: I recently met the chair of Lloyd's on wider insurance issues in relation to Ukraine and other matters in which I am sure the hon. Member shares my interest. I do not have the detail of what conversations have gone on in recent days, but I will happily get one of my ministerial colleagues to write to him on the issue.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): The Iranian regime will be carefully studying our actions here in the UK. Only last month, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials attended an Iran national day celebration hosted in London by the Iranian embassy. That was at precisely the same time that thousands of Iranians were being slaughtered on their own streets. Why were officials permitted to go to such an event? Who authorised it? Will officials be allowed to go to such events in the future?

Stephen Doughty: It is my understanding that Ministers were not consulted or indeed advised on that attendance. The issue has been ongoing since, I think, 2015, and was likely to have been under the previous Government as well.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): The Minister has come here to give us a pretty vague response of, "We're in discussions with allies about making a plan," and does not want to give us any more detail than that; I can potentially see why. When he has those discussions with allies, will he please remember that the British taxpayer kindly gifted two Sandown class minehunters to the Ukrainian navy and that we have trained up their crews, who are now at a NATO standard? The Defence Committee visited them in Portsmouth, and they were proud of those credentials. We have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) that Ukraine seems to be leaning into supporting allies in the Gulf. Therefore, when the Minister is having discussions with allies about making a plan, will he bear that in mind? Of course, those craft cannot deploy back to the Black sea because of the Montreux convention, and I believe the crews are there and ready to operate.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman asks an important question. I am not, for obvious reasons, going to get into the detail of individual pieces of kit and equipment, but I welcome the fact that Ukraine has engaged with Gulf partners on the lessons it has learned, particularly in relation to drone technology. That is important. It is, of course, absolutely right that Ukraine's focus remains on its needs and defending itself against Russia's barbarous aggression, and I can assure him that our commitments to Ukraine remain absolutely iron-clad in that regard, but I do not want to get into commenting on individual pieces of kit and equipment.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Listening to some hon. Members this afternoon, one is left wondering whether President Trump or Iran is the enemy. The truth is that our bases have been attacked. Are we not, therefore, inevitably already involved in this conflict? The Government seem not to want to face up to that reality. When it comes to the strait of Hormuz, does it therefore follow that we are simply going to rely on the USA to open it? Have we any plan?

Stephen Doughty: I am afraid that I do not recognise the hon. and learned Gentleman's characterisation of our response. We have British Typhoon and F-35 jets

flying in defence of British people, bases and partners, including Qatar, Cyprus, UAE, Jordan and Bahrain. We have had multiple F-35s, Typhoon jets and ground-based defences shooting down drones. The Defence Secretary has just set out the operational hours and sorties that our brave crews have been flying. We also have HMS Dragon on her way to the eastern Mediterranean, and RFA Lyme Bay has sailed from Gibraltar and is also available for maritime tasks. We also have helicopters and other assets in place, so I simply do not recognise his characterisation.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is suspected that AI systems have been used to target and murder 165 schoolchildren and their teachers using US-made Tomahawks, with further double-tap attacks falling on survivors 40 minutes later. This Government say that tackling violence against women and girls is a priority, but in failing to call out this clear war crime, those words mean nothing as the bodies of children get buried. Will the Minister explain what the UK Government are doing to hold America and Israel to account for these war crimes, and does he share my concerns about the use of AI to kill?

Stephen Doughty: The Defence Secretary has set out our position in relation to autonomous systems and AI, and that is not for me to comment on as a Foreign Office Minister, but it is my understanding that investigations into the incident the hon. Gentleman refers to are ongoing and it would not be appropriate for me to comment on them at this time.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers, for his tone and for his careful use of words. I am very clear on my stance on the principle of the war against the terrorist regime in Iran, but this is not about principle; it is about practicality. Some of my constituents are on the poverty line, and the wages of those who work and are not entitled to Government help no longer cover the bills that they covered three years ago. For those people, the Government must make the right decision and secure the shipping channel. Doing so would not enter us into a war but it would protect our constituents. Will the Minister determine to act in the British interest and work with our allies to secure this essential route?

Stephen Doughty: As always, the hon. Gentleman rightly speaks up for his constituents in Strangford. We all want to see the strait reopened, and it is important that we have conversations with allies on credible and viable ways to do that, but it is also important that we take action here at home. That is why the Prime Minister has acted on the energy price cap, on the fuel duty cuts and on the heating oil support, which I think will be of particular benefit to the hon. Gentleman's constituents. That is on top of the warm home discount and the investment that we are putting into energy security in this country, and I hope that helps his constituents.

Lord Mandelson: Response to Humble Address

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before we come to the urgent question on the Government's response to the Humble Address, I would like to remind the House that Peter Mandelson is the subject of an ongoing police investigation. However, no charges have been brought. The sub judice resolution, therefore, does not currently apply. In that context, it is up to Ministers how they reply, but the House's rules do not prevent them from answering fully. None the less, I know that the House would not wish to do anything that risked prejudicing the investigation, so I gently say to Members that it would be helpful to exercise a degree of restraint in referencing the specific matters under investigation.

4.44 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the Government's compliance with the Humble Address of 4 February 2026 relating to the appointment of Peter Mandelson as His Majesty's ambassador to the United States of America.

The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister (Darren Jones): I updated the House last Wednesday on the Government's response to the Humble Address motion of 4 February, after the first tranche of documents were laid in both Houses in response to that motion. The Government have been clear that they are committed to publishing all documents relevant to the Humble Address, and that further material will be published in due course as officials work through its full scope.

The first tranche, as the title of the document made clear, represented,

"Part of a Return to an Address of the Honourable the House of Commons dated 4 February 2026".

It responded directly to a number of specific elements contained in that motion, namely papers relating to Lord Mandelson's appointment as His Majesty's ambassador and the discussions that subsequently led to his dismissal. As the Government have said previously, there are specific documents that we would like to disclose but which the Metropolitan police has asked us not to in order to avoid prejudicing the ongoing criminal investigation into Peter Mandelson. The Government have agreed to that request. We will publish those documents in the future once the Metropolitan police has confirmed that it will no longer prejudice its investigation.

As a consequence of that, and as I set out to the House on 11 March, the Government have therefore taken the extraordinary step, as agreed with Mr Speaker, of briefing the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), on terms agreed by the Metropolitan police to ensure that there is as much transparency to the House as possible.

As the House understands, the Government must carefully assess the risk of prejudicing UK national security or international relations posed by the release of any official documents. Again, this process is subject to parliamentary oversight. Any such material will be and is in the process of being referred to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament. I thank the

Committee for its assistance and can confirm that this process was also followed regarding the first tranche of material published last week. Outside of this arrangement, the important and well-established constitutional principle that national security and international relations judgments are ultimately for the Government has not changed.

We are continuing the disclosure process for other documents across Government within the scope of the address. Given the breadth of the motion agreed by the House and the large number of materials and Departments involved, this process will take time and necessarily requires careful consideration. Where relevant documents are held, they are being prepared for release through an established process, including the appropriate checks relating to national security, international relations, legal privilege and the protection of personal data.

The Government have acknowledged that the documents published reveal that the appointment process fell short of what is required. As previously set out, the independent adviser looked last week at the process and concluded that he saw no grounds for the investigation that the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), has requested, but as the Prime Minister set out this morning, the inherited process itself was not strong enough. That is why the Prime Minister has already strengthened the process and is committed to strengthening it further in the future. This forms part of wider changes that the Government are bringing forward to improve the system, including a review by the Ethics and Integrity Commission relating to financial disclosures, transparency around lobbying, and the business appointment rules, alongside a review of the national security vetting system.

As I have said, and I know Members across the House will agree, Jeffrey Epstein was a disgusting individual, and Peter Mandelson's decision to put their relationship before his victims and the vulnerable was reprehensible. That is why there is cross-party consensus across the House for transparency and accountability and why the Government are committed to publishing all material relevant to the Humble Address. I will continue to keep the House updated as a matter of priority, as I have done to date, and I commend this statement to the House.

Alex Burghart: Since last Wednesday, it has become increasingly clear that either the Government did not follow due process in their appointment of Peter Mandelson or that they have not disclosed all the relevant documents. In different terms, either the Prime Minister's assurances that full due process was followed were misleading, or the Government have not complied with the Humble Address. Either would be a contempt of Parliament.

Last Wednesday, the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister said:

"All the documents that are available in relation to Peter Mandelson's appointment and dismissal are published...today, subject to those that have been held back by the Metropolitan police."—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2026; Vol. 782, c. 371.]

But many, many documents are missing. I have detailed 56 documents in a letter that I sent him. To give a few examples, there is no prime ministerial readout on the advice that the Prime Minister received. This is a breach of protocol. A prime ministerial decision, even if made orally, should be formally recorded. Where is that record? It starts to stink of the sofa government that we had under Tony Blair.

[Alex Burghart]

There are no minutes of any meeting at which this appointment was discussed, by anyone, at any time. Were there really no meetings about this? Most suspiciously of all, we have no material from the Prime Minister, from his chief of staff or from Peter Mandelson: no box returns, no emails, no forms, no WhatsApps—nothing. It is as though their fingerprints have been forensically removed.

To narrow this down, on 11 November 2024 the Cabinet Secretary said that if the Prime Minister wanted to make a political appointment, the civil service would “develop a plan for...the necessary security clearances and do due diligence on any potential Conflicts of Interest”.

That was the process, so let me ask the Chief Secretary two very specific questions. First, did Peter Mandelson receive security clearance, and if so, on what date? There was no such document in the release. Secondly, did Peter Mandelson make a full declaration of his interests? Again, there was no such document in the release.

I remind the Chief Secretary that noting the existence of a document does not prejudice an investigation in any way. The Government have already told us about one document that they are holding back at the request of the Met police; they are more than able to tell us about others. It is time for the Government to level with us. What is missing, and why?

Darren Jones: As I informed the House last week, the documents that pertain to tranche 1 are the documents the Government own, and they have been published in line with the Humble Address. The shadow Minister asks about the process followed for the appointment of Peter Mandelson. As the Prime Minister and the Government have said, the process that was followed was the process that was inherited; however, this has shown that that process is not sufficient, which is why it is being strengthened.

The shadow Minister made reference to questions about WhatsApps and other messages. I can confirm that those types of documents will be subject to a further tranche being published in due course. He also asked me about security clearance for Peter Mandelson. I refer him to the answer I gave last week in respect of that question, and to further comments from the Foreign Office.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): As an alumnus of Manchester Metropolitan University, I noticed that it has stripped Peter Mandelson of all the honours that it gave to him while he was chancellor of that institution between 2016 and 2024. Can the Chief Secretary confirm that any contacts with Government and the Department for Education during that period are not currently subject to this investigation?

Darren Jones: I can confirm that any documents that are within the scope of the Humble Address and refer to communications between Ministers and others and Peter Mandelson are part of the disclosure process currently being undertaken by the Government.

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

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): We may debate whether the Prime Minister’s appointment of Peter Mandelson showed a weirdly rushed, catastrophic lack of judgment or just a stunning level of disengaged naivety. Either way, the British public are rightly wondering whether decency in public office is just too much to ask. I reassure them on behalf of the Liberal Democrats that no, it is not too much to ask.

As well as confirming that Mandelson’s ongoing relationship with a convicted sexual predator was known, the files also revealed that he was given top-level briefings before his vetting was finished—a vetting process that clearly failed by any measure. Trust in politics is already stretched thin, and I am sure that everyone in this House wants to see it restored. If the worst fears of this sorry saga are found to be true, that trust will take another body blow, boosting only the populists on the left and the right.

I therefore ask the Minister, if the Prime Minister really wants to rebuild trust and ensure that the proper procedures are always followed, will he commit to taking up Lib Dem calls to make the ministerial code binding in law, and will he refer himself to the independent ethics adviser to determine whether, in the course of this long, sorry saga, he has breached the code or not?

Darren Jones: Who?

Luke Taylor: The Prime Minister.

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for his questions; I just wanted to clarify whether he felt that I should refer myself to the independent adviser.

I refer the hon. Member to the letter from the independent adviser, which came out on Friday of last week and concluded that there were no grounds for an investigation into the Prime Minister’s conduct, because the process that the Government inherited for these types of appointments had been followed appropriately. The process itself, as the Prime Minister said again this morning, is clearly not sufficient, which is why it needs to be changed for the future.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): Peter Mandelson’s appointment has done serious damage to public trust, but the deeper issue, as we are finding out, is the culture that made this possible. When a small clique is able to wield this much influence, confidence in public appointments is of course badly undermined. What structural changes are being made to ensure that factionalism and cronyism can never again override the national interest?

Darren Jones: I refer my hon. Friend to the part of my statement in relation to the work of the Ethics and Integrity Commission and the work that the Prime Minister has set it in reviewing the rules around transparency and lobbying, business accounting rules and other such related processes.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): Last week, the Government withheld the questions the Prime Minister put to Peter Mandelson and his responses, apparently at the request of the Metropolitan police. This is perhaps the most important documentation we could see and, as Madam Deputy Speaker confirmed, “Erskine May” confirms that:

“In criminal matters, proceedings are active when a charge has been brought”.

That is the balance between justice and democracy. Given that Mr Mandelson has not been charged, this matter does not fall under the sub judice rule, and he might not be charged for a year or more, if ever. There appears to be no other statutory bar to the Government releasing information: the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 does not apply; the Freedom of Information Act 2000 does not apply; and the Contempt of Court Act 1981 does not apply because section 5 of that Act excludes public debate of matters of public interest. Given the lack of statutory bars preventing the Government from acting, will the right hon. Gentleman release that documentation?

Darren Jones: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman and Members across the House would not want to do anything to prejudice a criminal investigation that might finally result in justice for the victims of Jeffrey Epstein and his associates. As I have said to the House repeatedly, where the Metropolitan police has asked for documents to be held back, we have consented to that. However, recognising the points the right hon. Gentleman makes, we have agreed a process with the Chair of the relevant Select Committee—a Member on the right hon. Gentleman's side of the House—so that the Chair is able to see those documents and so that any accusations of any cover-up by the Government can be shown to be inaccurate.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): The Chief Secretary has just mentioned that the process was not strong enough, but I have to say that that was a massive understatement. The due diligence checklist published last week screamed reputational risks, yet its red flags were ignored and dismissed, exposing a deeply embedded culture of deception. Mandelson's appointment has dragged our party into the gutter, and the apparent collusion between key figures in Labour Together and the Prime Minister's top team signals their clear complicity in this failure of judgment. Will the Government now take responsibility and support a full independent inquiry into Labour Together and those in the UK Prime Minister's office who enabled this?

Darren Jones: Where the Government have the ability to take action to ensure transparency and accountability on this matter, they are making sure that they do so. For organisations that are outside of Government, it is for those organisations to consider such requests.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): It is not much good blaming the process when it is as plain as a pikestaff that the Government knew that Peter Mandelson's appointment was, to put it mildly, extremely dodgy. If there were any conversations held, over the telephone or face to face, or any private emails sent from people's personal email addresses, will they be made available to this House?

Darren Jones: The documents that fall within the scope of the Humble Address will be made available to the House in the way that I have set out.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It would be very useful to know what proportion of the documents we have already been able to set our eyes on, but also what proportion is being held back by the police, so that we can make a calculation of how much more is to come. But it all sounds too casual, not least when my

right hon. Friend talks about WhatsApp messages. We need to ensure that there is proper due process across Government, not least when we are talking about the business associations of Peter Mandelson with the client of his own PR company, Global Counsel. How much more work is there to come that this House will see with regard to what was known about Peter Mandelson's relationship with Palantir?

Darren Jones: It is a reflection of the depth and extent of the work being undertaken by Government to comply with the Humble Address that it is taking some time to be able to process the documents. We moved at pace to publish the first tranche of documents last week and, as I have said to the House, we are going to publish the second tranche as soon as possible.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) referred to very specific documents—meeting notes and decision notes—that have not been disclosed. May I point out that the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister himself must not mislead the House? So, do these documents actually exist? Are there decision notes and meeting notes that have been withheld, or do they not exist?

Darren Jones: Documents owned by the Government that are within the scope of the Humble Address have been published, as I have set out.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Peter Mandelson's behaviour was disgraceful, and his continued relationship with Jeffrey Epstein is difficult to comprehend. It is an insult to the victims and survivors of Epstein's horrific crimes. Clearly, the Government are putting in place standards and tightening their appointments and vetting process, but could the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister tell the House what work Baroness Anderson will undertake in the Cabinet Office and when we can expect a further update on her progress?

Darren Jones: I know that Baroness Anderson in the other place will be listening with great intent to my hon. Friend's question. I was pleased to get the Prime Minister's support to appoint Baroness Anderson as an additional Minister in the Cabinet Office to take on this additional work, given the seriousness with which we take the need for modernisation and reform. I look forward to the proposals that she will bring forward in due course.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): It has been revealed that Peter Mandelson was given top-level briefings before his vetting was finalised. Who did that, and who will hold those people to account? Will the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister write to me if he is not able to answer that question now?

Darren Jones: As the Prime Minister has already said, the length of time it takes between an ambassador's appointment and agreement from the host country, and for certain vetting to take place, meant that in the past there had been an established process to allow for ambassadors to start work and to be announced before the vetting was completed. We are reviewing that process to make sure that there are not such gaps in the future.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Aside from the response to the Humble Address, 90 Members from parties across the House are calling for an independent statutory inquiry into the relationship between Jeffrey Epstein and British public figures and institutions, including whether due diligence was undertaken in the case of any appointments to public roles. Can the Minister confirm that it is the Government's position to support such calls and establish an inquiry? If not, can he confirm that there is no influence from Labour Together on such a position?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend will know that there are legal proceedings under way, with actions by the Metropolitan police and others. The Government agree that there should be justice for victims, and anyone who has any insight, knowledge or experience of Jeffrey Epstein, his associates or the events involved should come forward and share it.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Did the Prime Minister's chief of staff communicate with Mandelson via a private email address?

Darren Jones: Any communications that are subject to the Humble Address will be published in the second tranche.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): The Prime Minister rightly called for the removal of peerages from disgraced peers, so could the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister tell the House when we might expect further updates on the proposed legislation?

Darren Jones: I think there is cross-party agreement that we should introduce legislation that removes life peerages from those in the other place who bring the House into disrepute or suffer a criminal penalty for their behaviour. That is why the Government are working to introduce legislation that not only deals with Peter Mandelson but is available as a sanction for others who behave in that way in the future. We are getting towards the end of this Session, but we are committed to bringing forward that legislation. We look forward to presenting it shortly.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): No matter how many Ministers the Government sent out over the weekend to try to spin their way out of this crisis, the story remains unchanged. The Prime Minister chose to ignore the fact that Mandelson remained friends with the convicted paedophile Jeffrey Epstein; he chose to ignore Mandelson's own scandal-laden political history; and he even chose to ignore the advice of the security services, which questioned Mandelson's suitability for the job. Given the Prime Minister's appalling lack of judgment, can the Minister understand why so many people across these islands believe that he simply cannot be trusted to remain in office?

Darren Jones: On the second half of the hon. Member's question, the public are looking to the Prime Minister and seeing the important leadership role that he is playing in the world, given the events in the middle east, Ukraine and elsewhere. That is important for domestic conditions for families struggling with living standards and worried about the future. On the first part of the question, the Prime Minister has apologised for appointing Peter Mandelson, which he regrets—it was a mistake.

If he had had information on the depth and extent of the relationship, which became available after the publication of documents at the point of the appointment, he would not have appointed him in the first place.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): Gloucester residents rightly expect that nobody be above the law, so will the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister update the House on what steps the Department is taking to ensure that the Metropolitan police have all the support they need for their investigation?

Darren Jones: Of course, the Government take the Humble Address with the utmost seriousness, and respect the sovereignty of Parliament in exercising its own powers, but my hon. Friend is right to remind the House that justice for victims will be delivered only as a consequence of criminal investigation and criminal prosecution, not by motions of this House. It is important that none of us seeks to undermine those criminal investigations so that victims may, for once, see justice come in their direction.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Of course, nobody would expect the Government to contravene the indications of the Metropolitan police by publishing documents, but most people would expect that the first step for somebody applying for such an important job—the most senior diplomatic post—is to submit a declaration of interests. It is unclear whether that declaration of interests was submitted, or whether it actually exists, because we have not seen it yet. It is difficult to understand how such a basic first-principles requirement would not be disclosed in the first tranche of documents. Why is that?

Darren Jones: The right hon. Gentleman invites me to itemise the documents that have been held back by the Metropolitan police. I am advised that I am not at liberty to do that from the Dispatch Box, but I say again to him and the House that all documents that the Government have and are able to publish at this time have been published.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): Much of the discussion has been about tightening up the process. It has become increasingly clear from the documents already in the public domain that this is as much to do with the personnel delegated to make this political judgment. Will my right hon. Friend explain how tightening up the process might ensure that such personnel are not in a position to make political judgments of this kind in future?

Darren Jones: I refer my hon. Friend to the content of my statement, and the very wide-ranging review by the Ethics and Integrity Commission into the process not just for appointments but for vetting, as well as into transparency on lobbying, declarations of interests and business appointment rules. The Government hope that the work of the commission will allow us to have a process that avoids these problems in future.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): For four months, I asked the Government what severance payments Mandelson received. According to the permanent secretary of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, I received no reply due to an "error". Now, we have the failure to release 56 documents. Mandelson should have been dismissed for gross misconduct, yet the

British people had to fork out for a payout. Even though Treasury rules say that severance payments cannot be used

“to avoid...unwelcome publicity or reputational damage”,

Foreign Office advice to the Prime Minister said:

“Given the reputational impact for HMG, a modest settlement as proposed is the recommended course of action.”

Does the Minister maintain that no rules were broken with Mandelson’s payoff?

Darren Jones: I repeat for the House that, in line with the Humble Address, all documents that the Government have were published. The hon. Lady’s reference to 56 documents is a reference to 56 documents that the Opposition like to think exist, as opposed to those that have been published by the Government. On severance payments, the documents were published in a bundle last week, and they speak for themselves.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): For five years before my election, I led services for adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse. It is a cause that means a lot to me, and I know it is a cause that means a lot to the Prime Minister too.

We on the Labour Benches are furious with Peter Mandelson; he hoodwinked left, right and centre, requiring the Prime Minister to ring him up in the embassy in the middle of the night to fire him. The Prime Minister has said that if he had known then what is now known, he would not have appointed him.

There is a criminal investigation under way that we cannot cut across, and there are critical pieces of information that have not yet been disclosed, including the follow-up questions and Peter Mandelson’s answers to them. Will the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister outline when we might hear about the next steps and the release of those questions and answers? I think we should be reserving judgment until we see the totality of the evidence; as politicians, we are here to be led by the evidence.

Darren Jones: As I have said from the Dispatch Box, there are documents that the Government would have wished to have been able to publish as part of the response to the Humble Address, but the Metropolitan police asked us not to do so. It is right that we have honoured that request, given the ongoing criminal investigation. As soon as the Metropolitan police have informed us that they have discharged their duties, we will publish those documents for the House.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Prime Minister admitted to this House that he knew about the relationship between Jeffrey Epstein and Peter Mandelson. From the documentation that has been released so far, it appears that the Prime Minister did not actually interview Peter Mandelson for the job or make a decision on that; it was left to staffers. Despite that, there are newsreels showing both the Prime Minister and Peter Mandelson in public places, obviously having convivial discussions. Will the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister confirm that the Prime Minister did not formally interview Peter Mandelson for the job—and if not, why not?

Darren Jones: The documents that were published in the tranche last week in relation to the Humble Address show the process that was followed, which was the proper process at the time.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister for his answers so far. Will he outline that this Government will do everything they possibly can to support the police investigation? Does he agree that whether we are Members of this place or the other place, or former princes, it is hugely important for public trust that nobody is above the law? The victims of these vile crimes deserve nothing less.

Darren Jones: I think all Members across the House would recognise the primacy of the criminal investigations that are under way as the best route for justice for the victims of Jeffrey Epstein and his associates. With that in mind, the Government have committed to comply with the Humble Address and their transparency obligations to Parliament while holding back the documents that the Metropolitan police have asked us to hold back.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): The shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), and other Conservative Members have asked last week and this week about the declaration of interests. Either it exists and the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister does not want to say so, or it does not exist and he does not want to say so. Out of respect for this House, the public and the victims of Jeffrey Epstein, will he confirm now whether or not it exists?

Darren Jones: The hon. Lady should listen carefully to the answer I give. Given our obligations, I am not able to itemise all documents, as I have already set out from the Dispatch Box. What I can say to her, as I have said to her right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), is that all documents that the Government have and are able to publish at this time have been published. The only documents that have not been published are those being held either by the Metropolitan police or by agreement through the Intelligence and Security Committee—which is not relevant to the tranche 1 documents that were published last week.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Mandelson wanted more than half a million pounds to walk away from his job. This Government gave him £75,000; that went to someone who the Prime Minister said was clearly dishonest and lied. Will the Government be seeking to recover that public money—taxpayers’ money?

Darren Jones: The Government did not wish to give £1 to Peter Mandelson, but, as the documents from tranche 1 revealed last week, the decision was based on advice that the quickest possible route to removing him from civil service employment was to provide a severance payment on the terms provided, and that that sum was lower than the anticipated cost of legal fees associated with an employment tribunal dispute.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Two weeks ago, the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister gave me two pithy answers, so I ask him to do the same this week. First, did Peter Mandelson receive top-secret

[Gregory Stafford]

so-called STRAP security clearance? Secondly—we will try this question once again—did Peter Mandelson submit a declaration of interests? I want a yes or no to both those questions.

Darren Jones: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my previous answer.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Does the Minister believe that a declaration of interests form should have been submitted for a role as significant as this?

Darren Jones: I agree that all process should be followed, yes.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The problem with these sorts of scandals is that as time moves on, more and more people are tarnished by them. Last week, when the papers revealed that Mandelson received £75,000, I asked the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister whether the Government were worried about what he might say at an employment tribunal. He said,

“That was not the rationale. The documents will speak for themselves.”—[*Official Report*, 11 March 2026; Vol. 782, c. 367.] Of course, the documents do speak for themselves. They say that part of the business case for the payout—which the Minister was aware of, because it was sent to him—was that

“Given the reputational impact for HMG, a modest settlement as proposed is the recommended course of action”.

They also say that

“the individual has a high profile which could give rise to reputational damage to the FCDO and HMG were a court or tribunal claim to be pursued”,

which is exactly what I suggested based on what was in the papers, but which the Minister denied was part of the reasoning. Does he want to apologise for inadvertently misleading the House, and does he agree that those papers show that the Government broke Treasury rules on how such payments should be made?

Darren Jones: I think I said to the House last week, for the sake of clarity, that while I recognise that correspondence in the bundle mentions the business case being referred to me for my approval, that was never sent and was never received, so I was not privy to it as the hon. Gentleman suggests. On the basis of the severance payment, as I have said to the House, it was, based on advice, deemed to be the quickest way to get Peter Mandelson off civil service employment, and cheaper than maybe incurring the legal fees of a dispute at the employment tribunal.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I welcome the first tranche of documents being released. One of those documents—the due diligence checklist, “11-12-2024 Advice to the Prime Minister”—has an entire section about Mandelson’s relationship with Jeffrey Epstein, yet on 4 February at Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister said that

“If I knew then what I know now, he would never have been anywhere near Government.”—[*Official Report*, 4 February 2026; Vol. 780, c. 258.]

What additional information did the Prime Minister get to come to that conclusion?

Darren Jones: I think the hon. Member is referring to the initial release of documents by Bloomberg, which exposed the extent and depth of the relationship between Peter Mandelson and Jeffrey Epstein—which was not made clear to the Prime Minister prior to that appointment—and was subsequently confirmed by the US Department of Justice documents.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): In our country—and I fully support the Government’s national inquiry into grooming gangs and child sexual exploitation—the Epstein scandal exposes a global sex ring, with many hundreds if not thousands of under-age girls and women being trafficked for sex for the sake of political, financial and global influence. It is right that the Government are publishing details about the appointment of Peter Mandelson, but will the Minister confirm what other steps the Government are taking to go through all the millions of pieces of evidence and documentation that are being released by the US Department of Justice, to find and prosecute every single British person who took part in the exploitation of women and girls?

Darren Jones: The hon. Member is right to remind the House that while we have important questions about process, documentation and the appointment and dismissal of civil servants, above and beyond all of that was the most horrifying set of crimes that are imaginable to any of us in this House. The fact that they were able to happen in the way they did reminds us that we have much further to go to deal with male violence against women and exploitation of women by the powerful and rich. That is why the Government are committed to our strategy on violence against women and girls, and it is why we will of course comply with any investigation where we can be of assistance, to ensure that justice is being delivered for those victims.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): What level of security clearance was Peter Mandelson granted prior to his appointment as ambassador to the United States?

Darren Jones: I can confirm to the House my previous answer about the process for his appointment, agreement, and the security vetting that then took place. For particular details, I will need to refer the hon. Member to the Foreign Office.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister for making himself available on every occasion that the House asks him to come along and answer questions. As each week passes, the attention on this matter is not diverted but intensified, and with each seeming redirection, the British public become even more dejected and less confident in the Government structures that are in place to hold staff and Ministers to the highest possible standard. Will the Chief Secretary outline what additional steps can be put in place to assure Members of this House and the British public that the current job application route has been completely shut down, and that political persuasion will cease to be the top qualifying criterion in Government employment shortlists?

Darren Jones: As I think I have said to the House before, the vast majority of people who apply to public service do so to serve the public and are honourable

people who acknowledge and live the Nolan principles in every day of their work. What the Peter Mandelson example has shown—there have been others in the past—is that for all the rules in place that serve the majority well, there are still too many opportunities for those who wish to get around the rules. That is why the work that the Ethics and Integrity Commission is now doing will be vital in trying to prevent that from happening again.

Gregory Stafford: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker—and I apologise for not being able to give you notice of it. The ministerial code clearly states that Ministers must provide accurate information to this House. Under the duty of truthfulness, it states that Ministers are required to

“be as open as possible with Parliament”

and maintain high standards of accountability. That is not just in what they say, but what they fail to say. I know that you do not enforce the ministerial code, Madam Deputy Speaker, but would you expect a Minister who has misled the House by omission to return to the House to correct the record?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. While the occupant of the Chair is not responsible for Ministers’ words, I would expect any Minister to return to the House to correct omission, although that is a matter for those on the Treasury Bench and not for the Chair.

GP Contract

5.21 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on the changes to the GP contract in 2026-27.

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): When we came into office, we found GP services in an appalling state—underfunded, understaffed and in crisis. Since July 2024, this Government have been fixing the front door to the NHS, investing more than £100 million to fix up GP surgeries this year, making online booking available to patients across the country and recruiting 2,000 more GPs who are now serving patients on the frontline. Following investment in advice and guidance, we have seen 1.3 million diverted referrals since April 2025. Those are people who would have otherwise been added to the electives waiting list. A lot has been done, but there is a lot more still to do. We are determined to make the system fairer for coastal communities and deprived areas, so we have launched a review into the Carr-Hill formula to close the gap on health disparities and ensure that funding is targeted on the basis of need. We will shortly update the House in the usual way on our Carr-Hill review.

Last year’s GP contract saw the biggest cash increase in more than a decade, and this year we are investing an additional £485 million, taking the total investment made through the contract to more than £13.8 billion this financial year. Investment must always be combined with reform, so the new contract will improve access for patients by requiring that all clinically urgent requests are dealt with on the same day. It will provide a mechanism to hire even more GPs via a new practice-level reimbursement scheme, and it will support the shift from treatment to prevention, as set out in our 10-year plan, through incentives to boost childhood vaccination rates, better care for patients living with obesity and requiring GPs to share data with the lung cancer screening programme.

These ideas were not cooked up by someone sat behind a desk in Whitehall. What is happening is that we are taking the best of the NHS to the rest of the NHS, working with pioneering practices that have been doing these things for a long time. Today we can see that our policies are working, and after years of decline in general practice, we are getting the front door back on its hinges. Patient satisfaction with general practice is finally moving in the right direction. According to the Office for National Statistics, almost 77% of people described contacting their GP as easy in January this year, up from just 60%, where it was languishing in July 2024. I know that when he gets up, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) will hugely welcome, as will his hon. Friends, the progress that we are making.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Evans: The Health Secretary and his team have perfected the sales pitch for NHS reform. The problem is that the detail never seems to arrive. We have seen a 10-year health plan with no delivery chapter, and a plan for the abolition of NHS England with no price tag; the Health Secretary has announced 10 new “straight to

[Dr Luke Evans]

test” referral pathways, but could not name a single one; and now we are seeing a new GP contract with more questions than answers.

Calling something modernisation does not make it reform. If the rules and the delivery are unclear, it is simply confusion with branding. “Advice and guidance”, for example, appears in practice to create a single point of access for referrals. GPs will no longer be able to refer patients directly to a consultant, even when they believe that it is clinically appropriate. Will the Government publish the clinical evidence supporting that approach? Who will carry the legal responsibility if, in a GP’s professional judgment, a patient needs to see a consultant but must first go through “advice and guidance”? If advice and guidance becomes mandatory as an extra layer before referral, are the Government not, in essence, managing the waiting list by keeping patients in primary care rather than treating them in secondary care? Waiting lists will look shorter on paper, but patients are simply waiting elsewhere in the system. Can the Minister clarify exactly where those patients will appear in the official waiting list figures? The contract also requires patients whose cases are deemed “clinically urgent” to be dealt with on the same day, but it does not define “urgent” or explain what “dealt with” means, and that really matters.

Let me therefore ask the Minister three clear questions. First, when will the Government publish the clinical definition of “urgent”—a patient’s sick note is urgent for the patient, but not clinically urgent—and what counts as a patient’s being “dealt with” on the same day? Secondly, the Minister has talked about access, but how can practices guarantee same-day responses when demand is uncapped and definitions are not published? Finally, with advice and guidance being required as a mandate beforehand, how will we ensure that patients are protected, and where will they appear on the waiting lists?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for the GP-related questions, for which I was grateful when he finally got to them.

On clinical evidence for advice and guidance, I think that the evidence speaks for itself. We introduced advice and guidance in the last contract with an £80 million investment, and it has been a stunning success. Take-up across the country has been huge, and—this is the statistic that matters most of all—1.3 million referrals that would otherwise have gone to electives have been dealt with by GPs. [Interruption.] The hon. Gentleman, who is chuntering from a sedentary position, seems not to care about what actually matters for patients, but through advice and guidance they are able to get a response from their GPs within about 48 hours. I can assure him that it takes a great deal longer to secure an out-patient appointment. If he is looking for statistics on advice and guidance, let me give him that one again: 1.3 million referrals have been taken off electives and dealt with by GPs. That is part of the hospital-to-community shift.

The hon. Gentleman asked for a definition of “urgent”. We trust our clinicians. We know that general practitioners are experts in their field. They know when they see an urgent issue, but they also know that that the symptoms might be a more acute manifestation of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or that a child’s rash suddenly looks

more dangerous than it did the day before. We trust our GPs to make those decisions, and it is a real pity that Opposition Members do not seem to do the same.

The hon. Gentleman also wanted a statistic in relation to access. In July 2024, patient satisfaction with access to a GP was languishing at a miserable 60% after 14 years of Tory neglect and chaos. Today it stands at 76%, which is a 16 percentage point improvement. The hon. Gentleman asked for statistics; perhaps he should take that statistic and deal with it.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Minister mentioned the Carr-Hill formula. York had the lowest funding under the primary care groups, the primary care trusts and the clinical commissioning groups, and it now has the lowest funding under the integrated care boards. It is because it is not the most affluent place that it is really important that the new funding formula works for areas such as York. Could the Minister say a bit more about how that will be determined, so that my community gets the health spending that it deserves?

Stephen Kinnock: The Carr-Hill review is happening as we speak, and I expect to get a submission from officials on the first round of analysis that is being conducted by the National Institute for Health and Care Research. That will be the first step towards agreeing on how we make the formula work, with a view to implementing the new Carr-Hill formula from 1 April 2027.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I welcome the fact that the Government have adopted our policy of seeing clinically urgent patients on the same day, but patient safety has been put at risk by increasing workloads, according to members of the Royal College of General Practitioners. One in five patients has been forced to wait at least two weeks for an appointment. Although the Government’s funding of 1,600 new GPs is welcome, it is insufficient to deliver the required shift to community care. The Health Foundation says that an additional 6,500 GPs will be needed by 2031, and the Liberal Democrats would provide 8,000. What is the Minister doing to address the shortfall? Residents in Epsom and Ewell, who already struggle to get a GP appointment, are concerned that increased housing will make it even harder. What is the Minister doing to ensure that there is funding for GP buildings, as well as GPs?

I welcome the Government’s focus on the obesity crisis, but it does not fix the root cause. Aside from the junk food ban, what steps are the Government taking to encourage children and young people to create active and healthy habits for life from an early age?

Stephen Kinnock: On buildings, we have the £102 million primary care utilisation fund, which will be very important in refurbishing GP practices. We are committed to delivering 120 new neighbourhood health centres by the end of this Parliament, and 250 by 2035.

The hon. Lady asks about GP numbers. In our manifesto, we pledged to bring back the family doctor, and that is precisely what we are doing. We said that we would deliver 1,000 new GPs to the frontline, but we are delivering 2,000, so we have smashed through our manifesto pledge.

There will be more to come, because we are making the practice-level reimbursement scheme more flexible so that it does not apply only to GPs who have just come out of training; we are now enabling practices to hire more experienced GPs. That will also help with under-employment. Many GPs across the country practise only three days a week, and this is an opportunity to boost that to four or even five days a week.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): When this Government took office, the number of registered patients per GP in Calder Valley was much higher than the national average, with one GP surgery in Brighouse having 600 additional patients per GP. Given the new GP contracts and the new Carr-Hill formula, will the Minister confirm that the funding will help practices in my constituency to recruit the GPs they need, so that people can see a doctor when they need one?

Stephen Kinnock: I am not able to pre-empt the Carr-Hill review, but we have had a system based on data that is often 25 years old. Of course, we know that the Conservatives have the Tunbridge Wells philosophy. We will always recall the former Prime Minister standing in front of Conservative party members and proudly proclaiming the fact that he had been taking money out of parts of the country that needed it most and pumping it into those parts of the country that were delivering his pork barrel politics.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The nod to the pressures on rural general practices in the Carr-Hill process is to be welcomed, as is the improvement to many GP practices, but so many principals in general practice are throwing in the towel in the prime of their professional lives because of the bureaucracy, which many of them tell me burdens them well after the last patient has left their clinic. What are we going to do to reduce the administrative pressure on general practitioners, and to prevent the haemorrhaging of our most experienced doctors through early retirement or going part time?

Stephen Kinnock: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very important point about bureaucracy. Many of the reforms that we are pushing for in the contract are designed to reduce bureaucracy. For example, by moving to a single point of access and embedding advice and guidance in the contract, we will reduce the number of transactions. In the current system, the practice needs to put in a request for a £20 payment each time it provides advice and guidance; we are embedding that and streamlining it.

The other point to make is that at the heart of our 10-year plan is the shift from analogue to digital. I have seen some extraordinarily effective artificial intelligence technology around ambient voice services, which enable an entire consultation to be recorded and put directly into the system, thereby saving the GP hours at the end of the day in writing up notes.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I declare an interest as a working GP in the NHS. I probably would not be standing here if general practice had not been decimated over the last 14 years. I welcome the £485 million of extra funding, and I also welcome the fact that the capacity and access money is being channelled back

into emergency GP action, so increasing the number of appointments, and increasing continuity of care by bringing back the family doctor. May I have some reassurance that the processes of advice and guidance and the referral mechanisms will not get in the way of Jess's rule, which is about referring patients on their third presentation without any particular diagnosis?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The £292 million we have made available for advice and guidance is repurposed funding from the capacity and access improvement payments, so it is part of incentivising improved access and better patient outcomes. I can absolutely assure him that Jess's rule remains fixed as a really important part of ensuring that it is three strikes and a referral. Whatever happens, that will be a top priority throughout the embedding of this contract.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): My constituents will welcome some of these headlines, such as clinically urgent cases being seen on the same day and more GPs, but what is being done to help accommodate them? Stubbington surgery in my constituency has excellent staff, delivering really great patient satisfaction, but they are hampered by really suboptimal buildings. They have expanded to fill every inch of available space, and the former cupboard under the stairs is now the phlebotomy room. They need a new site, but that is proving very difficult to find—not only the place, but the capital funding to deliver it. Can the Minister give them any hope from this announcement?

Stephen Kinnock: I am not familiar with the details of that specific case, but if the hon. Member writes to me, I will be more than happy to furnish her with a response. There is a real concern in some parts of the country, particularly where there have been new developments or populations moving into the area, that the GP practice does not have the required capacity. I am not sure whether that has happened in the case she refers to, but in such cases we also look to developers, including to section 106 and the community infrastructure levy as an opportunity. We have the primary care utilisation fund, and with neighbourhood health centre funding coming on stream, that may also be an opportunity. If she cares to write to me, I will furnish her with a response.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): The welcome funding, alongside the contract, to hire 16,000 more GPs will be really encouraging news for my community. However, in high-growth areas such as mine, all too often it is physical space rather than funding for GPs that constrains practices. I am really glad that, after getting involved, we have been able to help move forward crucial expansion projects at Shefford health centre and Lower Stondon GP surgery in my constituency, but we should not need the MP to get involved in such situations to help our GPs. Will the Minister meet me to decide how we can work with our ICBs better to ensure that, where we have areas of significant housing growth, we will automatically see growth in the number of GP surgeries in the future?

Stephen Kinnock: Very much along the lines of what I said to the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), we need to ensure that the social infrastructure is there in such areas of population growth. I would be more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that further.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): In this country, we have an immense wealth of talented young people who would love to train to be doctors, but over many decades we have not recruited enough. I appreciate that this is not just an issue for the Department of Health and that it spans the Department for Education and the Treasury, but what more could be done to increase the number of doctor placements so that we can train more and rely less on recruiting doctors from overseas who often come from countries much poorer than our own?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, but that is precisely what we have been doing. We said in our manifesto that we would bring back the family doctor. We said we would hire 1,000 more GPs to the frontline and we have delivered 2,000. When we came into office in July 2024 there was a bizarre situation where demand for access to GPs was spiralling, yet the additional roles reimbursement scheme, designed under the previous Government, was not for GPs. It was for physician associates and anybody else in the practice, but not for GPs. We have bulldozed that bureaucracy and invested £82 million in getting the ARRS up and running and fit for purpose. As a result, we have 2,000 more GPs and 1,600 more full-time equivalents through this contract.

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): I recently met people from Byron Primary Care Network, who were clear about the pressures facing primary care. How will reforming GP contracts ensure that communities in my constituency with a growing population can better access GP services? We have been waiting over 14 years for a GP practice in Hucknall.

Stephen Kinnock: A number of things have happened which will help with access to GPs. One is the very significant increase in the number of GPs we have put on the frontline and another is online access. We are now dealing with the 8 am scramble by ensuring we do not have a choke point on the telephone lines because more and more people are able to use online access. On capabilities in terms of physical infrastructure, a very important part of that is our commitment to neighbourhood health. There will be 120 new neighbourhood health centres by the end of this Parliament, which will really help to deliver the hospital-to-community shift that I am sure my hon. Friend's constituents are looking forward to.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): GPs truly are the frontline of our NHS. I recently had the pleasure of meeting representatives from the Chilcote practice in Torquay. They shared with me their concerns about the global sum payment. Their calculations suggest that it should be a little in excess of £200, yet the recently announced payment is £128 a year. Will the Minister please advise on how he plans to bridge that gap?

Stephen Kinnock: The very significant uplift we have made to the contract—the £1.1 billion last year and the £485 million additional investment we are making this year—will go some way to address the hon. Gentleman's question, but there is, of course, always more we can do. We have to deal with very many competing priorities across the Department of Health and Social Care, but

general practice is right at the top of the list. That is demonstrated by the fact that we have invested in more GPs, better online access and more physical infrastructure for general practice.

Michael Payne (Gedling) (Lab): I recently met those from Stenhouse medical practice in Arnold. They talked to me about the need to invest in primary care to alleviate pressure on our hospitals. May I take this opportunity to thank all GPs and GP staff across Gedling? Will the Minister explain to me what actions the Government are taking and how they will improve GP services for my constituents in Gedling?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend makes such an important point about paying tribute to the incredible work that our GPs and their teams do right across the length and breadth of our country, including in Gedling; he is an excellent champion for his constituency. This is about marrying investment with reform. In addition to the £1.1 billion in the previous contract, the £485 million this year and the measures I mentioned to recruit more GPs to the frontline, there is also very important work happening around the shift from treatment to prevention in the 10-year plan. We are boosting childhood vaccination rates, providing better care for patients living with obesity and requiring GPs to share data with the lung cancer screening programme. This is about incentivising GPs, working with them as partners as we move forward into the modernisation of our health service.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): The new contract has stated that GPs must offer on-the-day appointments for urgent requests—which they already do—and unlimited access during opening hours up to 6.30 pm, with no definition of “urgent”. Katrina, a constituent who messaged me today, said, “This will mean that those with complex needs, like me, will wait longer for appointments.” What reassurance can the Secretary of State offer constituents such as Katrina that this new system will work for everyone, not just those self-diagnosing their sick note as urgent?

Stephen Kinnock: The key point here is that GPs are the clinicians whom we trust to define what urgent means. There are, of course, a number of criteria and conditions that will ring an extra alarm bell and ensure that the patient is registered as urgent. It is worth mentioning that 46% of all GP appointments already take place on the same day as contact is made with the surgery—with the majority of those classified as urgent—so performance is already good. This is not something new that we are landing on general practice; it is much more about ensuring that we have a clear line of sight into who the urgent patients are and ensuring that they get treatment on the first day.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): I welcome these reforms. However, on the issue of accountability, despite years of failure documented in multiple inspection reports by the coroner and the Care Quality Commission, the integrated care board has not yet removed the contract from Cockermouth's Castlegate and Derwent partnership. What else do Ministers believe I can do to ensure that a failing partnership is held to account, other than calling for the resignation of the senior partner, Dr Desert?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for his constituents. I am not familiar with the details of the case that he mentions, but I would be happy to look into it; if he would write to me, we can take that further.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Local doctors tell me that they were hoping the new contract would be focused on family medicine, with detail about the 10-year plan and neighbourhood health centres that the Minister has just touched on. I ask when the Secretary of State will be releasing the detail of the neighbourhood contract, which is really vital as I work with local health authorities to try to secure a second practice for residents in Stamford.

Stephen Kinnock: The guidance on neighbourhood health will be published very soon indeed; it is almost complete, and is coming soon. We recognise that general practice will be right at the heart of neighbourhood health, so we have to ensure a single neighbourhood provider contract and a multi-neighbourhood provider contract that are aligned with the best value that we can deliver, both for the taxpayer and in terms of patient outcomes. We will also be consulting on the single neighbourhood provider and multi-neighbourhood provider, with the consultation process starting some time after the overarching neighbourhood guidance, which is coming out very soon.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): It has been really hard to get a GP appointment in Hastings and Rye, so I welcome the bold action that this Government are taking to tackle that 8 am scramble to get a GP appointment: more funding for GPs; changing the funding formula to better support coastal towns, like ours; and requiring GPs, as part of this new contract, to have online booking and same-day appointments for urgent cases. However, I want to ensure that all the people I represent are benefiting from the reforms this Government are introducing, so this spring I will be launching a GP survey for all my constituents to fill out. What work is the Minister doing to ensure that we feel the benefits of these reforms everywhere in the country, and will he, alongside NHS officials at the integrated care board, meet me later this year to discuss the findings of my GP survey?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend and I have had some discussions about GP practices in her constituency, and I know she is doing excellent work to ensure that performance is always being driven in the right direction. She asks what we are doing right across the country; the Carr-Hill formula will be a nationwide initiative, and the contract itself is also nationwide. It is important that the Government do not try to micromanage and that ICBs and trusts work together. We are there to set the framework and ensure that everybody is clear about the outcomes; it is then up to the people at the coalface to deliver those outcomes. We do need to know where that is not working, so perhaps we could look at my hon. Friend's survey once she has it; it would be a good way of checking in and ensuring that there is a golden thread between the outcomes that we want to see and the delivery on the ground.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I recently visited the Spa surgery in Harrogate and spent half a day with practice managers, GPs, partners,

receptionists and nurses, and I am grateful to them for that opportunity. The Minister said earlier that he trusts GPs to make decisions, and just a moment ago he said that the Government should not be in the business of micromanaging, but the new contract outlines specific directions for spending. How does the Minister reconcile that with the fact that local GP partners tell me that the contract will remove the flexibility to manage and meet local service need, and that the uplift in funding will not cover the cost of these additional obligations?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Member for his question, but it is pretty clear to us, based on the experience of advice and guidance—I think it is advice and guidance that he is referring to specifically—that the £80 million we invested in advice and guidance under the last contract has been extraordinarily successful, with very high take-up right across the country. As a result, we have kept 1.3 million people out of electives who did not need to go to those out-patient appointments. What we are doing now is embedding that in the contract, because it has been such a success.

By embedding it in the contract, we are giving more flexibility and less bureaucracy, because there will be a single point of access in the trust. GPs will be able to access the high-level consultant expertise and specialism that they need in order to assess whether or not a particular patient needs to go to an out-patient appointment. It will mean more flexibility, high-level triage and much better outcomes for patients.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): My dad was a GP in Hartlepool for 33 years. He worked through the improvements brought in by the last Labour Government and, until his retirement, through the destruction that the last Conservative Government oversaw—most notably the inability to get a same-day urgent appointment, which saw far too many patients ending up at the door of their local hospital. Does the Minister agree that ensuring that people can access same-day urgent appointments gets treatment out of hospitals and back into communities, where it belongs?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for that question; I can feel the passion with which he asks it, particularly because of his family connection. It is vital that clinically urgent patients get treatment on day one. We are confident that that is happening in many cases, but embedding it in the contract means an additional level of transparency and commitment from all sides of the equation. That is really important, because it recognises the good performance that is already happening in many cases but will also drive up performance in areas where it is not at the level at which it should be.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Cambridgeshire receives an increasingly raw deal from the Carr-Hill formula, due to the fact that the population demographics have changed so dramatically over the past 25 years. I therefore welcome the announcement that the Carr-Hill formula will be reviewed and that a new formula will be in place by 1 April next year. Cambridgeshire is about to move into a mega-ICB with Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes, so could the Minister allay the concerns in my constituency about how that will affect Cambridgeshire? We are about to see a change in the Carr-Hill formula,

[*Ben Obese-Jecty*]

and we are about to move into one of the biggest ICBs in the country, which will undoubtedly have an impact on local services.

Stephen Kinnock: Clearly, a lot of change is happening in the system, but that is because a lot of change was required. Frankly, we have to do what we are doing if we are going to get the NHS back on its feet and fit for the future, with the three big shifts set out in our 10-year plan. Part of that is about the structure. Our view is that we can consolidate more of the back-office activity, which will free up more resources and allow us to do more on the frontline. ICBs play a vital role in that, particularly in commissioning. We want to see more strategic commissioning and more resource and expertise put into the parts of the ICB that are delivering better outcomes in population health. We must also see less duplication and more streamlining of back-office functions. It is about getting more efficiency but also being more responsive to patients and practitioners on the frontline.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Government's reforms, which will ensure same-day access for GPs in urgent cases and will also make it easier to get an appointment online, finally moving towards ending the 8 am scramble. I recently visited Swanscombe health centre, where the brilliant team is under significant pressure because of the large number of new families moving to the area, particularly neighbouring Ebbsfleet, which has seen 5,000 very welcome new homes built so far. Will the Minister visit Swanscombe with me to see the work that the practice is doing and look at how we can get GP services designed into developments much earlier in the process in areas such as Ebbsfleet Garden City?

Stephen Kinnock: Hon. Members raise this issue with me regularly. There seems to be something of a disconnect when new developments are being built, whereby the section 106 agreement or the community infrastructure levy just do not seem to be delivering the social infrastructure that they should be delivering. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that in relation to the specific case he raises. Then, of course, we could discuss the possibility of a visit.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Blackburn is one of the most deprived towns in the country, and the health inequalities are stark. Despite that, Blackburn has the third-highest patient to GP ratio in the UK. While I welcome the Government's intention to move towards a needs-based funding formula, the satisfaction statistics to which the Minister refers simply do not reflect what is felt by my constituents. In recent weeks, I have had constituents say that it has been almost impossible to obtain a GP appointment, whether online or via the phone. When will residents in my constituency see the difference that he refers to?

Stephen Kinnock: I think the first part of the hon. Member's question is connected to the second part, because, as he correctly points out, thanks to the 14 years of neglect and incompetence that we saw, the Carr-Hill formula became a very anachronistic way of sharing funding. It should be based on need, but it was based on very outdated statistics and data. We are fixing that,

and the changes that we are making will be felt by his constituents. It is disappointing to hear that he has had that feedback, because it does not reflect the nationwide polling from the Office for National Statistics, which shows that satisfaction with access, which was languishing at 60% in July 2024, now stands at 76%.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I hugely welcome the investment into general practice, particularly the flexibility to employ often under-employed GPs who want additional hours and shifts. I also welcome the Minister's comments about innovation and AI. Sadly, I have had representations from Grange Park surgery in Burley-in-Wharfedale in my constituency, which finds that it is unable to deliver high-quality care because of unreliable and outdated IT systems that are provided across the Bradford area. Frequent outages directly impact access and patient care, so will the Minister set out what investment is available to ICBs to ensure that shift from analogue to digital?

Stephen Kinnock: Thanks to the decisions that the Chancellor of the Exchequer has made, significant additional funding has been made available for capital investment in our NHS, and a big part of that is about driving the shift from analogue to digital. The other shifts—hospital to community, sickness to prevention—are not going to work otherwise; they all rely on this pivotal shift from the analogue age to the digital age. It is disappointing to hear the specific feedback that my hon. Friend has heard from the practices in her constituency. If she would like to write to me, or grab me in the Division Lobby, we can talk about the specifics of those cases. But overall the capital budget has been significantly boosted by the decisions that our Chancellor of the Exchequer has made.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Serious concerns have been raised about GPs being offered incentives to prescribe particular branded drugs. We cannot have a situation where prescribing decisions are made to balance the books; they should be made on a purely clinical basis, as I am sure the Minister agrees. With many GP practices seriously strapped for cash, does the Department of Health and Social Care have a clear picture of the situation, and what consideration has the Minister given to banning incentives so that the very best drugs are prescribed, not those produced by the most influential companies?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Member raises an important point. It is important that we at the Department of Health and Social Care work closely with the NHS regions and the ICBs to keep a close eye on that issue. It is vital that GPs are aligned with the highest professional standards. If we see those standards not being observed in any case, action must be taken. If she has specific evidence to suggest that such practices are going on, she is more than welcome to share it with me.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): We all welcome the work being done to get our national health service back on track. What engagement does the Department have with, and what guidance does it provide to, ICBs about what happens when a practice closes or a GP returns their contract in rural communities, like in Betley in Newcastle-under-Lyme? We need to do whatever we can to ensure that people in rural communities such

as mine do not get left behind and can access the GP services that my hon. Friend the Minister outlined in their own communities.

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is right that it is vital that ICBs have a clear understanding of their population health needs and their demographics. It is important that the ICB is ahead of that curve and taking decisions well in advance of a practice closing down so that a commensurate service is provided; that is a really important part of the ICB's responsibilities. If he has specific examples where he feels that his ICB has not been delivering on that basis, he is welcome to share those with me.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I pay tribute to the GPs in Dewsbury and Batley and the surrounding villages. The Minister mentioned preventive health. What steps are the Government taking to support GPs in their treatment of patients with preventable or avoidable diseases through the prescription of exercise and healthy foods? Secondly, we talk about online access, which is welcome—my constituents welcome surgeries that offer appointments throughout the day—but how will the Minister support the digitally excluded who cannot get through at 8 am and do not have access to online applications?

Stephen Kinnock: On prevention, there are some really important measures in the contract: in essence, we are recalibrating the quality outcomes framework, which is the basis for payments to incentivise the actions that GPs take. By changing the QOF, as it is called, we can shift that in one direction or the other, and we have changed it to incentivise boosting childhood vaccination rates, particularly in those areas of the country where vaccination rates are worryingly low, and better care for patients living with obesity. That is about exactly the things the hon. Member just mentioned: prescribing, if you like, exercise regimes and advising on better nutrition. We are also changing the QOF to require GPs to share data with the lung cancer screening programme. Those are just three examples of what we are doing within the contract.

On online access, it is clear that there must always be three channels of access to a GP—walk-in, telephone and online—and that for an urgent matter it would be a walk-in or a telephone call. What has really worked is that online access has taken pressure off the telephone lines as people who do not have urgent requirements have been migrating online and using the NHS app—take-up of the app is also excellent—so we are moving in the right direction.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): My father was a family doctor in my Camborne, Redruth and Hayle constituency for more than 40 years; now that he is in his 91st year, I am thankful he is no longer practising. I have the highest number of deep-end group GP practices in my constituency, including the one where my father practised. While I welcome the consideration for deprived areas, will the Minister elaborate on what targeted funding there will be for areas with the highest levels of deprivation?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and ask him to please pass on my best wishes to his father and thank him for the outstanding service

he provided over many years. The Carr-Hill formula review is an important piece of work. It will have a complex range of drivers in it, based on remoteness and coastal areas, but socioeconomic indicators will be very much at its heart. Those are the clear terms of reference that we gave to the National Institute for Health and Care Research, and that is the basis of the review. I expect those documents from officials very soon, and we will update the House accordingly. Some of the process was set out in a “Dear Colleague” letter a little while back, but we are also keen to have feedback from MPs in that process.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Many of the surgeries in my constituency have faced enormous pressure when having to deal with patients who cannot get an appointment, so I welcome the additional support that will come to our communities, especially inner-city communities. The Laurie Pike and al-Shafa medical centres in my constituency do so much work on prevention; I hope the Minister will join me in commending them on the work they do. Will there be ringfenced funding for preventive work in areas such as cardiovascular disease detection, respiratory illnesses and diabetes?

Stephen Kinnock: Please do pass on my thanks to the Laurie Pike and al-Shafa practices for the outstanding work they do. We are not really doing ringfencing; we are embedding prevention in the contract through the quality outcomes framework. Those incentives are the best way to give practices the flexibility they need while ensuring that they are clear about what we expect in terms of outcomes.

Issues such as cardiovascular disease and diabetes are part of the quality outcomes framework. It is also worth mentioning the Pharmacy First scheme, which is looking to move some of this work out of GPs and enabling pharmacists to operate at the top of their practice. That is another example of the shift from hospital to community, which is so important in enabling people to get the best possible care in the right place at the right time, as close as possible to their homes.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his answers so far. One of the No. 1 issues that came up on the doorstep when I was canvassing across my constituency before the general election was same-day access to GPs. Although I recognise that there is still work to be done, I welcome the work the Labour Government and the Minister have done to improve GP access for constituents across Harlow. Does the Minister recognise that there is still more to be done? Will he touch a little on the importance that the shift from hospital to community will have for hospitals like mine, the Princess Alexandra hospital, and specifically the accident and emergency department?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is right: avoiding preventable admissions is right at the heart of what we are trying to achieve. Of course, we have challenges with delayed discharge—something like 14% of patients in hospital beds are medically fit for discharge—and if we look at the flow of patients through hospital, we see that we can address a lot of the problems at that end of the process by preventing avoidable admissions in the first place. The advice and guidance element of the contract is therefore very important, because it is by

[Stephen Kinnock]

improving co-ordination and teamwork between primary care and secondary care that we will ensure that the 1.3 million people who would have ended up on the electives waiting list or going into outpatient clinics no longer need to be there—they will be dealt with by the teamwork between consultant specialists and GPs. They will be helped, supported and cared for close to home, without having to go into hospital, which will have a positive knock-on effect right through the system.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his positive answers, and I thank the Minister and the Government for the giant steps they are taking to improve the NHS; we are encouraged by that. While the Government have rolled out major changes to the GP contract in England to improve access to same-day appointments, the situation in Northern Ireland, as he will know, is critical. Patients back home are struggling to get GP appointments, waiting times are long and workforce shortages are acute.

I know from past questions that the Minister has a good working relationship with Mike Nesbitt, the Health Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly. What discussions has he had with the Department of Health in Northern Ireland to ensure that local GP services in Northern Ireland work in parallel with the new guidance in England so that patients are not left behind?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Member for his kind words about the Government's work. I do have an excellent relationship with the Minister in Northern Ireland. Devolution is vital to the Government, and we are certainly not in the business of trying to micromanage what is happening both across the regions of England and in the devolved nations of our United Kingdom,

but it is clear that there should be learning in both directions. When I speak to the Northern Ireland Minister, we are clear that we want to see the best possible performance and outcomes right across our United Kingdom. I look forward to continuing to work with him on that basis.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The beautiful and vibrant yet very isolated community of Coniston has had a GP practice for the last 200 years or so, but it runs the risk of losing it this year. Its GPs, who were wonderful, retired last summer and a caretaker service is being provided. Bids have been invited and there has been much interest, but no bid has been made. The reason is that the finances are really marginal at such a small surgery where people cannot go anywhere else. There is an answer, and I want to ask the Minister whether he might intervene and talk to the ICB to help us to get there. If the dispensing contract were to be let jointly with the GP contract, that would make it viable, and I know of GPs who would be interested if that were to happen. Will he talk to the ICB to ensure that that flexibility is applied so that we can save the surgery in Coniston for the next 200 years?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. It would be deeply troubling if such an important service to the community were to be removed, so I would certainly be happy to speak to him. Perhaps he would like to write to me to provide more details. Looking to the medium to longer term, the review of the Carr-Hill formula could well end up benefiting communities such as the one he has mentioned, because remoteness and rurality will be an important factor in the Carr-Hill review, but I accept that that might be a bit too far off for what sounds like a more urgent issue. If he would like to write to me, I am sure we can look into that.

Heating Oil Support

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before we come to the statement on heating oil support, I must note my disappointment about briefings to the media before important announcements are brought to this House. It shows a deep discourtesy to this House and its Members and a worrying pattern of behaviour from the Government. As the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee has stated,

“making the most important statements in the first instance to Parliament means doing so before they are made to the media and not at the first available opportunity thereafter”.

The requirement to come to this House is set out in the Government’s own rules, in their ministerial code, and they must do better. Furthermore, a statement of this importance ought to have been made by the Secretary of State, and I am sorry that the Minister has been put in this position.

6.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I take my responsibilities under the ministerial code very seriously and will make sure that that message is communicated.

With permission, I wish to make a statement on the action we are taking to protect British people from the soaring costs of heating oil due to events in the middle east. It is now more than two weeks since the conflict in the middle east began. My thoughts and the thoughts of the whole House will be with the millions of people affected, including the British citizens in the region and the troops serving there, but just as we saw four years ago when Putin invaded Ukraine, the impact of this conflict is being felt far beyond the battlefield. With Iran continuing to target energy infrastructure and shutting off the strait of Hormuz, the price of crude oil on the international market has rocketed, and I know that the 1.5 million UK households that use heating oil to heat their homes will be understandably concerned. Indeed, some customers have already reported prices doubling or being unable to secure a delivery at all. Let me be clear that this Government will not stand by and let British families suffer. Let me set out the direct action that we are taking today.

First, we will always stand up for the most vulnerable in our society, and I can confirm to Parliament that we are committing over £50 million to help low-income families who use heating oil. We are allocating this funding where the greatest need is, based on census data, and it will go directly to the devolved Governments with the expectation that it will be used to support vulnerable households. We know that this is a particular issue in Northern Ireland, where almost two thirds of homes rely on heating oil, and we have allocated £17 million to support them. We will continue to work closely with the Northern Ireland Executive on all our plans that I will outline in this statement, given the particular circumstances that exist there and the reliance on heating oil.

In England, funding will be distributed by local authorities via the crisis and resilience fund, which comes into effect from 1 April, and £3.8 million will be passed to the Welsh Government and £4.6 million to

the Scottish Government to deliver to affected households through existing programmes. I am today calling for the Scottish Government to ensure that this money is passed to Scottish families as quickly as possible.

Secondly, as well as providing direct support for consumers, we are working with the sector to ensure that pricing is always fair, transparent and justified. This Government will not tolerate profiteering or unfair practices, so we are in daily contact with industry to understand the drivers of recent price movements and have reminded heating oil distributors of their commitments under the trade association code of practice. The Chancellor has also written to the Competition and Markets Authority to ask it to remain vigilant across heating oil prices and to tackle unjustified increases, and we urge customers to share any evidence of price manipulation with the CMA.

We also recognise that the heating oil sector is currently under-regulated. Unlike gas and electricity, the heating oil market is not regulated by Ofgem. We are going to put that right by exploring what regulations might be needed to ensure that consumers get a better deal and by exploring new ways to ensure that households are better protected. This will include: securing an agreement with industry on a strengthened code of practice to rapidly provide enhanced protections to customers; introducing stronger consumer protections in the heating oil market, which could cover dispute resolution, a greater variety of repayment options for those facing hardship, greater price transparency and enhanced protections for vulnerable groups such as the elderly; supporting the CMA’s plans to carry out a more comprehensive examination of the UK’s heating oil industry; and exploring the creation of a new ombudsman or the appointment of a regulator such as Ofgem to champion consumers.

Thirdly, this conflict is yet another reminder that we must get off the rollercoaster of global fossil fuel markets as soon as possible and on to the path of clean, secure, affordable energy that this country controls. This is the only way to protect the British people from energy price shocks and ensure that we are no longer buffeted by the headwinds of conflicts that we had no part in starting. Thanks to our mission to make the UK a clean energy superpower, we have already brought in £90 billion of investment in clean energy, but now, in the light of events in the middle east, we have set out a package of measures to help us go even further and faster in pursuit of national energy security.

We will bring forward the next renewables auction, just months after our most successful ever auction secured enough power for the equivalent of 16 million homes. We will make plug-in solar available for the first time in Britain so that families can buy a low-cost panel straight from a supermarket and set it up on their balcony or in their garden. We will speed up the delivery of our £15 billion warm homes plan—the largest home upgrade programme in British history. We will also reform nuclear regulations following the Fingleton review so that we can fast-track new nuclear power stations.

Behind every decision this Government take is a simple principle. Whatever the challenges, we will always support working people; we will always fight their corner. That is why we are directly helping those affected by the spike in heating oil costs; it is why we are cracking down on any suppliers who are cancelling orders or jacking up prices, while working at pace to ensure that the sector is

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properly regulated; and it is why, despite the opposition from parties on the other side of the Chamber, we are doing everything we can to take back control of our energy, ending our reliance on these unstable global fossil fuel markets and instead bringing in an era of new, clean, home-grown energy that we control in this country—an era of economic growth, new good jobs, unprecedented investment and real energy security. That is how we will ensure that ordinary working British people never pay the price for foreign conflicts and our overdependence on fossil fuels again. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

6.18 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I thank the Minister for giving me advance sight of the statement, although I really have to take issue with the Prime Minister's earlier comments, taking credit for Ofgem's decision to lower the energy price cap. That decision was taken not by the Government, but by Ofgem using a Conservative mechanism, and it was in fact taken weeks before the current crisis began. But why let the facts get in the way of this Government's spin?

I am glad to see that the Government have today taken steps to support those households across Great Britain and Northern Ireland that rely on heating oil—steps that those of us on this side of the House called for when prices began to rise weeks ago. Those households are, as the Minister has highlighted, acutely exposed to price shocks, and the stories we have heard from consumers across the country are very concerning indeed. Just this morning, I heard from a constituent who faces a lump sum bill of over £1,000. These consumers are often served by a single local supplier, meaning that there is no realistic competition.

Let us be under no illusions: this announcement has come about only after the pressure put on the Government by the Opposition. The Leader of the Opposition and my right hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) called for these actions almost two weeks ago. Like everything with this Government, they end up doing the right thing only after weeks of dither, delay and inaction—but today's announcement will be welcome news for rural households, and nowhere is that more apparent than in Northern Ireland, where over 60% of homes rely on oil for heat.

Although I welcome the announcement, I would be grateful if the Minister could provide some clarification. First, can he explain what, if any, support will be made available to those who heat their homes with liquid petroleum gas? Furthermore, it appears that the allocation of funding for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is to go directly to the devolved Administrations and not directly to local authorities. Considering that the Minister represents a Scottish constituency, he understands just as well as I that handing over a cheque to the Scottish Government does not guarantee that money will be spent where it was intended to be spent. Can he therefore outline how this Government will ensure that those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland get the support they need, and that this funding is not siphoned off for

other priorities determined by devolved Ministers? Why was this money not awarded directly to local authorities in those nations as it is being delivered across England?

It is also my understanding that this funding is inclusive of Barnett consequential. Could the Minister confirm whether that is the case? If it is, will he confirm that Scotland is being short-changed due to the higher proportion of households on heating oil than the Barnett formula would account for?

The Government could go further and heed our calls to deliver a 20% cut to everyone's energy bills—and I mean everyone's—through the Conservative's cheap power plan by axing the carbon tax and the rip-off wind subsidies now. That cut would be worth around £165 to the average family. The Government should also bring about another one of their famed U-turns and cancel their planned fuel duty rise later this year—a rise that will add £156 to struggling families' bills, because Labour's plans always lead to more costs for families and businesses.

Let us take today's announcement as an example. We cannot ignore that this support will be funded through Labour's tax rises on working people. Why? Because this Government have made a choice—a political choice—to shut down the North sea and forgo £25 billion of tax receipts that an attractive, investable and successful North sea oil and gas industry would, and still could, provide. Backing the UK's oil and gas industry is about driving the economic growth that we so desperately need, which in turn would deliver greater tax receipts than the current regime. It is about becoming more energy secure. One hundred per cent of all the gas produced in the British North sea is used in the British gas grid. The less we use from British waters, the more we have to import—at a higher cost and with a bigger carbon footprint—from Qatar, the USA and Norway, which continue to explore in the same sea in which we are prevented from exploring.

Backing the UK's oil and gas industry would support a vitally important skilled workforce—a workforce that right now is packing up and going overseas. What will it take for this Government to change course—revenue, investment, job security? What is it that this Government do not get? Just today, the CEO of RenewableUK joined the chorus of voices calling for an overhaul of this disastrous act of economic self-harm being inflicted by this Labour Government. We read in *The Times* at the weekend that we are currently led by the “least intellectually curious” Prime Minister of all time, so it is no surprise that the Secretary of State has been given free rein to inflict his myopic vision of a future—[*Interruption.*] Those are not my words; they are the words of people in the Cabinet today! Surely at this time of such global instability, the case for a thriving oil and gas industry is clearer than ever.

We welcome the action announced today on heating oil, but there are serious questions—not just from me but from the industry, the renewables sector, the trade unions, and, frankly, everyone other than those sitting on the Labour Benches—over wider Government energy policy that need to be answered, and answered soon.

Martin McCluskey: Dear, oh dear! Where to begin? I will do my best to wade through the many points that hon. Gentleman raised.

First, the energy price cap is reducing on 1 April because of actions that this Government took to take £150 out of energy costs. That will see every bill in this country reduced. People listening should hear that their bill will go down in April, and that is protected to the end of June. The hon. Gentleman appears to be criticising us for a lack of speed. If he would like to volunteer how many days it took for the last Conservative Government to provide support for people on heating oil, I am all ears. How long did it take his party in government? It took them nearly 200 days. We are around three weeks into this conflict in the middle east, and we have come forward with support today.

LPG will be eligible in so far as the English schemes that we have funded additionally today through these actions, and we are making that clear to local authorities in a letter that has been sent from Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers today. It will be for the devolved Administrations—Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland—to determine how they distribute the funds. I hope that they will work at the same speed as this Government to ensure that they are available on 1 April, but all nations already have crisis funds available that they could be deploying for this purpose, just as we will be deploying them for this purpose in England from today; if there are people in crisis now applying to the existing household support fund, they will be eligible for support from today, and the additional funding will come after 1 April.

The hon. Gentleman talked about the funds being Barnettised, but the funds are not being Barnettised; Scotland is not being, in his words, short-changed. The funds are being allocated based on census data on how many heating oil-fuelled households there are in each individual nation. That is why Northern Ireland comes out with £17 million, Scotland with £4.6 million and Wales with less. It is not a Barnett share; it is based on the number of households that use heating oil.

Finally, I do wish that the hon. Gentleman would stop coming to this Chamber and talking down the UK's oil and gas sector. *[Interruption.]* No, I do wish that he would stop talking it down. He has implied from his Dispatch Box that the taps are being turned off in the North sea; they are not. The North sea is working today at full capacity and has been for some time. On Thursday, I was in Aberdeen, speaking to workers in that sector and to workers in floating offshore wind, who will benefit from our decision to invest in clean energy. If we take our eyes off the opportunities that will be available in future, it is a road to ruin. The hon. Gentleman will also know that more extraction from the North sea will not reduce the price of energy. We are a price taker, not a price maker. That is not our road to cheaper energy for households.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Unlike the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), I give an unqualified welcome to today's announcement, which will support some of the most vulnerable people in the United Kingdom—some of those in greatest fuel poverty. I have to say to the Minister, though, that we invited him to join us at our Committee session tomorrow afternoon to discuss the

warm homes plan, following last week's excellent evidence session. So far he has not been available. It is not too late for him to change his mind if he wants to, but for now I will ask him one question. Given that people on heating oil are at the sharp end of the impact of the spike in oil and gas prices, will he consider giving them preferential treatment when it comes to the warm homes plan so they can benefit from the range of measures, including on energy efficiency, and the reduced costs that it can deliver for them?

Martin McCluskey: I am always happy to come to the Committee; I understand that discussions are ongoing about a longer evidence session just on the warm homes plan to give it the attention that I am sure my hon. Friend agrees it is due. I agree that the warm homes plan should target some of the lowest-income people in our country. That is why we have allocated well over £1 billion for some of the low-income schemes in the warm homes plan, and why we have also focused on how we target rural households, many of whom will be affected by the heating oil situation.

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

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): We welcome the Government finally taking action to protect households from soaring energy costs due to the middle east crisis, following calls from those on the Liberal Democrat Benches and MPs of all parties. However, today's intervention is a sticking-plaster solution, with too many households potentially falling through the cracks and not receiving support. We have heard that those families who must use oil for heating are the most exposed and defenceless, caught in the crossfire of Russia's war in Ukraine and now the volatility in the middle east.

The heating oil market needs regulating. The Liberal Democrats are calling for the immediate introduction of a three-month VAT holiday on heating oil, as well as a proper price cap, because these households deserve the same protection as those that use gas and electricity. The real way to protect households and businesses is not by parroting Trump's "Drill, baby, drill" mantra and buckling in for more roller-coaster rides that burn a hole in people's pockets but by accelerating the transition to secure, home-grown clean energy that we control and extending preferential treatment to the warm homes plan, to help those homes that use heating oil to electrify and get off volatile fuel that we do not control.

Will the Government agree with the Liberal Democrats and set a price cap for heating oil to shield off-grid households? Also, if the Government want to provide targeted support, will they learn the lessons from the covid pandemic and the 2022 energy crisis and immediately enact a data-sharing scheme between Departments, including the Department for Work and Pensions and the NHS, and devolve this to local authorities to enable them to deliver targeted support to those who need it the most through, right now, the crisis and resilience fund that they want to be adopted on 1 April?

Martin McCluskey: I thank the hon. Lady for her constructive tone, for working together on some of this, and in particular for her comments on the need to move towards a transition to ensure our energy security and, ultimately, to lower bills.

[*Martin McCluskey*]

On the hon. Lady's point about a cap, the market for heating oil, as she will know, is very different from the market for electricity and gas. The reason that the price cap was introduced many years ago was the potential loyalty penalty that existed, whereby consumers who were with an individual company for a long time were penalised for that. Heating oil, by contrast, is supplied through a highly competitive market. That is why we have asked the CMA to look at this in more detail and we will examine its findings to establish what regulation may be required.

On the hon. Lady's comments regarding the warm homes plan, the low income fund will target many of those people. She may also be interested to know that about 50% of the grants given out under the boiler upgrade scheme are to rural homes, many of which will be in this situation, that are transitioning from oil heating to electrified heating through a heat pump.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his statement. Giving support to people who are off grid is vital; however, Thanet Earth, which is near my constituency and employs a number of my constituents, actually grows 20% of the tomatoes that are sold in this country. The business is profoundly energy intensive and is doing all the right things on decarbonising its energy supply, yet it is still profoundly affected by such fossil fuel spikes as those we are experiencing today. Will the Minister look at what is possible to support such energy-intensive industries through this energy crisis?

Martin McCluskey: I know that my hon. Friend has been a champion for such industries in her constituency, including Thanet Earth. The Minister for Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), is working through the implications of this crisis for such businesses as we speak, and will come forward with plans in due course.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement. One characteristic of volatile energy markets is that when wholesale prices rise, consumer prices tend to rise like a rocket, and when the wholesale price stabilises the consumer price tends to fall like a feather. Can the Minister assure me and my constituents that in the conversations that he is having with the Competition and Markets Authority he is also looking at whether, when the market returns to normality, prices will fall as quickly as they have risen in this volatile moment?

Martin McCluskey: The hon. Member makes an important point. I know Ministers in my Department have been discussing that with the CMA and will carry on doing so. The CMA has started its work looking at the heating oil market and will, I hope, come forward soon with proposals that we can examine, to determine whether further regulation is required.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement, which will reassure a lot of families in Northamptonshire. Could he give us a bit more detail on the timeline under which this will be brought in, and assure people across Northamptonshire that the process will be easy to access, without bureaucracy?

Martin McCluskey: I know that my hon. Friend has been fighting hard for his constituents in Northamptonshire during this crisis. We are topping up the crisis and resilience fund with this additional funding across England that will be available from 1 April. Local authorities in affected areas have received notification today of the additional funding that will be available to them, but they can also use existing means to distribute funds to those in crisis, without waiting until 1 April. The message to my hon. Friend's constituents would be to contact their local authority today, and that more funding is coming on 1 April.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): The Minister's statement included what I am sure were some very sincere words. He said:

"Whatever the challenges, we will always support working people; we will always fight their corner. That is why we are...doing everything we can to take back control of our energy".

I did not want to have to break this to the Government, but they are not fighting for working people or taking back control of our energy by actively closing down the North sea. Thousands of people are losing their jobs every month and our energy security is going down. The only way the Minister can remedy this is by removing the ban on new licences and scrapping the energy profits levy.

Martin McCluskey: Once again we hear a voice from the Opposition talking down the UK's oil and gas sector. The North sea is not being shut down. [*Interruption.*] It is not being shut down; it is producing oil and gas today, and will play a role in this country for years to come. It is also important for Opposition Members to remember that not a single barrel of additional extraction from the North sea will reduce the price of energy in this country. It will not help any of our constituents with the cost of their energy.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the Minister and the Government for their swift response; £4.6 million to Scotland will be very welcome in my constituency, where up to 50% of homes outside the town of Stornoway rely on heating oil. What discussions has the Minister had with the Scottish Government to ensure that the £4.6 million is distributed through local authorities through the crisis grant fund; that local authorities have maximum discretion in how they distribute that fund; that we have maximum accountability on how the money is spent; and that we have maximally swift delivery of this much needed support?

Martin McCluskey: My hon. Friend was one of the first people to come to me with concerns around the heating oil situation in his constituency. The Minister for Energy had these discussions with the Scottish Government towards the end of last week, and I will have further such discussions over the next few days. I would hope that the Scottish Government take as wide an interpretation around their crisis funding as this Government have about England, and ensure that it is made clear to local authorities that the support is available for those on heating oil and those on liquefied petroleum gas. How the devolved Governments distribute those funds is, obviously, a matter for them.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): It is estimated that over 20,000 homes in North Yorkshire rely upon heating oil, including constituents in the rural part of my constituency in villages outside Occaney, Copgrove, Farnham, Flaxby and others. They already face what is known as a rural premium, with households paying more for everyday essentials. Given that reality, how can the Government justify offering only limited support to households that now face soaring heating oil costs?

Martin McCluskey: My priority, and that of the Government, in dealing with the situation in the middle east has been to come forward as quickly as possible with support, which today we can guarantee will be available for those on heating oil from 1 April. For constituents who do not use heating oil, electricity and gas prices will reduce on 1 April by 7%. We will keep the situation under review. It is fast moving. Three weeks ago, we would not have thought that we would be in the situation we are in today. We will keep the matter under review, but our priority has been to get this money to the people who need it as quickly as possible.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): With one in four households in South Norfolk relying on heating oil, the announcement today will make a huge difference to my constituents and I thank the Government for their extremely swift action. As local discretion is to be exercised by local authorities, will the Minister make it clear to local authorities up and down England that they need to ensure this addresses as many people as humanly possible, to give them the support when they need it most?

Martin McCluskey: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance, and the Minister for Local Government and Homelessness has written today to the leaders of councils in areas that are receiving additional funding to make this clear.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I am curious about the details as I have been raising this issue on behalf of my constituents in West Worcestershire all week, many of whom rely on heating oil and liquefied petroleum gas. How much extra money is going into the crisis and resilience fund in West Worcestershire, and how will local authorities prevent “first come, first served” and instead ensure that those with the emptiest tanks get access to the money first?

Martin McCluskey: I will write to the hon. Lady with the details around her local authority area, but we are confident that the amount going into the crisis and resilience fund—both additional and current funding—will be enough to meet the demand for this period while the heating oil prices are increased. As I said to other hon. Members, we will keep the situation under review as it progresses.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): On behalf of my constituents, I thank the Minister for his speedy response to the situation, which I know from my inbox has been very welcome to those using heating oil, but can he reassure us that the correspondence from Government to Lancashire county council will make it clear that those on LPG will also be eligible for the fund?

Martin McCluskey: I can assure my hon. Friend that guidance will be provided to local authorities to ensure that LPG customers are also dealt with through the fund.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): While I welcome the Minister's statement, my constituents and I have a few questions. How many households does the Minister project that this will be applied to? What does he foresee the average amount of support being? Is there a qualifying criterion in terms of benefits or household income? Will the fund be disbursed via the upper tier or lower-tier council, and should my constituents apply to Bromsgrove district council or Wiltshire council for support?

Martin McCluskey: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the current household support fund and the future crisis resilience fund are discretionary and it will be for the local authorities to determine, under the guidelines, what they will be able to provide. On the support available and the number of households affected, we are confident that this can meet demand over this period of time. As I said in response to other hon. Members, the important thing is ensuring that this money reaches people as quickly as possible, and we did not wait around, as the previous Government did, to provide support to these households.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and the swift response to the need of my rural constituents who are reliant on heating oil and LPG. This crisis has shown that our strategic approach of getting off the reliance on global fossil fuel markets is absolutely the right one, but it has also exposed the under-regulation of the heating oil market domestically, so can the Minister tell me what this Labour Government will do to tackle that under-regulation?

Martin McCluskey: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments on the need to transition as quickly as possible. Through this crisis we have seen the volatility that this country is exposed to because of our reliance on fossil fuels. For the sake of people across the country, we cannot allow that to continue. On regulation, we have had discussions with the Competition and Markets Authority, which has set out what it is looking at in terms of the heating oil market. It will come forward with recommendations and a report, which we will study carefully to determine the need for regulation.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): With prices doubling or tripling, a 97-year-old constituent cannot afford her next bill and another family has no hot water. Reporting price gouging to the CMA will not help them now, so what support will the Government give those above the lowest income thresholds who cannot afford the next delivery, and what will Ministers do to stop public money allocated now simply filling the pockets of profiteering suppliers?

Martin McCluskey: No one should have to face the kind of situation that the hon. Lady has just described, which is why we are coming forward today with support. That additional funding will be available through the crisis and resilience fund from 1 April. However, as I said in response to an earlier question, constituents can

[*Martin McCluskey*]

already go to their local authority, and we are giving clear guidance to local authorities on the support that they can offer today, and we are expanding some of the guidelines for the existing funds to make it clear that they can provide support for people on heating oil and LPG. On the hon. Lady's latter point on regulation, as I have said, the CMA is investigating this. There are clearly issues in the heating oil market, as we can see in what has happened over the past couple of weeks. That is why we have asked the CMA to look at that. It has agreed and we will study its conclusions and come forward if necessary with regulation.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for the very quick action taken by this Government. He mentioned his hope that the Scottish Government will act as quickly as this Government have to pass on these savings to people who use heating oil. Will he ensure that we get more than just hope, as we want an assurance that the SNP Government will not fail my constituents, as they have done so many times before? Will he keep up the pressure on the SNP to deliver what it should be delivering for my constituents and others?

Martin McCluskey: I know that my hon. Friend would possibly share some of my concerns, which is why I have been so clear today that the Scottish Government should move at pace to ensure they can provide the same level of assurance to people across the country today that we are, and that support is on the way and that from 1 April people will be able to apply to those funds. Some £4.6 million is being provided to the Scottish Government for this action, and we would want to ensure that every single penny of that reaches the people who need it.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On behalf of the low-income families of North Dorset, I very much welcome the Minister's statement, but what help can he give to those who are not classified as low income but who are, in the old parlance, just about managing? Surely a VAT holiday for all customers would be of benefit right across the piece. May I urge the Minister to consider that for those families? There will also be a number of rural buildings—doctor surgeries, community halls, parish halls, village halls—that use heating oil, and for which the costs will be very high. They operate on very limited budgets and give a lot of support to elderly and vulnerable people in our communities. Will the funds available also be open to them?

Martin McCluskey: I thank the hon. Member for his comments. On the point about regulation, it is important to remember that we have already taken action, and not for heating oil but for people on traditional electricity and gas, whose bills will reduce by 7% in April—that is a universal offer, available to everyone. Obviously, alongside the universal offers there are targeted offers, such as ours today on heating oil. On non-domestic premises, the Minister for Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North, is looking in detail at the situation and will come forward with more proposals later. Today's announcement is for domestic premises, but we will come forward with details for non-domestic.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): I very much welcome the Government listening and acting so quickly on this subject. On 5 March, one of my constituents had an order of 500 litres of heating oil cancelled and was invited to remake the order, but he was then told that it would cost around twice as much as the previous order. Rob, who is on the state pension and is a wheelchair-user, could not afford to remake the order and therefore has had no central heating from 5 March. Does the Minister agree that all providers should be honouring contracts previously made?

Martin McCluskey: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing that case to my attention, and I ask him to write to me with more details. From conversations about this case and others that have been mentioned across the House, it is clear why we need regulation in this market and why we need to investigate it. I am glad that the CMA is taking that forward.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Reform): The Treasury is raking in tens of millions in increased tax revenues from rising fuel and energy prices on the one hand; on the other, it is providing some mild relief to a chosen few. The Chancellor is robbing Peter to pay Paul, and then expects the country to give her a pat on the back. Will the Minister do what could be done now: cancel the proposed increase in fuel duty for September and provide some genuine relief to everyone who is feeling hard pressed right now?

Martin McCluskey: The right hon. Gentleman will know that fuel duty is frozen and, as the Prime Minister set out last week, we will keep that under review. It is important that people who are listening to these discussions hear that fuel duty is frozen, and that just as we are taking action with electricity and gas in April, we have taken action today. The right hon. Gentleman calls them the chosen few. I would say we are targeting support at those who need help now to make sure that people can heat their homes sufficiently. This is the Government taking action today to make sure that people are better off and that they see the effects through this period.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I thank the Government for acting so swiftly—the previous Government took 200 days to act when we faced a similar crisis after the start of the Ukrainian war. I want to ask a couple of questions. First, can the Minister confirm that LPG is included in the package? Many of my constituents are on LPG, not just heating oil. Secondly, will he set out how the package will help those who are financially vulnerable and also medically vulnerable, including disabled constituents, many of whom are at greatest risk and have shared concerns that they have to have their heating on 24 hours a day?

Martin McCluskey: I can confirm that LPG is included in the package, and guidance will be provided to local authorities to make it clear that it is for LPG as well as for heating oil. My hon. Friend referred to medically vulnerable people. They are eligible under the existing household support fund and the crisis and resilience fund if they fall into crisis. There is still a lot more that we have to do for people who are medically vulnerable. That is why the Government are taking action to look

at how data can be better shared in order to ensure that medically vulnerable people can receive the support they need.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I welcome the Government coming forward with a proposal, but many of my constituents are facing £600 or £700 increases on bills that are coming immediately at them. The Minister cannot tell us today who exactly will be eligible for help—perhaps he can answer that. He cannot tell us how much they will actually get when they are looking at an increase of £600 or £700 on one bill just to fill up. He did not even seem to know which particular council is going to administer this help. Can he please give some clarity? Otherwise, we are getting the appearance of action and no real relief for most of my constituents.

Martin McCluskey: We are providing action quickly, while the previous Government waited nearly 200 days to provide action. The funding will be available from 1 April, as I said. The Minister for Local Government has today written to local authorities to inform them of the additional funding that will be available to them, but, as the right hon. Member will know, the funds are administered by local government. We are providing clear guidance to people and to local authorities that those funds should be available to people using heating oil and LPG.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I represent about 13,500 households that are off the grid. I welcome the recognition of the scale of the problem in these communities and getting them proper support. I urge the Minister to ensure that regulation for the heating oil sector is brought forward as quickly and effectively as possible, so that constituents are not ripped off far into the future, and to continue to monitor the situation as it progresses so that further action may be taken if required.

Martin McCluskey: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for all his work to stand up not just for his constituents, but for rural communities more generally. The CMA is investigating heating oil and will come forward with proposals, which we will study to determine whether we need to regulate in this area. But it is clear from what we have heard across the House this evening and in other reports that this market is not working in the way it should.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): More than 130,000 homes in Scotland now face deeper anxiety and financial uncertainty with this paltry intervention from the Government. The reality of this cold winter and spring in the north of Scotland and in the highlands and islands, not least in my constituency, is that there was snow last night. The gritters were out, and some people now face hypothermia as they struggle with the massive increase in costs. With more price increases in the supermarkets, higher fuel costs, rising inflation and growing extreme fuel poverty in Scottish households as this illegal war continues, I ask the Minister whether the Government will now commit to a more robust plan, including further interventions later this year.

Martin McCluskey: This is from a representative of a governing party in Scotland that has ditched its fuel poverty targets and, just a few months ago, ditched its heat in buildings Bill, which would have provided support and help to people with leaky buildings.

Seamus Logan: What are you going to do about it?

Martin McCluskey: I will answer the hon. Gentleman. We have supplied £4.6 million of funding today. He rolls his eyes, but his constituents and many others across Scotland will look at him askance for doing so. This is support for people, and it is now for the Scottish Government to come forward with how they are going to ensure that the money reaches the pockets of people across Scotland.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): It is really good to see the Government prioritising people in distress in rural and coastal areas. My question is slightly separate. It is about listed buildings and conservation area properties, and how those people struggle to insulate their homes because of planning rules. Does the Department have any plans to do something about that?

Martin McCluskey: The recent warm homes plan talks about listed buildings. We are working with many heritage organisations to assist with retrofit. I recently visited Saltaire in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) and viewed some excellent examples of historic buildings, which demonstrated that they can be retrofitted to just as high a standard as modern buildings.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): Although I thank the Minister for the limited amount of support that he has announced today, may I represent to him two of the most vulnerable groups in this regard: the very old and the very young? I ask him to consider them. I have elderly constituents who hardly dare turn on their heating because they do not know whether they can afford it. Will he consider including those groups in the regulations, and if not, will he give local authorities greater discretion to pay out hardship payments in the scheme?

Martin McCluskey: First, we should communicate loud and clear today that the energy price cap is going down in April. People's bills will be reduced by 7%, and it is important that people across the country who are anxious about their bills hear that message. On the hon. Gentleman's about older and younger constituents, the discretionary element of the crisis and resiliency fund allows local authorities to make those choices. It is a person-centred approach to allow them to make choices that are applicable to their local area. I encourage him to have that discussion with his local authority. The guidance would allow it to do that.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I thank the Government for their engagement with Back Benchers who represent rural constituencies, and for bringing forward this support so swiftly—in marked contrast to the 200 days it took the Conservatives. However, I share some of the concerns that have echoed around the Chamber about the people who are just about managing, who might not find themselves eligible. If the crisis prolongs, the Government have said that they will keep the situation under review. Will the Minister consider everything being on the table, including, for example, looking at VAT?

Martin McCluskey: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his advocacy for his constituents in Bishop Auckland. This is a fast-moving situation. We have come forward today with support because we wanted to assure people that there would be support available as quickly as possible, and that is what we have done. As I have said, we will keep the situation under review.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): We appreciate the Minister's statement and the fact that the Government have moved so quickly to provide support. I have received many messages from people in the Meon valley who use heating oil and other types of energy as their main sources of heating. They understand that we cannot control international events, but they are worried that companies are profiteering, with the average price going up from £300 to £640 a tank, or from 63p to £1.40 a litre. Are the Government working at pace to ensure that Ofgem and other regulatory authorities, which do not currently regulate heating oil, will prevent companies from taking advantage of the international situation and making money off older people in particular?

Martin McCluskey: The market is clearly not working as it should and needs attention. My hon. Friend the Minister for Energy met the Competition and Markets Authority last week. The CMA took quick action to respond on Saturday in areas that it planned to investigate. I hope that it will come forward with that work quickly, and then we will be able to make a decision about further action.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Carlisle and north Cumbria has around 7,000 off-grid households, so I thank the Minister for his statement, which I know will be welcomed by heating oil and LPG households in my constituency. Will he reassure us that, in tackling the under-regulation left by the previous Government, this Government's action will regulate the heating oil and LPG markets?

Martin McCluskey: The CMA is considering these issues, and we will examine its conclusions carefully. I will write to my hon. Friend about LPG and the CMA's examination of it, which I hope will provide her with the reassurance that she needs.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Thousands of households in East Hampshire are off grid. They face much bigger swings in energy prices, and of course when their tank happens to run out is a matter of chance. For them, the statement will be good news, but how will the Government ensure that take-up is maximised among vulnerable and low-income customers, as is done for pension credit? How will the support be communicated to them? For all the questions about how the scheme will be administered, what message should we take back to constituents about what the criteria will be and how much money will be available? It is right that local authorities have discretion, but there has to be some sort of consistency so that people know what to expect. The Minister has talked about guidance being sent to local authorities. Will it include that?

Martin McCluskey: I thank the right hon. Member for the constructive way in which he has approached the matter. We need to maximise take-up to ensure that we

reach all the people who need support. Local authorities have an important role to play in that; the communications that they provide to their residents will be important. We will also need to work closely with the trade body. With heating oil—more than in many other sectors—there is a relationship between the people who come and fill up the tank and the householder. Those people have a role to play in ensuring that people understand what support is available. The crisis and resilience fund, which this money is topping up, is available from 1 April, and there will be guidelines, as I said. We have been clear that heating oil and LPG are in scope. I take the right hon. Gentleman's point about consistency, but we must remember that this fund is discretionary for local authorities, so there needs to be some flexibility—largely because local authorities will know how best to serve their local areas.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I welcome the £3.8 million commitment, which will help Welsh households with rising costs. A 70-year-old woman in my constituency saw a quote for 500 litres of oil rise by £250 in less than a week. Farmers will also be hit hard: they will face increased red diesel prices and an exponential rise in fertiliser costs. Will the Minister share what support may be given to farmers?

Martin McCluskey: I welcome my hon. Friend's comments and her advocacy for her constituents. The £3.8 million being provided to Wales reflects the fact that Wales—especially west Wales—has significant numbers of heating oil-fuelled homes. I will write to her on support for farmers more generally. This is obviously a very fast-moving situation. Our priority at the moment is to ensure that householders get the support that they need for heating oil. As I said, the Minister for Industry is considering issues in the non-domestic sector, which will be relevant to my hon. Friend's farming constituents.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I suppose it was inevitable that the Minister would take the opportunity to bang the drum for his disastrous net zero policy, which has been responsible for giving people in the United Kingdom the highest electricity prices in the whole of Europe. Of course, he talks about the need for energy supply and security. We have our own gas and oil and, as far as I know, it does not have to go through the strait of Hormuz or through a Putin-controlled pipeline, yet we have turned our back on it. I welcomed the support for Northern Ireland, even though it amounts to about £34 per household, but I noticed that the Minister said he is working closely with the Minister for the Economy in Northern Ireland. Given that she is still to bring forward a plan to spend the £81 million granted in the Budget last year, will he ensure that he keeps her feet to the fire so that people in Northern Ireland can receive the support that they need now, not next winter?

Martin McCluskey: I had a constructive conversation with Minister Archibald this afternoon about the support on offer, and I am confident that the Northern Ireland Executive will work at pace to ensure that it is delivered to people across Northern Ireland. The right hon. Gentleman mentions net zero. It is important to remember two things: first, more North sea extraction would not affect energy prices for people in this country, and secondly, the long-term route to lower prices is not

through exposing us further to fossil fuels. That exposure—not net zero—is why we have some of the higher prices in Europe. More exposure, which is his suggestion, would just increase our prices and our vulnerability, including for people in Northern Ireland.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): Having grown up in a household that relied on heating oil, I know how overlooked off-grid rural communities can feel. They were overlooked by the previous Government, who did not include them in energy price support for 200 days, and they have been overlooked by a regulatory framework that does not give them the same protections offered to other homeowners. I welcome this announcement of support, in which the Government have acknowledged that those households deserve far better. However, I have seen quite exploitative practices from oil companies in my constituency recently, so can we ensure that we are not shying away from the regulatory reforms that are needed for the longer term?

Martin McCluskey: Many hon. Members have highlighted such cases. The heating oil market is clearly not working in the way that it is meant to, which is why we are focusing on what we need to do in terms of regulation. As I have said, the CMA is considering particular aspects of the market. We will study its conclusions and come forward with proposals.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): How was the sum of money that the Minister announced arrived at? Was there any reference to the increased tax receipts that the Treasury will see as a result of hikes in oil prices? Will he lay out the criteria on which the money will be awarded? Without such criteria, he cannot possibly approach rationally the amount of money that he will be giving people in order to help them. Finally, how are my constituents to spot the price manipulation that he has asked them to report?

Martin McCluskey: On the right hon. Gentleman's final question, his constituents should send any cases of potential price manipulation through the CMA, which will investigate such cases. As for how allocations have been arrived at, that is a combination of the number of heating oil households in individual areas and deprivation figures. It will be for local authorities to determine how the scheme works. As I have said, we have provided guidance to local authorities to ensure that households that use heating oil and LPG receive the support that they need.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for the rapid action he has outlined. About 7% of households in my constituency are oil fuelled. Families in Gnosall, Norton and Haughton have told me that they had agreements with an oil contractor for deliveries, which were supposed to take place last week but were cancelled as the conflict escalated. Now, the price has more than doubled. Will the Minister tell me what rapid action is being taken to stop companies price gouging in such a way?

Martin McCluskey: I will say a couple of things in response to that. We have been in constant dialogue with industry bodies to communicate clearly to them what we would see as inappropriate action and pricing.

We are moving at pace with the CMA and have asked it to look at this market because it is clearly not functioning. Absolutely none of our constituents should have to face the kind of situation that my hon. Friend describes.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): Nearly 13,000 households are off-grid in my constituency, including my home. It is a wild west out there; prices have doubled in just a few weeks, and many of my constituents are not even able to pay for the minimum 500-litre orders required by the providers. Does the Minister agree it would be far quicker and simpler for the Government to provide relief through a VAT holiday on heating oil and LPG? That would ensure that support reaches every household immediately, rather than relying on councils to distribute limited discretionary funds.

Martin McCluskey: Our priority has been to ensure that support reaches people as quickly as possible. That is why we have come forward with this proposal today. As I said in response to previous questions, we will keep the situation under review as the situation in the middle east progresses. The CMA is looking at a number of areas before it makes recommendations that might lead to regulation, and we will study those carefully. One of those is whether the issue of minimum orders needs to be examined more closely. The hon. Lady has my reassurance that we are looking at this issue, and the CMA will come forward with proposals.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): More than 22,000 households in my constituency rely on heating oil. Dozens of constituents have contacted me over the last week, and they are worried sick, so I very much welcome this announcement and the speed with which the Government have made it. This situation has exposed the fact that rural communities are uniquely vulnerable to global energy shocks. May I urge the Minister to do all he can to prioritise better regulation and to look at how rural communities can benefit from the warm homes plan and transition to better insulation and renewable technology in a way that they were not able to do under the previous Government?

Martin McCluskey: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and for everything that he is doing to advocate for the many constituents he has who use heating oil. As he said, we need to move forward with the CMA to examine what regulation might be required. He will have seen that the warm homes plan highlights rural households and low-income households as an area of priority. He may be interested to know that around 50% of grants from the boiler upgrade scheme are going to rural homes, showing the demand that exists in constituencies such as his.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Daisy in Old Weston has seen her quote for 500 litres of heating oil leap from £324 to £868. Lee has a 1,400 litre tank; her quote from before Christmas was £600, and it is now nearly £2,000. Those are huge price spikes, and they are having a massive impact. Will the Minister outline how the crisis and resilience fund will be allocated to Cambridgeshire county council? What is the total amount that it is likely to receive? Is there any cap on how much can be given out to individual households? Is there any cap on how much Cambridgeshire county council can give out in total, or will this be done on a first come, first served basis?

Martin McCluskey: The situation that the hon. Gentleman describes for his constituents is clearly intolerable. That is why we are looking with the CMA at the case for regulation in this market—it is clearly not working in the way that it should. On the crisis and resilience fund, more than £800 million has already been allocated through the spending review, and today we have added just over £50 million to the fund. This funding will be made at the discretion of local authorities, and we have written today to leaders of local authorities detailing the additional funding that will be available to them.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): I very much welcome the Minister's comments today, but he will understand the huge level of concern regarding the prospect of profiteering in not just the heating sector, but the wider energy sector, and its impact on the grocery sector at large. Indeed, the National Farmers Union has reported in recent days that it is concerned about potential profiteering in the fuel sector and the fertiliser sector. Will the Minister outline what action the Government are taking beyond instigating reviews at the level of the CMA to ensure that our constituents are protected from any profiteering?

Martin McCluskey: This Government will not stand for any profiteering in the system. That is why the Chancellor and the Secretary of State brought the petrol retailers in last week, for example, to make that abundantly clear to them. We have also made it abundantly clear to the representatives of the heating oil industry. When it comes to the electricity and gas suppliers, we took action through the Budget last year to remove costs from energy bills and reduce energy costs by 7% from April. We will cut no corners in holding companies to account where we think there is any sense of profiteering or manipulation of price. That is what the CMA is examining for us, and that is why we will examine what it comes forward with for the heating oil industry and decide whether there is a need for regulation.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I plan to run the statement only until 7.30 pm. May I encourage short questions from Members and perhaps shorter answers from the Minister?

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I welcome today's announcement and the proposals. They potentially offer a relief of 20% or so to the households in Wales that are off-grid, including 72% of households in my constituency. The Minister will appreciate that households will be anxious to understand what level of support they stand to receive. Was there a per-household level of payment in mind when the Government came up with these calculations? Given that LPG households will be entitled to support, can I also ask why heating oil data was used to calculate the £3.8 million allocation for Wales?

Martin McCluskey: As the hon. Gentleman said, £3.8 million has been allocated to Wales. It will be for the Welsh Government to design the scheme that they will use to roll that out; it may be through existing schemes or through something different, but that is a decision for them. In all this, our priority has been to work at speed. We do not want to leave people in a

situation without any support, which is why we have come forward with this proposal, just a few weeks after the initial stages of this conflict in the middle east. That is our priority. As I said, we will keep this issue under review, and we will come forward with more proposals if necessary.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement. Some of the most vulnerable people in my constituency live in the village of Banton, which is not on the gas grid. However, the rest of my constituency would be considered urban. Will the Minister make representations to the Scottish Government so that they do not just look at rurality when deciding how they are going to allocate this funding?

Martin McCluskey: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which I will be sure to raise in future discussions with Scottish Government Ministers.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Residents of Curland and Hatch Beauchamp are among the 9,000 off-grid households in my constituency, and they have contacted me about the heating oil question. Given that prices have gone up so greatly, they will welcome the Government's move, however small, against the soaring prices caused by Trump's illegal and unprincipled war. However, given that the help works out at only £35 per house, would it not be better to have a VAT holiday and a permanent price cap so that these customers are not second-class energy consumers?

Martin McCluskey: Not every household will decide to fill up now, at the point when the prices are so high. In addition, we have made it clear that this money is going through the crisis and resilience fund, which means that it is focused on low-income people, so we need to be careful not to imply that the funding is at the level that the hon. Gentleman describes. We are making sure that support is getting to people quickly, and that is the absolutely priority.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Minister's confirmation that the UK Government have provided the Scottish Government with £4.6 million to ensure that the most vulnerable households in parts of my constituency, like Auchtertool and Kingseat, are shielded against the increases in the price of heating oil caused by war in the middle east. Does he agree that it is up to the Scottish Government to act very rapidly to ensure that the most vulnerable households in my constituency get the support that they need?

Martin McCluskey: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. We must ensure that support is available in all parts of the UK as quickly as possible. In England, it will be available through the crisis and resilience fund from 1 April.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): In my constituency, an oil refill that was costing less than £500 costs well over £1,000 today, so I am rather underwhelmed by a package that offers a household £35 pro rata. How does the £53 million for the whole package compare with the increased VAT tax take from the rise in the price of heating oil? I suspect that it does not compare favourably. Would not the fairer—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Questions have to be shorter.

Jim Allister: Would the fairer approach not have been to suspend the 5% VAT on home heating oil? Would that not have been fairer to everyone?

Martin McCluskey: My priority and the priority of the Government has been to ensure that support gets to people as quickly as possible, which is what we are doing today. The pro rata suggestion that the hon. and learned Gentleman has just made misses the fact that not everyone will fill up their tank during this period when prices are high. We do not know where the situation in the middle east is going, and we do not know what prices are going to be like two, three, four or five weeks from now. However, as I have said in response to other hon. Members, we will review the situation as it progresses.

Jon Pearce (High Peak) (Lab): The Minister's statement will be hugely welcome in High Peak, where thousands of households are reliant on heating oil. Many have told me that the prices they are being charged have more than doubled. These households have been overlooked for too long. Will the Minister set out how the sector can be better regulated, to make sure that these households get a better deal going forwards?

Martin McCluskey: I thank my hon. Friend for his continued advocacy for his constituents in High Peak. The CMA is investigating areas of policy around the heating oil market and will come forward with suggestions. We will examine those suggestions in detail to determine whether or not regulation is required in the sector. However, it is clear from points that my hon. Friend and others have made that this market is not operating in the way that it should.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his announcement—the £17 million for Northern Ireland, as part of the £53 million package, is welcome. That recognition and funding is important, given the price of home heating oil. Some 62% of people across Northern Ireland have heating oil, including almost 80% of people in my part of the Ards peninsula—in my constituency, where I live—so it is very important that we get this right. Will the Minister commit to urgently engaging with his counterparts in Northern Ireland? My people want to see the money sooner rather than later.

Martin McCluskey: This funding has to work for people in Northern Ireland, including in the hon. Gentleman's constituency of Strangford. That is why today, I have had another call—the second over the past few days—with Minister Archibald in the Northern Ireland Executive, and it is why I will continue to engage with the Northern Ireland Executive over the next few weeks.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): In villages like Waterhouses and Quebec in Durham, many people use heating oil to heat their homes and their water. I have been contacted by very distressed constituents who tried to order their usual supply of heating oil, only to find that prices had soared so irrationally that they cancelled their order. This profiteering is completely unacceptable, so can the Minister restate the actions

that the Government are taking to stop these heating oil companies blatantly ripping off my constituents, and can he tell me the best mechanism for reporting such behaviour?

Martin McCluskey: Again, the points that my hon. Friend makes and the cases she brings to the attention of the House demonstrate that this market is clearly not working in the way that it should. I encourage her to send any of these cases to the CMA, so that it can consider them as part of its work.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I welcome the speed with which this Government have listened and responded to those households whose homes are heated by heating oil. I also thank the ministerial team for their engagement with MPs across the House. As many people on heating oil in North West Leicestershire may not previously have accessed support via the household support fund, how will the Minister ensure that the support gets to the individuals who need it?

Martin McCluskey: The local authorities have a role to play—as do all of us in this House—in communicating clearly that support is available. We need to make sure our constituents know that support for heating oil and LPG is now part of the crisis and resilience fund, and that it will be available from 1 April.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): We have seen oil prices surge over the past two weeks, and the targeted Government support announced today for low-income rural households that are reliant on heating oil, including many of my constituents, will help. Can I ask specifically about the distribution of the support? What are the criteria for a vulnerable heating oil customer, and what support will there be for those who do not need to fill up now, but will in the medium to near term?

Martin McCluskey: On my hon. Friend's final point about the medium term, we are keeping this issue under constant review, because the situation is moving so quickly. In his case, it will be for the Welsh Government to set out how they will distribute these funds; that may be through existing schemes, or through a new scheme.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Although I warmly welcome this support for the poorest rural homes, hydrotreated vegetable oil prices have remained relatively stable throughout the fortnight, so as well as securing ample production of HVO through sustainable aviation fuel refining, can I once again urge the Minister to ensure that the barriers and disincentives that prevent tens of thousands of rural residents from switching from kerosene to HVO are cleared as a matter of urgency?

Martin McCluskey: As my hon. Friend knows, a consultation has recently concluded, and we will come forward with a response in due course.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): I appreciate the speed at which the Government are working, and understand that local authorities will have a role in how the money is distributed. However, in the absence of detail, many people are doing a back-of-a-fag-packet calculation. Can the Minister reassure them

[Markus Campbell-Savours]

that we are committing enough money to make a real difference, and will he commit to meeting me to discuss how we support the 14,715 households in Penwith and Solway who do not benefit from being on the mains gas grid?

Martin McCluskey: The Government believe that this funding should be sufficient for those low-income households that are at acute risk of imminently losing access to their heating and hot water. As I have said in response to other questions, we will keep this issue under review and come forward with responses in the House at a later stage.

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): The 6,700 households in my constituency that are wholly reliant on heating oil have been very anxious following the impact of the war. They tell me that the impact on oil supplies has doubled and—in one case—trebled the price of heating oil, and some suppliers are no longer offering delivery dates. Elderly residents are wearing coats and gloves indoors to ration their supply. Over the past week, Ministers have taken the time to listen to rural MPs and have set out the scale of the issues we face, so let me place on record my gratitude for the additional £758,000 that will go to the worst-affected households across Shropshire. Can the Minister confirm that this money will be available from as early as 1 April?

Martin McCluskey: I thank my hon. Friend for the constructive way in which she and other MPs representing rural constituencies have engaged with this process. I can confirm that the money will be available from 1 April.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I am grateful to the Minister for his statement. With over 5,000 properties off the grid in the Banbury constituency, I welcome this announcement. Can I add my voice to the others we have heard from around the Chamber in asking that this Government to do what the previous Government failed to do: finally tackle the lack of regulation and proper accountability in the sector?

Martin McCluskey: We inherited a number of areas in the energy sector that were unregulated. This is one of them, which is why we are putting focusing so much on it, and we will study the CMA's conclusions when they come forward.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): It is imperative that this support reaches the most vulnerable heating oil households, such as those in the Braes villages in my constituency, who have seen astronomical price spikes. Can the Minister confirm whether the Scottish Government have yet signalled that they will administer this Government's funding for Scotland's vulnerable heating oil households nationally or via local authorities—and if they have not, will he ask John Swinney to get a move on?

Martin McCluskey: I commend my hon. Friend for the work he is doing for his constituents in Falkirk. As I mentioned earlier, the Minister for Energy met the

Scottish Government last week. I will be having further discussions, and will pass on those sentiments to Scottish Government Ministers.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents, Barrie and Gill Fulton, live in a rural part of Littleborough, and therefore rely on LPG. Both Barrie and Gill have cancer, and they are worried sick about the price spike that they are seeing at the moment. Can my hon. Friend reassure me that the scheme will be flexible enough to take into account the needs of families like the Fultons? Does he also think there is a certain irony in Opposition Members complaining about the pain felt by their constituents as a result of a war that they directly support?

Martin McCluskey: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing the case of Barrie and Gill Fulton to the attention of the House. I can confirm that the guidelines stipulate heating oil and LPG, so they will be covered; determining who is eligible will be at the discretion of local authorities, but I hope my hon. Friend's constituents can find some relief in that information.

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): Many households in the rural part of my constituency—including in Carron valley, whose community council I met on Friday—rely on heating oil and live in older housing stock that can be difficult to make energy-efficient. Many of those communities also have an older population. Does the Minister recognise the particular challenges this creates, and will the Government consider future measures that better reflect the nature of rural housing?

Martin McCluskey: In our warm homes plan, we came forward with proposals for England. The Scottish Government, unfortunately, have ditched their heat in buildings Bill, which would have provided some relief to my hon. Friend's constituents. I hope that the Scottish Government come forward with an alternative soon.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): In the rural parts of my constituency, one in 20 houses relies on heating oil. One of my constituents told me that his bill had gone up by 270%, while other constituents have had their deliveries cancelled. I welcome the £53 million of investment. I know it will be targeted through local authorities, but can the Minister give my constituents an indication of when that money will filter through to their bank accounts?

Martin McCluskey: The additional top-up funds will be available through the crisis and resilience fund from 1 April. What I say to my hon. Friend's constituents and those of all other hon. Members is that they should contact their local authorities today if there is an issue so that, either now or after 1 April, they will be able to take advantage of that support.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Minister for his answers this evening.

Point of Order

7.30 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In Thanet, we are welcoming to people who play by the rules, but unfortunately it appears that the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) forgot his manners and did not notify me of his visit to the wonderful, tolerant and open-minded community in Cliftonville for the by-election campaign. I seek simply to put on the record that the convention was not observed by the right hon. Gentleman and to give him the opportunity to make good on that failing by apologising.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for her point of order. I assume she notified the right hon. Member for Newark of her intention to refer to him.

Ms Billington indicated assent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Members intending to visit another colleague's constituency, except for purely private reasons, must inform them in advance. I expect Members from all parts of the House to show courtesy to each other and to follow the rules.

GRENFELL TOWER MEMORIAL (EXPENDITURE) BILL (ALLOCATION OF TIME)

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Grenfell Tower Memorial (Expenditure) Bill—

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings on Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

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

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

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

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

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) proceedings on the Bill shall stand postponed while the Question is put, in accordance with Standing Order No. 52(1) (Money resolutions and ways and means resolutions in connection with bills), on any financial resolution relating to the Bill;

(c) on the conclusion of proceedings on any financial resolution relating to the Bill, proceedings on the Bill shall be resumed and the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chair shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

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

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

(a) any Question already proposed from the chair;

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

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

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

(e) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (11)(a) of this Order.

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

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

(7) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (4)(e) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chair shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions.

Other proceedings

(8) Provision may be made for the taking and bringing to a conclusion of any other proceedings on the Bill.

Miscellaneous

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grenfell Tower Memorial (Expenditure) Bill

Second Reading

7.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I start by paying tribute to the bereaved family members of those who died at Grenfell Tower, as well as the survivors and members of the local community. Nothing we can say in this Chamber can take away what they have been through. The fire at Grenfell Tower, which took the lives of 72 people, was a terrible moment in our country's history. It was an avoidable tragedy, and it has had lasting consequences for bereaved families, for those who survived and for the local community and far beyond. We must ensure that nothing like it can ever happen again. There is still much to do on justice, on reform and on making homes safe, but today's Bill is about one clear part of our responsibility: how we remember Grenfell and how we keep our promise over time.

This is a simple Bill with a simple purpose: to ensure that the Grenfell Tower memorial is properly supported today and for the long term. It is for the bereaved, survivors and the community to take their decisions on what the memorial will look like. The Bill is here to fund that important work. Grenfell must not be about party politics. The previous Government promised to support bereaved families and survivors to create a fitting and lasting memorial. This Government are keeping that promise.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for the sombre and appropriate way he proposes the Bill. Although the memorial is important and should be tasteful and poignant, the best memorial is the lessons learned so that no other family has to suffer as these victims' families have suffered, and the lives that will be saved by the changes that are implemented for safety. That is the real memorial those people wish to have.

Steve Reed: I could not agree more with the hon. Gentleman. He describes it absolutely correctly. That is why it will be the local community, survivors, the bereaved and the next of kin who will take decisions about what the memorial will look like.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): The Secretary of State is correct in everything he has said so far about the memorial. Is he willing to meet me? He has spoken about safety, and many of my residents are concerned about their safety with unsafe cladding. They are also worried about the cost of that. Will he or one of his Ministers meet me to discuss that issue further?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Part of the legacy of Grenfell must be that people are kept safe in their own homes. I would be happy to ensure that she has an appropriate meeting with an appropriate Minister, whether that is me or a colleague.

The points that Members have raised is why the independent Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission was set up in 2019. It is community-led and there to shape a shared vision of the future of the site. After years of

engagement, the commission published its report “Remembering Grenfell” in November 2023. It set out clear recommendations for: a permanent memorial at the site of Grenfell Tower; a private site where parts of the tower where people died and where their remains were not identifiable can be laid to rest with respect; and a physical and digital archive alongside a permanent exhibition, so that the story of Grenfell is preserved as a lesson for the future.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for bringing forward this piece of legislation. Can he confirm that the Bill is not only about capital expenditure, but long-term maintenance, to ensure that this is a lasting legacy for the families of Grenfell?

Steve Reed: I agree with the point that my hon. Friend makes. This legislation has to be about the long term; that has to be the best way we can pay tribute to those who died and their relatives from that very dark night.

The work of the memorial commission will be guided by those most directly affected. We know that views about the future of the site are deeply personal and not always shared by everyone. The Government have welcomed the commission’s recommendations and will help to carry them out. Design work led by the community is now under way, with a design team appointed after a selection process that involved bereaved families, survivors and the wider local community. The aim is to start construction of the memorial from mid-2027.

This is a very focused Bill. It gives the Government the statutory authority needed to spend public money on the construction and long-term management of a Grenfell Tower memorial. It allows for land to be bought where needed and for works to be carried out on that land. The scope of the Bill is deliberately narrow. It does not set the design of the memorial. It does not determine planning decisions. It does not set governance or ownership arrangements. It makes sure that spending connected to the memorial is carried out properly, in line with the rules for Government spending and with Parliament’s agreement.

The community will continue to work on the design while Parliament considers this Bill so that work stays on course towards a mid-2027 start to construction. The memorial will honour those who lost their lives and those whose lives were forever changed by that tragedy. It will be a place where people can remember, reflect and pay their respects. It does not take away from other work that still needs to be completed. The community has waited far too long for justice to be served. Those responsible must be held to account, and I fully support the Metropolitan police in what is one of the largest and most complex investigations it has ever carried out. We must also reform the system so that the voices of residents cannot be ignored and safety risks can never again simply be brushed aside.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): The way in which the Secretary of State has spoken so far reflects the way we all felt post-Grenfell. We must ensure that the communities feel they have somewhere to go, somewhere to grieve. Does the Secretary of State agree that the work relating to who was responsible for the tragedy needs to continue, alongside the work on the memorial?

Steve Reed: I strongly agree with my hon. Friend, and of course the police investigation continues. The families have had a long wait for justice, but justice must and will come.

This requires a new culture of transparency and accountability, which the Government remain fully committed to building. I will continue to act on the Grenfell inquiry recommendations to ensure that they lead to real and lasting change across the country. No one should ever go to bed unsure about whether their home is safe, and speeding up remediation remains one of our highest priorities. We are working with developers, freeholders and local authorities to remove unsafe cladding as quickly as possible, and we are now monitoring thousands of buildings to ensure that progress is being made.

This short but important Bill is about how we remember what we learn and what we do as a result. It ensures that national remembrance is properly supported and protected with Parliament’s consent, while also supporting the central role of bereaved families, survivors and the community. It helps to ensure that Grenfell is never forgotten, and that the lessons of that tragic night will make homes safer and the future fairer for everyone. I commend it to the House.

7.41 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): This will be one of those rare occasions when there is a broad consensus across the House. The Opposition support the Government in wishing to continue the work begun since that tragic night in 2017 to ensure that lessons are learnt, changes are made, and the 72 victims who lost their lives are properly remembered. My Conservative colleagues and I welcome the Bill, and will support it today on Second Reading and during its further stages.

The tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire, which caused the horrific deaths of 54 adults and 18 children, was a national tragedy that still sits as a dark and distressing memory within our national conscience. The failures that led to that horrific blaze, and to so much bereavement and distress, have now been studied in great depth by the Grenfell inquiry. They had to be addressed in detail, which is why we welcome the Government’s work to implement the inquiry’s recommendations and support their efforts to meet all of them by the end of the current Parliament. It is firmly the responsibility of the Government of the day to implement those recommendations, but it is our collective parliamentary responsibility to allow the means for that to happen, to support the Government’s work, and to ensure that, nine years on, we continue the process of remembrance.

It is very difficult for us here to judge how best to commemorate the 72 people who so tragically lost their lives. That is why I believe that it was the correct approach, in 2019, to allow the independent Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission to develop proposals for a fitting and permanent memorial. The victims of the Grenfell Tower fire belong at the heart of everything we do in this place and outside it to remember the tragedy. It is very important that in remembering the fire, we also remember all those affected by the events that night: those who lost their lives, of course, but also the bereaved families, the survivors, and the immediate community who have previously lived, or currently live, in close proximity to Grenfell Tower.

[Gareth Bacon]

As this process of remembrance reaches one of its most important moments—the realisation of the monument promised to the Grenfell community by the Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission and by successive Governments—it is vital for any future monument to keep the four promises made to the community: the promise of a mission to create a place of dignity and peace; the promise to create a bold memorial to ensure that the tragedy of the fire is never forgotten; the promise to introduce key measures to ensure that the memorial is looked after and not allowed to fall into disrepair; and a final promise to ensure that the voices and wishes of the Grenfell community are always at the heart of decisions made about the memorial. As for the future and the preservation of the memorial, it is important for this space to be protected from decay and enabled to continue to serve as a focal point for peaceful and reflective remembrance of the horrors of the fire. That is why my colleagues and I welcome the provisions in the Bill to allow the maintenance and preservation of the monument.

As was mentioned during a recent debate on the Grenfell Tower annual report, it is necessary for the Government to deliver on their promises of funding. I welcome what the Secretary of State said about that, and I hope that he will confirm the funding arrangements in due course.

On a related note—although it is not directly connected with the purposes of the Bill—perhaps the best possible tribute to all those connected with the tragedy at Grenfell Tower would be for the Government to honour funding commitments regarding the completion of the refurbishment of the Lancaster West estate for those who are still living there. The refurbishment was intended to be funded 50-50 by the Government and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. The funding required from the Government is a small additional fraction of the reported cost of the memorial. The council has done its part, and I understand that agreement regarding Government funding is close, but the longer this is delayed, the more costs will inevitably rise, so let me take this opportunity to urge the Government to conclude these proceedings with haste.

The inquiry's finding that decades of systemic failure, as well as sheer dishonesty and dangerous negligence, allowed this tragedy to occur represents a shameful and damning conclusion on the work, or lack thereof, of culpable industry figures, regulatory bodies and successive Governments. The least that we can do now is support the full implementation of the inquiry's recommendations, and we on the Opposition side of the House will constructively scrutinise the support for victims and their families that the Government are proposing, to try to ensure that anything that is done is done properly.

For today, however, I look forward to seeing the Bill through its remaining stages in this House, and to working constructively to move the memorial a step closer to realisation. That is why the Opposition do not plan to amend the Bill today. As I said at the start of my speech, we will support it, and support the aim for the memorial to become a real place of peace and remembrance for the Grenfell community.

7.46 pm

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): One hundred and five months ago, 72 people lost their lives in a tragedy that was foreseen and entirely preventable. Today we remember them. We pay tribute to their families, to the bereaved, to the survivors and to the community around the tower who have suffered so much, and we recommit to truth, justice and lasting change in Grenfell's name.

This Bill is important, and I thank the Government for introducing it and giving it the time for what I hope will be a smooth passage. A fitting memorial is essential, and the Bill will help that to come about. The Grenfell site is the last resting place for many, and it remains a symbol of injustice. Every day when I leave my home to come to work in this place, I see the tower slowly receding from the west London skyline. I understand the fear that when the tower is gone, that stark physical reminder of unfinished business will also recede. We cannot let that happen.

I want to thank the members of the Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission, and the independent co-chairs, for their work in advancing a design. As the Secretary of State said, it is not easy work, but it is vital for it to remain independent of local and national Government, and to engage widely with bereaved people and survivors as the work progresses so that they feel heard and included. I know that residents are watching the deconstruction process closely. This has to be done with the utmost care and transparency—for the bereaved families, for whom the tower is sacred, and for the community who are understandably anxious about local impacts. The Bill also makes provision for the preservation, archiving or exhibition of materials from the tower and site, which is essential. Transparency and clear communication on decisions are the only way in which to ensure trust in this process, between the Department, the commission, and the bereaved and survivors.

Although the work on a memorial continues, truth and justice cannot come soon enough. Last week, the Metropolitan police team leading the investigation reassured me that they still expect to hand over files to the Crown Prosecution Service in the autumn, with the CPS expected to make charging decisions in spring 2027. Ministers in the Home Office have told me that the Government's special grant will continue, to ensure that the investigation team—one of the largest in the history of the Met—will be able to make the timeline work. I ask for the Minister's support in ensuring that representations are made to the judiciary to begin planning now for what could be extremely complex and interlocking criminal trials. A further delay for many years due to the Crown court backlog would add insult to injury for the bereaved families and survivors. The victims have waited almost nine years, and they deserve justice to come as swiftly as possible following any charging decisions.

While we await criminal justice, accountability should hit the culpable companies where it hurts them: their bottom line. I ask every procurement officer around the country to think twice before using any of the companies cited in the inquiry report. New powers under the Procurement Act 2023 give more scope for discretionary exclusion provisions. It is shocking that at least two contracts currently exist between NHS trusts and Rydon, and I urge all public bodies to do a full audit of their contracts, including those with subcontractors and supply chains,

and to make sure that those companies are not included. It is good news that, through the Procurement Act, the Government have introduced new powers to exclude companies on grounds such as professional misconduct, and I hope that procurement officers will start using them.

Beyond truth and justice, and beyond a physical memorial, many people affected by Grenfell tell me that they want to see lasting systemic change. Can any one of us here tonight truly say that, approaching nine years after the fire, the pace and depth of change in this country have been sufficient? In a statement to this House on 22 June 2017, the then Prime Minister said that

“long after the TV cameras have gone and the world has moved on, let the legacy of this awful tragedy be that we resolve never to forget these people and instead to gear our policies and our thinking towards making their lives better and bringing them into the political process.”—[*Official Report*, 22 June 2017; Vol. 626, c. 169.]

I agree with those words from Baroness May.

On 4 September 2024, the current Prime Minister said:

“In the memory of Grenfell, we will change our country; not just a change in policy and regulation, although that must of course take place, but a profound shift in culture and behaviour, a rebalancing of power that gives voice and respect to every citizen, whoever they are and wherever they live.”—[*Official Report*, 4 September 2024; Vol. 753, c. 314.]

I agree with the Prime Minister, too. The question is how we meet those goals to ensure that reality matches the rhetoric. I thank the Secretary of State, the Minister for Building Safety and their predecessors—my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) and my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris), who is on the Front Bench—for their cross-Government work to push for change.

On 25 February, we had the first annual report from the Government on progress on implementing the inquiry’s recommendations, and I welcome the progress on construction product regulation, on evacuation plans for disabled residents, on improving the functioning of the Building Safety Regulator, and on streamlining ministerial accountability. I was really pleased to hear the Secretary of State confirm that he is supportive of the idea of having a national oversight mechanism to ensure that lessons from inquests and inquiries are properly accounted for. It remains a tragic truth that if the preventing future deaths report on the Lakanal House fire in 2009 had been acted on by the then Government and the London fire brigade, Grenfell could have been prevented. Instead, recommendations sat on a shelf and an opportunity to save lives was missed. I hope that we can soon get clarity on how that mechanism can be set up.

For me, it is not about diminishing the Government’s right to accept or reject recommendations, or outsourcing accountability from Parliament to an external body. Instead, it is about ensuring that our inquiry and inquest landscape works as intended, and that we are not wasting time and money and retraumatising victims through exercises that do not lead to meaningful change. I hope the Public Office (Accountability) Bill—the Hillsborough law—will herald a much-needed shift in the state’s openness and accountability when tragedies happen, and it will be all the stronger if a national oversight mechanism sits alongside it.

The London fire brigade has made important progress in learning the lessons of Grenfell, although the risk in high-rise buildings remains, as we have seen in London and around the world in recent months. I thank those officers who continue to put themselves in harm’s way to save lives. Beyond the scope of the inquiry’s recommendations, one element of Grenfell’s legacy of permanent change and a memorial for this country is the hugely significant Awaab’s law, which is now in place. It means that emergency repairs will be investigated and actioned within 24 hours, with a statutory timeframe for hazards that risk harm. I also welcome the steps to professionalise social housing management, but there is still more to do.

The pace of remediation has been too slow. Whereas other countries have completed their work, we still have close to 2,000 buildings above 11 metres where work has not begun. I welcome the target of making sure that has happened by the end of this Parliament, because the cladding scandal has trapped people in unsafe buildings for years. They are unable to sell their properties or to move their families, and are taking on more and more debt from interim fire safety measures, with developers either no longer around or unwilling to take responsibility. If the Government plan to introduce stronger requirements to get this issue sorted, they will certainly have my support.

Can we really say that, almost nine years on, social tenants have the power, agency and respect that they are entitled to? Certainly not from my casework in Kensington and Bayswater, and I expect that many Members from across the House have had a similar experience. I believe that a stronger tenant voice at a national level would help provide input into policymaking, alongside the bodies representing councils and housing associations, the regulator and the ombudsman.

That change needs to happen at a local level, too. The Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea has repeatedly pledged to change the culture of how it engages with residents, yet last September the independent regulator found that the council’s housing department is “seriously failing”, and it has been given a C3 rating because far too many homes are not of a decent standard. Just think about that for a moment: a council that is culpable for a disastrous refurbishment in which residents were ignored, resulting in 72 deaths, is unable to meet basic standards of decency for our residents nine years later. That is not what culture change looks like in practice.

The residents on the Lancaster West estate, which surrounds Grenfell, tell a similar story. They were promised a model 21st-century housing estate in the aftermath of the fire. Progress has been made but, again, it has been too slow. They will welcome the memorial—I am sure they all want a fitting tribute—but as we pass this Bill tonight, they will ask: if the money can be found for a memorial, can it not also be found to ensure that their lives are not disrupted for years to come? RBKC has had questions to answer on this project, and residents and the Government have rightly demanded answers. Any request for additional money must be accompanied by proper oversight and accountability of RBKC and of the Lancaster West project. I am glad that council officers have confirmed that they welcome this approach, and I hope the Minister can reassure me that a solution will be found, so that residents are not left in the lurch. I thank Ministers in the Department of Health and

[Joe Powell]

Social Care, and in the Department for Education, for their additional funding, which has enabled bespoke Grenfell services to continue. They are sorely needed.

I welcome this Bill. A fitting memorial is essential, but justice will not be served until the individuals and companies responsible for the fire and for the deaths of 72 men, women and children have their day in court. As we approach the ninth anniversary, the police investigation is still ongoing, companies implicated in the fire still have their hands on public money, hundreds of thousands of people are living in unsafe homes, and thousands of my constituents are still being let down by inadequate housing services. We need to see charges, we need to see accountability and we need to see further systemic change—not just for the bereaved survivors and for the community around the tower, but to make sure that a disaster like this never happens in our country again.

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

7.59 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to the 72 people who tragically lost their lives in the disaster nearly nine years ago. The Liberal Democrats welcome the Bill, and we support it. Nearly nine years since the fire, families and communities have waited long enough for a proper legal and financial footing to be provided for a permanent memorial to the 72 people who lost their lives.

As a chartered architect and a member of the Royal Institute of British Architects, I began the new professional training and development that the Grenfell report now rightly requires of all architects. Tragically, previous fires had exposed the problems of highly flammable cladding, which shows that the risks were known. There were opportunities to act and attempts were made to act, yet 72 people lost their lives. The social homes at Grenfell were provided to serve the interests of diverse and often low-income residents, but they were refurbished—in part, to improve outward appearances—in ways that militated dangerously against those people's interests. That context is worth stating, because it speaks to a pattern of big institutions and corporations not seeing or valuing the people they are supposed to serve.

On the question of justice, we need to be direct in pointing out that the Metropolitan police have said this week that prosecutions are not expected before 2027—10 years after the fire. All of us in this House must ensure that justice is done. That is one reason why the Liberal Democrats have called from these Benches for a new office of the whistleblower to create legal protections and promote greater public awareness of people's rights. It is also why we have consistently supported the Government's Public Office (Accountability) Bill, which will place a statutory duty of candour on public authorities and ensure equal legal representation for bereaved families. We are glad that the Government have committed to that legislation, and we will work on it—and on this Bill—with parties across the House so that its protections are delivered.

On cladding and fire safety, there has been genuine progress since 2017, and the Government deserve credit for accepting all 58 recommendations of the inquiry,

but thousands of people are still living in buildings with unsafe cladding. Remediation is taking far too long, and that needs to change.

I would like to raise three key points before I conclude. First, will the Minister say something about the Grenfell projects fund, which has provided substantial support to the community since the fire? If it is being wound up, the Government should set out clearly what is going to replace it.

Secondly, now that the tower has begun to come down—and I completely understand why people have different views about and reactions to that—I welcome the Government's announcement last week about saving elements of the structure, and support them in leaving any decision about how they may be retained for consultation with the Grenfell community.

Finally, we must all be vigilant in ensuring that all the recommendations are followed through, that the community is fully consulted on the memorial, and that the voices of those who raised concerns before the fire are—tragically, unlike those of the victims—at last properly heard and their concerns acted on. We owe it to the community to ensure that the commitments made to it since 2017 are kept, that buildings across the country are made safe and that the systems that failed are genuinely reformed. The voices that were not heard need to be heard and remembered into the future. Across this House, we should do what one reflection on the Grenfell memorial wall urges us all to do, which is to ensure that they not only rest in peace, but “rest in power”.

8.3 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The Grenfell Tower fire was a momentous as well as a tragic event. It fundamentally changed the way we look at fire safety, social housing and the emergency services. Most of all, it changed the lives of many people—not just those who lost their lives or were injured and traumatised, but their family, their community and people across a much wider swathe of west London. Indeed, there were ramifications across the whole country and beyond.

I pay tribute to all the Front Benchers for supporting this Bill, and to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) for showing his usual sober but committed attitude towards his constituents and to ensuring that the wrongs of Grenfell are righted. Nine years on, and there is still no justice for the Grenfell families, but that reckoning must come. My constituency neighbours Kensington, where Grenfell is located, and many of my constituents live in high-rise blocks only a few moments' walk from Grenfell Tower.

I am conscious of the fact that so much more needs to be done on fire safety. The all-party parliamentary group on fire safety and rescue has done a very good job in keeping this issue alive, but it is quite clear from what we saw only a few days ago in Glasgow that the danger from fire is great. New risks also appear: Grenfell was an electrical fire, like many fires are, but we increasingly have the danger of lithium batteries—explosive devices that anyone can take into their own home, but which can wreak havoc.

This debate is specifically about the memorial, so let me say a few words about that. It should obviously be the memorial committee, the survivors and the community

who determine exactly what form the memorial takes. However, I want to take up one of the points made by my hon. Friend, which is that we must not allow people to forget what happened at Grenfell. Yes, I think we all appreciate that the tower had to come down, but over the last nine years, anybody who lives in that part of London, who travels past it on the tube or who drives past it will have been very much aware of its symbolism and the reality of it, with the green heart on the side of the building. It is slowly shrinking and disappearing, but we must not allow the memory of Grenfell to shrink or disappear.

I note that the height of Grenfell Tower is almost identical to the height of the Monument that was built to commemorate the great fire of London. More than 350 years on, that is still not just a very visible symbol, but a reminder of the resilience of the city, as well as something that commemorates those who lost their lives. I would like to think that, even as the years and centuries go past, we will not forget the people who died in Grenfell—and died needlessly in that way. Those of us who from time to time join the silent walks that regularly take place will know that the community will not forget, but it is important that none of us forgets. The reason for that is that memorials are more than just tributes and monuments in themselves; they are about ensuring that justice takes place, but also that we do not repeat any of these disasters.

The Secretary of State said recently that 70% of the recommendations of the Grenfell inquiry will be implemented by the end of this year and that all will be by the end of this Parliament, and that over 90% of public buildings with dangerous cladding have had it removed. Clearly, there is some way to go, even if that represents substantial progress, but it is absolutely vital—I again draw attention to what a couple of Members have said about public inquiries, coroners' reports and prevention of future deaths reports—to ensure that the lessons are learned and implemented.

The call has gone up around the Hillsborough Bill and more generally for a national oversight mechanism. There is already a register of prevention of future deaths reports, but there is nothing to ensure that those recommendations are implemented. There are also gaps in the system when the coroners courts—frankly, I do not believe they are fit for purpose in the 21st century—do not follow through. There is a certain randomness to when a prevention of future deaths report is ordered, and to how it is monitored. The consequence is that events such as Grenfell happen because events such as Lakanal were not paid attention to and heeded. That is an extraordinary indictment of all of us here, because we pass the laws that regulate how those processes work.

Yes, we need to look at escape and emergency, and yes, we need to look at design and construction projects, at construction itself and at regulation—there are many lessons to be learned—but we have to stop treating social housing and social housing tenants as second class, and we have to ensure that all the lessons of Grenfell are learned. I believe that that will happen only if—on the back of this Bill, the Hillsborough Bill and the growing calls for a national oversight mechanism—we ensure that we follow through on the recommendations of all public inquiries. We think carefully about whether to set them up and spend millions on them, but when it

comes to ensuring that the outcomes are followed through, we are found wanting. If that can be the lesson of Grenfell, we can all feel that something has been achieved out of the tragedy, but most importantly, that we are stopping such tragic and terrible events happening again.

8.9 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): I associate myself with all the comments made by my hon. Friends the Members for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) and for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter). It is an honour to follow them. This is not an issue on which there will be any contention at all between me and the Secretary of State, who I know cares deeply about this matter and who, like all of us in the House today, wants to see a swift and just resolution.

Today, we debate a Bill that touches on one of the deepest wounds in our national conscience. The fire at Grenfell Tower in June 2017 which claimed 72 lives was nothing short of tragic. They were men, women and children who today should still be with their families—those empty spaces at tables, memories that will never be made and lives that were taken too soon. Almost nine years later, the hurt and pain of that night remains raw. As my hon. Friends have said, the rest of the world has continued turning, but for many people they are merely existing, not living, due to the loss they experienced that night. What happened that evening in Grenfell was not simply a tragedy. It was a catastrophe that was, sadly, entirely avoidable, with lives taken too soon due to foreseen circumstances, failures of regulation, failures of safety and failures of responsibility.

To the families and survivors watching this debate, either here in the House or on television, I want to say clearly that we all stand with you. In the years since the fire, through their pain and their grief, they have fought for changes in the law, campaigned for accountability and demanded action. Anyone who has lived through grief knows that sometimes putting one foot in front of the other on the best of days is hard enough, let alone campaigning for justice to prevent this ever happening to anyone again. That fight is not over yet, but I want each of the family members to know that their work so far to ensure that this can never be allowed to happen again has unequivocally saved lives.

The Grenfell Tower inquiry laid bare the scale of systemic failures that led to the fire. Warnings were disregarded and residents' concerns about fire safety fell on deaf ears. It is really important to underscore that the structural inequalities in Grenfell are stark. Of the residents who died in the fire, 85% were from ethnic minority backgrounds—85%. The area surrounding the tower is home to some of the most expensive homes in Britain, yet Grenfell Tower was neglected. Its residents were marginalised, ignored and treated as an afterthought. We cannot and must never allow those disparities to be ignored, because they sowed the seeds of this disaster.

The lessons of Grenfell must not simply be documented in reports and recommendations, only to be forgotten; they must be acted on. The words we utter today, the thoughts and feelings and the value of everything we have learned, and the people who we have held in our communities through all this over the past nine years, cannot be in vain. The families of the deceased have waited for too long as accountability has been kicked

[Dr Rosena Allin-Khan]

down the road. Those responsible for the decisions and failures must be held to account—they must. Justice delayed is painful, but justice denied would be absolutely unforgivable.

The Bill before us today is simply about remembrance, dignity and respect. Grenfell Tower should serve as a place where those who are lost are never, ever forgotten, but it is essential that the memorial reflects the wishes of those most affected: those who have lost loved ones, those who survived the fire, and the community who live in its shadow. They must be at the very heart of the decisions on the future of Grenfell.

If I may, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Denis Murphy, who lived on the 14th floor of Grenfell Tower and who has family in my constituency of Tooting. Denis was one of the 72 lives lost that evening in 2017. I remember speaking to his son and sister in the days after—the unimaginable pain they went through, listening to Denis on the phone as the fire spread. Denis was categorically true to himself, trying to calm his neighbours and children, even though he knew his final moments were imminent. I still remember afterwards how many parts of the system worked so well to support Denis's family, but I also remember how the system added to their pain. The Department for Work and Pensions demanded benefit repayments from the family, and so quickly afterwards; they had not even held the funeral. Finally, I remember Denis's funeral, packed to the rafters: an entire community grieving, but giving a great man an emotional yet beautiful send-off.

The pain that Denis's family went through—the horrors of that night, replicated another 71 times—must absolutely never be forgotten. We cannot stop until, quite frankly, those responsible are jailed for their actions. We owe it to the families and to everyone who lost their lives that fateful night. Grenfell must remain a turning point for this country. A permanent memorial will stand as a reminder of the lives lost, but it must also stand as a reminder to learn the lessons of Grenfell and as a reminder of the demands for justice. The 72 people who lost their lives that night and their families deserve nothing less.

8.17 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): The creation of a permanent memorial to the people who lost their lives in the Grenfell Tower fire is deeply important and necessary, and I welcome the Bill before the House today. It is right that Parliament ensures there is a lasting place of remembrance for the victims, the bereaved families, the heroic firefighters and emergency services, and the community whose lives were changed forever on that night.

Grenfell was an avoidable tragedy. It was the result of political choices made over many years—choices to weaken building safety regulations and to erode proper inspection and oversight—and a system and culture that allowed cost-cutting to take precedence over the safety of human life. It was a national scandal caused by institutional failings at the highest level. The result was an apartment building covered in flammable materials, allowing the fire to spread rapidly, reflecting with utter shame the decisions that were made, which resulted in the death of 72 people.

At its heart, Grenfell exposed the dangers of a deregulatory approach to the economy. When safeguards are stripped back in the name of efficiency or profit, it is too often working-class communities who pay the price. Residents of the Grenfell Tower block had raised concerns about safety for years, as had the fire service. They warned about the risks and about the conditions in which they were living, yet those warnings were repeatedly overlooked.

In the same year of the fire, I attended an international workers' conference in Madrid. One session focused on health and safety, looking in particular at disasters in places where factories had collapsed or fires spread because safety standards had been neglected—places in the global south. When I mentioned Grenfell, delegates from Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Bangladesh and elsewhere already knew about it. They were shocked and horrified that something like this could happen in the United Kingdom—one of the richest countries in the world—and asked how on earth it could have happened.

That is why this memorial really matters. It must honour those who died, support the bereaved families, and recognise the deep and lasting impact on the community. I welcome the fact that the community will be involved in all stages of its design. It should also stand as a reminder of the dark and deadly side of capitalism, and serve as a lesson about the catastrophic consequences of neglecting safety regulations and ignoring the warnings of the people whose homes and lives were at risk.

The victims have waited long enough for justice. Those responsible must be held to account and must, where necessary, be prosecuted. Remembering Grenfell must mean more than remembrance alone; it should force us to act quicker to ensure that everyone has a decent and safe home, and that tragedies like Grenfell can never happen again.

8.20 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for opening this debate and for his commitment to remember the 72 victims of this terrible tragedy and their families. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) for his incredibly passionate speech and for his leadership in representing the communities who have been affected so dreadfully by this absolutely terrible tragedy.

It is hard to believe that this took place nearly nine years ago. Whereas I was at home and then in my place of work, watching from afar as these terrible events occurred, my constituent Rod Wainwright, who I have had the honour of mentioning in this place a number of times, was on the frontline. Despite not being on duty, he was called in at 1 am and spent 15 hours on the scene under near-impossible conditions without being relieved. Rod still blames himself for not saving more people on that terrible night, but I echo earlier comments that it is faceless people in suits who are to blame for this terrible tragedy, not heroes like Rod Wainwright.

When fire crews from across Essex recently came together in Harlow to tackle a blaze in an industrial unit where temperatures rose to 1,700°C, it made me recognise the incredibly difficult job that our firefighters do. I want to put on the record my thanks to the firefighters who dealt with that issue so speedily and ensured that no injuries happened.

Seventy-two people lost their lives in the Grenfell Tower tragedy, and so many others, like Rod, had their life irreversibly changed. Members across this House may well question the time it has taken for the recommendations of the inquiry to be acted on, and the challenges local authorities and local fire services face. As the Secretary of State will be aware, Harlow has a number of high-rise buildings. There are also challenges caused by permitted development rights. I have written to the Minister about some of the safety challenges.

No one can deny that this tragedy should, could and must be a seminal moment not only for building safety, but in how we think about and treat everybody in our community. I welcome this Government's commitment to a lasting memorial, and I recognise the huge importance of the memorial being led by the community who have been so terribly affected and so terribly let down by this tragedy. I absolutely welcome the cross-party consensus on ensuring that we get this right. I hope that it will be a fitting tribute to the 72 people who lost their lives, to their families and to the people like Rod, whose lives were irreversibly scarred just because they stepped up to help and answered the call.

8.24 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): The fire at Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017 was a catastrophe that exposed systematic failures in regulation, in oversight and in the value placed on the lives of people in social housing. Seventy-two people died and hundreds more lost their homes, community and sense of safety. Families are still living with that loss every single day. Tragically, nothing we can do in this place can bring back those 54 adults and 18 children. As the Secretary of State noted in his speech, there is still so much to do to find truth and justice, and to ensure that it never happens again. We owe it to the families, the bereaved, the survivors and those who fought so hard for justice to ensure that what happened on that dreadful night is never, ever forgotten, and that those responsible are held to account.

This Bill is about the memorial and the foundation that will properly fund the community-led work on this memorial. Its narrowness ensures that it is the community who will choose the best way to do this. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell) for his words, his work and his leadership for truth and justice. I associate myself with his statement that we cannot stop until we have accountability, justice and action for change.

I represent Portsmouth North, a constituency in a working-class city that knows about close-knit communities, resilience in the face of loss and the importance of remembrance. When I was a teacher, before I came to this House, I spent years helping young people to understand not just what happened in the past, but why it matters that we remember. The archive, exhibition and memorial site will serve that purpose for generations to come. We must be able to look at what happened at Grenfell and understand why the safety of every person in every home in every tower block matters. That is a responsibility that falls on all of us.

I pay tribute to the survivors, the bereaved families and the community groups who have campaigned with such dignity, determination and immense courage. They asked

only to be safe in their homes, and they were let down horrifically by a chain of failures across government, regulators and industry.

We should be clear about one of the lessons—and, indeed, the title—that comes out of the work of journalist Peter Apps. In his brilliant book, Apps noted how, for years before the fire, experts, campaigners and residents raised warnings about dangerous materials and weak fire safety rules in high-rise buildings. Yet in the atmosphere of deregulation, with the political drive to cut red tape, these warnings, and indeed these people, were repeatedly delayed, dismissed and ignored. Apps shockingly recounts how, when pressure was put on officials to strengthen fire safety guidance, one response was chilling in its bluntness: “Show me the bodies”. The unimaginable tragedy of Grenfell is that the bodies did come.

Seventy-two lives were lost in a disaster that was not inevitable, but the result of choices made over many years to weaken oversight and treat safety regulations as a burden rather than a protection. Cutting red tape may have an attractive ring as a political soundbite, but red tape can also be the crucial regulation that keeps us safe in our homes, our cars, our workplaces and our public realm. With that tragic lesson at the front of our minds, it is right that our attention turns to a memorial. The least we can do is to stand with the Grenfell survivors and campaigners, support their vision and together pass this legislation without delay, so that we remember them not only today and in debates in this place, but into the future.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

8.28 pm

Gareth Bacon: I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for their work today to shepherd this important Bill through Second Reading. I also want to thank all hon. Members, who contributed thoughtful comments and points, as we strive to work across the House to see this memorial realised. I thank the hon. Members for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos), for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter), for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), for Harlow (Chris Vince) and for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin).

As outlined earlier on, it is of great importance that the largest loss of life in a residential fire since the second world war is remembered with a fitting and lasting memorial. Built in a peaceful and appropriate way, according to the wishes of the survivors and the wider Grenfell community, the memorial will go some way towards helping the nation to remember the 72 people who lost their lives. But it is first and foremost a space for the Grenfell community. The avoidable national tragedy that was the Grenfell Tower fire must also be an unavoidable memory in this place. It is important that policymakers keep in mind the duty that we have to protect British citizens from failure, negligence and unsafe practices.

As has been mentioned by a number of hon. Members, we must not forget to remind ourselves of the raw emotion that comes with the creation of this memorial space. Since the former Deputy Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), understandably announced the decision to dismantle Grenfell Tower just over a year ago in February 2025, we have heard of the distress that this news brought to some members of the Grenfell community. It is vital

[Gareth Bacon]

that, as the Government move closer to fully dismantling the Grenfell site, they continue to engage with the bereaved and all those affected to ensure that their voices are not just present but listened to and that their concerns, memories and experiences are understood.

I have also raised the importance of this funding being protected. It is imperative that as the process to build and maintain the Grenfell Tower fire memorial progresses, the funding that has been promised and the means by which it can be preserved is also safeguarded. While our greatest duty is to build on the lessons of the failures that led to the catastrophic fires, it is also our sincere duty to uphold the promises made to the whole Grenfell community since that night. For that reason, as I mentioned earlier, the Conservative party will not seek to divide the House. If a Division is required, although that seems unlikely, we will vote to pass the Bill into law to ensure that the memorial is built.

This memorial is not part of the technical and regulatory changes that had to come as a result of the fire, such as the Building Safety Act 2022, the cladding safety scheme and all the effort undertaken by the Government with specific regard to the recommendations of the Grenfell Tower inquiry's findings. It is not possible, of course, to put right the disastrous wrong that occurred on 14 June 2017, but the memorial can help to appropriately commemorate it. We will, therefore, support the Bill.

8.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Samantha Dixon):

I begin by thanking right hon. and hon. Members from across the House for the way in which they have approached today's debate. The care and seriousness with which Members have spoken reflects the weight of Grenfell's legacy—for bereaved families, for survivors, for the local community, and for the country as a whole. Whatever our political differences, today's debate has shown a shared understanding that this Bill is about the lasting impact of Grenfell on the national conscience. It is about doing what is right and keeping faith with those most affected by the tragedy. It is about the collective promise we made as parliamentarians that Grenfell would be remembered with dignity, truth and permanence.

Before I turn to the points raised in the debate, I want to restate what this Bill does. It is a simple Bill with a simple purpose. It gives Parliament's authority for the spending needed on the Grenfell Tower memorial so that it can be built, cared for and sustained over the long term. It also approves the spending on another site where elements of the tower are laid to rest and preserved, and where there is an archive and exhibition.

The Bill does not set the design or location of the memorial, nor its governance or how it is run, because this Bill is not about taking control. It is about supporting the community-led work that is already under way and ensuring that it has the financial backing that it needs. At this point, I thank the members of the community who are watching this evening and the co-chair of the memorial commission for attending in the Gallery. The Bill helps to ensure that Grenfell is not forgotten and continues to support this Government's wide-ranging programme of reform.

Members from across the House have raised different issues about the memorial itself, the legacy for the future in terms of legislation, remediation, long-term maintenance and the police investigation. I pay tribute to everyone who has contributed today. I welcome the constructive approach of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), and I agree with him that the victims are at the heart of this legislation. I can reassure him, and my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell), that we continue to work with the local authority, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, as it completes the refurbishment works and delivers for residents. We must walk alongside that community, and we will continue to do so. We must never lose sight of the people at the centre of this tragedy.

I welcome the question from the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) about the Grenfell projects fund, which I assure him does not relate to the funding for the memorial; as he will know, that fund is administered by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. I ask him to contact the council to confirm its ongoing support for the memorial.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) pointed out, we will never forget, and we should never forget. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) spoke most eloquently about how we should remember. My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) reminded us that this is about the whole of the country, communities across our country and how we respond to them. As my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) pointed out, we also remember those who served on that day and the legacy that it has left with them.

I thank in particular my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) for recognising the work done by the journalist Peter Apps in respect of this community. He is well regarded and well respected. If any hon. Members have not read the book to which she referred, I strongly recommend that they do so.

Grenfell was a devastating tragedy. As hon. Members have observed, its impact has been international as well as national, and it has had lasting consequences for everyone who has been directly affected. The tragedy exposed serious failures and left searching questions that the state continues to answer. The responsibility to remember Grenfell, and to do so properly, rests with all of us.

As right hon. and hon. Members have said, the Bill does not address every issue to arise since that terrible night of 14 June 2017; nor does it intend to. There is still a great deal of work to do elsewhere on justice, accountability, reform and making homes safe. I remain committed to that work and to acting on the Grenfell inquiry recommendations so that they lead to lasting change.

The Bill instead has a different, more focused role. It supports the community in creating a memorial—a place of remembrance—by ensuring that it can be properly funded, with Parliament's consent. I am grateful to hon. Members from all parties who have spoken in support of the Bill. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Further proceedings on the Bill stood postponed (Order, this day).

**GRENFELL TOWER MEMORIAL
(EXPENDITURE) BILL (MONEY)**

King's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Grenfell Tower Memorial (Expenditure) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State on, or in connection with the following activities in England—

(1) the construction of a memorial to commemorate the victims of the fire at Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017;

(2) the preservation, archiving or exhibition of elements of the Tower, material from inside the Tower or other material relating to the fire;

(3) the use, operation, maintenance or improvement of the memorial, archive or exhibition;

(4) the acquisition of, works on, and the use, operation, maintenance or improvement of—

(a) land for the purposes of paragraph (1) or (2);

(b) land where elements of the Tower are, or may be buried.
—(*Nesil Caliskan.*)

Question agreed to.

**Grenfell Tower Memorial
(Expenditure) Bill**

Proceedings resumed (Order, this day).

Considered in Committee

[Ms NUSRAT GHANI *in the Chair*]

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I remind hon. Members that in Committee they should not address the Chair as Madam Deputy Speaker—please use our names. Madam Chair or Madam Chairman are also acceptable.

Clause 1

EXPENDITURE RELATING TO COMMEMORATING THE
VICTIMS OF THE FIRE AT GRENFELL TOWER

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider clause 2 stand part.

8.38 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Samantha Dixon): Clause 1 is the core operative provision in the Bill. It provides the Government with the statutory authority required for expenditure on the construction and long-term management of a Grenfell Tower memorial. It also authorises expenditure on preservation, archiving and exhibiting at any site where elements of the Grenfell Tower are laid to rest. It also permits land acquisition in support of those activities where needed, and for work to be done on that land. It ensures that all expenditure for these purposes is properly authorised by Parliament in accordance with established public finance principles.

The clause does not determine the design of the memorial, the planning process, governance or ownership arrangements or decision-making responsibilities. The design remains with the community-led Grenfell Tower Memorial Commission and construction is subject to the statutory planning framework. The clause is tightly focused, allowing the Government to incur expenditure on the activities I have identified to the Committee.

Clause 2 provides the short title of the Act. The short title will be the Grenfell Tower Memorial (Expenditure) Act 2026. I commend these clauses to the Committee.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With the leave of the House, I will put motions 5 and 6 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

PUBLIC PROCUREMENT

That the draft Procurement (Amendment) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 26 January, be approved.

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Renewables Obligation (Amendment) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 2 February, be approved.—
(*Nesil Caliskan.*)

Question agreed to.

Asbestos-related Lung Cancer: Compensation Act 2006

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Nesil Caliskan.*)

8.42 pm

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): I have called this Adjournment debate on the subject of the Compensation Act 2006 and asbestos-related lung cancer because I wish to bring to the attention of this House an injustice in the way the law treats victims of asbestos-related disease, and to urge the Government to review the operation of section 3 of the Compensation Act 2006 to ensure that it supports sufferers of asbestos-related lung cancer. A simple change in the law will ensure that all victims of lung cancer caused by exposure to asbestos at work are treated equally to those suffering from mesothelioma.

Although asbestos has been banned in the United Kingdom for more than 25 years, its deadly legacy continues. Each year, around 5,000 people in Great Britain die from cancers caused by asbestos exposure at work. It remains the single biggest workplace killer in the country. In my constituency of West Dunbartonshire, this issue is particularly prevalent. My constituency is among Europe's worst hotspots for deaths linked to a cancer caused by exposure to asbestos at work, with more than 340 deaths since 1980. I have lived in Clydebank all my life and have seen at first hand the devastating effects of asbestos. This issue is deeply personal to the community I represent. For a number of years I have worked closely with the Clydebank Asbestos Group, an organisation that does so much to fight for truth and justice for sufferers of asbestos-related illness.

Towns like Clydebank, Dumbarton and the surrounding villages were built on heavy industry and, above all, the proud tradition of shipbuilding along the River Clyde. Generations of local men and women worked in the great yards, such as John Brown & Company, and in the engineering works, factories and power stations that supported them. Those industries built ships that sailed the world and powered Britain's economy, but they also exposed thousands of workers to asbestos without adequate protection. They trusted their employers to keep them safe and, in too many cases, that trust was betrayed.

To give a bit of background, the origins of section 3 of the Compensation Act 2006 lie in a series of court decisions that exposed a serious problem in the law for victims of mesothelioma caused by exposure to asbestos. In the case of *Fairchild v. Glenhaven Funeral Services*, the House of Lords recognised the unique position that these victims face. Asbestos diseases can develop decades after exposure, and because it is impossible to identify which particular fibre caused the illness, the court accepted that it should be enough for a claimant to show that an employer had materially increased the risk of the disease. However, a later ruling in *Barker v. Corus UK* created a new difficulty by deciding that employers should be liable only for their share of the risk. In practice, that meant victims could lose a large part of their compensation if some employers or their insurers could no longer be traced.

Parliament recognised that this outcome was deeply unfair and rightly acted quickly to unanimously pass the Compensation Act 2006, ensuring that people suffering from mesothelioma could recover full compensation

from any one negligent employer. Section 3 of the Act therefore created a crucial protection. It allows victims of mesothelioma to recover full compensation from any one negligent employer, even if other former employers or their insurers cannot be traced. That reform was passed with unanimous support because Members recognised that people diagnosed with a terminal asbestos-related cancer should not be forced to pursue complex claims against multiple employers while facing an extremely limited life expectancy.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful argument. Does he agree that the whole reasoning of section 3 of the Compensation Act was because of the difficulty in identifying employers who exposed claimants to the particular fibres that caused mesothelioma, and that it is a huge anomaly that the section should apply to mesothelioma cases caused by asbestos but not to cases where people have developed lung cancer due to asbestos? This injustice should be remedied as soon as possible.

Douglas McAllister: My hon. Friend is correct, and I recognise his obvious expertise in this matter. I believe that he practised law, and in particular personal injury law, prior to being elected to this House. I thank him for his intervention and for all he does for his constituents in Wolverhampton West.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Mr Shannon, were you here at the beginning of the debate? You were 90 seconds late—faster next time.

Jim Shannon: You are very kind, Madam Deputy Speaker—I ran the whole way. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing forward the debate. Over the years as an elected representative—as a councillor and as an MLA back in Northern Ireland—I had a number of constituents who had unfortunately succumbed to mesothelioma and lung cancer as a result of working in the Harland & Wolff shipyard over the years. The illnesses took 10 or 20 years to catch up with them. Perhaps the Minister could look towards Northern Ireland and what has happened there—as ever, I am trying to be helpful. Northern Ireland has its own set of guidelines, called the green book, for assessing damages. General damage for lung cancer and mesothelioma in Northern Ireland is typically estimated at between £125,000 and £250,000. While symptoms from negligent causes are similar, the distinction between the treatments remains in place. Does he agree, as I think he does, that the loophole must be closed once and for all? Perhaps we can start that tonight by the Minister doing that very thing. Thank you for letting me in, Madam Deputy Speaker—you are very kind.

Madam Deputy Speaker: It would not be an Adjournment debate without Mr Jim Shannon, would it?

Douglas McAllister: The hon. Member is correct to recognise that point. This issue cuts across all nations in the United Kingdom, not least Northern Ireland, with its rich and proud shipbuilding past. I thank him for his considered intervention.

The difficulty is that the principle relating to mesothelioma does not apply to sufferers of asbestos-related lung cancer, despite the fact that the diseases are strikingly similar. Both are caused by asbestos exposure and have incredibly similar symptoms, to the extent that medical professionals struggle to differentiate the two. Both are devastating and often fatal—in fact, around 60% of people diagnosed with asbestos-related lung cancer die within a year, which is a higher proportion than those diagnosed with mesothelioma—yet the law treats the victims of the two diseases very differently when it comes to compensation.

That difference is not based on medical evidence or moral principle; it exists simply because asbestos-related lung cancer cases were not considered when the legislation was introduced in 2006. Does the Minister agree that this situation is irrational and unfair? I emphasise that this debate is not to do with the legality of proving whether the cancer is asbestos related or not; it relates specifically to cases where the patient has been formally diagnosed with asbestos-related lung cancer.

For people with asbestos-related lung cancer, the current legal framework creates a significant and deeply unfair obstacle. In many cases, individuals were exposed to asbestos by multiple employers over the course of their working life. Under the current legal framework, compensation must be apportioned between the different employers responsible according to the extent to which each contributed to the risk of the disease. Victims must therefore bring claims against every employer responsible in order to recover full compensation.

Of course, the problem is that these illnesses often develop 30 or 40 years after exposure. By that point, many employers no longer exist. Companies have closed, industries have declined, and insurance records have been lost or destroyed. As a result, victims are frequently unable to trace every employer who exposed them to asbestos, or their insurer. When that happens, they are able to recover only the proportion of compensation attributable to the employers that can be traced. That means that people suffering from a terminal disease can lose substantial amounts of compensation simply because some negligent employers have disappeared over time.

That double standard of sorts has had profound consequences. In numerous cases, victims have lost tens of thousands of pounds in compensation because former employers could not be traced. The shortfall in compensation payments can be seen clearly. In one case in England and Wales, compensation that should have amounted to £112,000 was reduced by more than £76,000. In another case, a victim lost almost 70% of the compensation that would otherwise have been awarded. Across 33 documented cases concluded over the past seven years, the total compensation lost in this way amounts to less than £900,000, so this is not a vast sum in the context of the wider compensation system, but for the families involved it would make the world of difference to their quality of life at a time of immense hardship.

One case that illustrates the human impact particularly clearly is that of James Leo Heneghan. Mr Heneghan was born in 1938 and spent much of his working life exposed to asbestos dust. He died from lung cancer in 2013. After his death, his son, Carl Heneghan, pursued a claim for compensation on behalf of the family. Six of Mr Heneghan's former employers were successfully traced

[Douglas McAllister]

and admitted liability for exposing him to asbestos. However, several other employers who had also exposed him to asbestos could not be found, and neither could their insurers. As a result, although the full value of the claim was £175,000, the family received just £61,100. Nearly two thirds of the compensation was effectively lost. Had Mr Heneghan been diagnosed with mesothelioma, a cancer strikingly similar to asbestos-related lung cancer, his family would have received full compensation. The disease did not affect Mr Heneghan any less severely because some employers could not be traced. The suffering endured by his family could have been eased, but because of the specific terms set out in section 3 of the 2006 Act, their rightful compensation was slashed.

The solution to this problem is simple and not unprecedented. Parliament has already established the appropriate legislative model. Extending the principle contained in section 3 of the Act to asbestos-related lung cancer would allow victims to recover full compensation from any one negligent employer or insurer. The responsibility would then fall on that employer or insurer to pursue contributions from other responsible parties. This approach ensures that compensation is delivered quickly and in full to the person who needs it most, while still allowing the costs to be shared appropriately among those responsible.

It is important to emphasise that the scale of this reform would be modest. Specialist practitioners estimate that fewer than 100 asbestos-related lung cancer claims are brought each year, and only a portion of those would involve missing employers. The number of people affected is therefore relatively small, but for those individuals and their families the consequences would be great.

Beyond giving compensation to those who rightly deserve it, this small change to the Act would have wider benefits beyond the individual claimants. Patients with asbestos-related lung cancer often need a lot of care and support. With adequate compensation, they can afford additional care, specialist equipment, or medical treatments that may not be immediately available through the NHS. This gives patients the dignity and choice they deserve and eases the pressure on already stretched public services. Making sure negligent employers and insurers pay the full compensation would also prevent the burden from falling on the state through the benefits system. Taxpayers should not have to shoulder the financial consequences of workplace negligence.

The Compensation Act 2006 was a great piece of legislation brought in under the previous Labour Government. It just contains an unintentional oversight, and one that is easily rectified. Parliament did not deliberately choose to treat victims differently; asbestos-related lung cancer was simply not considered when the law was changed in response to legal developments concerning mesothelioma. There is a gap in the legislation. Closing that gap would not require a fundamental overhaul of the law; it would simply involve extending an existing and widely supported principle to a closely related group of victims.

It is a simple solution, and it comes down to fairness. There is absolutely no justification for treating sufferers of asbestos-related lung cancer any differently from sufferers of mesothelioma. When compensation cannot

be recovered from some employers because they have disappeared, who should bear the financial burden? At the moment, that burden falls on the victim suffering asbestos-related lung cancer. The law should allow those people to recover full compensation from any one employer who is responsible. That employer can then seek a contribution to the damages awarded from other responsible employers or insurers.

In my frequent meetings with the Clydebank Asbestos Group, I have heard personal stories about how this has affected people in my community and across the UK. It is outrageous that victims and their families are not being given the support, dignity and rightful compensation they deserve. The time for sufferers of asbestos-related lung cancer to receive the same recognition as those with mesothelioma is long overdue.

It is incredibly significant and appropriate that we debate this today because 2026 marks 20 years since the last Labour Government introduced the Compensation Act. That is 20 years of sufferers of asbestos-related lung cancer not getting the compensation they rightly deserve, and it is time to make that change. Will the Minister agree to meet me and to work with me and the relevant organisations involved with this issue to review the Compensation Act 2006 and discuss how we can make the necessary improvements by way of amendment, so that people suffering from asbestos-related lung cancer and their families can finally access the full and fair compensation that they deserve?

8.59 pm

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) for securing this debate. We have all been treated to a fine and thoughtful speech. He is without doubt a tireless advocate for his constituency—for Clydebank, Dumbarton, and the communities ravaged by the diseases that he has described. I extend my sympathies to all those who have suffered with asbestos-related diseases, made sick by their places of work and the conditions in which they should have been kept safe.

This is no doubt an incredibly important issue, which involves a complicated area of law where the common law and legislation have developed a complex and nuanced set of rules. I will set out the general position on causation and liability in negligence claims. The usual test for causation in negligence cases is the “but for” test—that is, whether the claimant’s harm would have happened but for the defendant’s breach in the duty of care owed to the claimant. If the claimant proves on the balance of probabilities that it would not have occurred without the breach, causation is established. Causation in industrial injury litigation that involves exposure to asbestos can be particularly complex, given that normally the claimant’s condition will have been caused by prolonged exposure to asbestos, involving many incidents and several different employers.

When determining liability and compensation, the courts draw a distinction between divisible and indivisible injuries. In England and Wales, liability and compensation for divisible industrial diseases, which is where the condition worsens with long-term exposure, is apportioned between previous employers, with each defendant liable only for the period of negligent exposure they caused.

In the context of industrial injuries, indivisible diseases are conditions where the harm is treated as a single whole injury, because it cannot be medically or causally divided between different workplace exposures. It is usually impossible to know which specific exposure caused the injury. Under the normal rules, that would mean an employee who worked at different companies would likely fail in any legal claim because they cannot prove which employer caused them harm. Mesothelioma, for example, is treated as an indivisible disease.

As my hon. Friend eloquently set out, there have been a number of legal developments in recent years regarding liability and compensation for mesothelioma. In *Fairchild v. Glenhaven Funeral Services Ltd*, the House of Lords created a special rule for cases such as mesothelioma, where a claimant has been negligently exposed to asbestos by multiple employers but cannot prove which exposure caused the disease. In such cases, if an employer negligently exposed a worker to asbestos and thereby materially increased the risk of mesothelioma, they can be held liable even if the claimant cannot prove that that employer's exposure actually caused the cancer. In short, the "materially increased risk" test replaced the "but for" test.

However, in *Barker v. Corus*, the House of Lords accepted that the *Fairchild* exception—that is, the materially increased risk test—still applied, but it also addressed the consequences of that liability. The court held that defendants were not jointly and severally liable, as had previously been understood, but instead liable only on a proportionate basis, reflecting their respective contributions to the overall risk.

In response, Parliament acted with cross-party consensus to enact the Compensation Act 2006, which reversed the effect of *Barker v. Corus* for mesothelioma claims. Section 3 of the Act reinstated the principle that victims could claim full compensation from any liable party, who can then seek contributions from others responsible for the exposure. That is vital in mesothelioma cases specifically, as it is not possible to establish which workplace fibres triggered the process of carcinogenesis. Equally, there is no action an individual can take that increases or decreases their chances of developing the disease. At the time of passing the 2006 Act, the broad political consensus was that due to the unique pathology of mesothelioma, the *Barker* ruling had to be reversed. Otherwise, there was a real risk of claimants being unable to seek the compensation that they deserved. As such, it was decided that as a unique disease, mesothelioma required a distinct legal remedy.

However, as we have heard, in terms of the life-changing effects and ill health that asbestos-related lung cancer can bring, in reality, the situation for many sufferers is little different for other non-mesothelioma claims, and the *Barker* ruling still applies to them. That was affirmed in *Heneghan v. Manchester Dry Docks Ltd*, in which it was held that the materially increased risk test of *Fairchild* applies to those claims, while the joint and severally liable principle introduced by section 3 of the Compensation Act 2006 is limited to claims relating to mesothelioma. Broadly, the courts accept that the materially increased risk test is proven for those claims if medical evidence shows that the asbestos exposure more than doubled the relative risk.

This area of law is a mix of devolved and reserved matters. The Scottish Parliament agreed via a legislative consent motion to UK-wide legislation that became section 3 of the Compensation Act. I want to assure my hon. Friend and the House that the UK Government are committed to ensuring that necessary support is available to all individuals suffering from asbestos-related conditions, including asbestos-related lung cancer. Eligible individuals can receive industrial injuries disablement benefit—a weekly no-fault payment for work-related diseases such as asbestos-related lung cancer. The Scottish Government plan to replace the IIDB with employment injury assistance, and work is under way to manage that transition.

Although the UK Government have no immediate plans to review the current legal framework in England and Wales, which has been the subject of much detailed analysis and determination in the senior courts, I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the attention that he has put on this issue. He and I have had the chance to speak outside the Chamber about how the law might be developed. I am grateful to him for securing the debate and giving me the opportunity to set out the UK Government's position on what is, without doubt, a complex and intricate area of law, but one that has a significant impact on the lives of those who suffer from industrial-related diseases. In response to his question—or, dare I say, challenge—I will of course meet him and relevant organisations to discuss how the law might be reviewed to ensure that sufferers and their families can be treated fairly. I think that that is the right and careful approach, and I look forward to working with him.

Question put and agreed to.

9.6 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 16 March 2026

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

Member Defections: Automatic By-elections

4.30 pm

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 737660 relating to automatic by-elections following Member defections.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Roger. I thank those who have shown up for this debate; we may not have a large quantity here, but I am sure that we will have quality. My role this afternoon is primarily to introduce the debate on this petition on behalf of the Petitions Committee, outline some of the arguments that have been raised and give colleagues an opportunity to consider the issue.

Let me start by thanking the many thousands of people who signed this petition, which was started by Barry McIlhinney from Perth in Kinross-shire. It gathered more than 129,000 signatures, including 252 of my South Cotswolds constituents. It may not surprise anybody to hear that the four constituencies with the highest number of signatories were Fareham and Waterlooville, Newark, Romford and East Wiltshire—I shall leave it to hon. Members to spot the pattern.

Whatever view Members may take on the proposal, it is clear that the petition touches on what some commentators have called a crisis of confidence in our democracy: the suspicion—we can debate whether it is a fair one—that some MPs are here less to represent the interests of their constituents, and more to represent their own. The petition reflects a wider public interest in the relationship between voters and those who represent them, and in how that relationship operates in the intervals between general elections. The key question is, when voters decide who to vote for, what exactly are they choosing? Some argue that voters elect an individual, full stop, and that what matters most is the person whose name appears on the ballot paper. However, others suggest that party affiliation is a significant part of how voters make their decision, as they view a candidate's political party as shorthand for a particular set of values and attitudes.

I would suggest that in the real world, for many voters, the decision that they make in the privacy of the polling booth at a general election is a complicated calculation: an algorithm involving party values, historical loyalties, headline policies, party leaders, local reputations and individual personalities. In our first-past-the-post system, that also increasingly includes tactical voting, as in many cases voters feel that they must choose not simply the candidate that they most admire, but the one most likely to defeat the candidate that they most fear. That is one of the quirks—some may even say flaws—of our electoral system. MPs may like to think that every vote that they win is the result of their particular blend of wit, charm and intelligence, but I suspect that, if elections were decided purely on our unique personalities, many of us might not be in this Chamber at all.

My point is that voters often consider a range of factors when deciding how to cast their vote. This petition invites us to consider what should happen if one such factor—political party affiliation—changes during the course of a Parliament. Political parties clearly play a very real role in getting their candidates elected, investing time, money, wisdom and infrastructure. Parties pay the deposits and give their candidates training, campaign support and access to networks of volunteers. It could be argued that an exceptionally cynical candidate could simply align themselves with the party that had the most successful campaigning machine, and then promptly jump ship once they arrive here—I am not for a moment suggesting that anybody would do such a thing.

During a general election campaign, the people knocking on doors, delivering leaflets early in the morning, getting out the vote late in the evening and standing outside polling stations in the rain are often long-standing party members, supporting the person they see as their party's candidate. Many would argue that party affiliation forms an important part of the democratic bargain made with voters at a general election. However, at the same time, others emphasise that MPs are elected as representatives rather than as delegates, and that they must retain the freedom to exercise their judgment and follow their conscience once elected.

This petition therefore invites us to consider where the balance should lie between those two contrasting principles. The question is whether the current constitutional arrangements strike the correct balance, or whether there should be some additional form of democratic mechanism when an MP decides to move to another party.

Some argue that a by-election would allow voters to confirm whether they still support their MP after a change in party affiliation. They also argue that, if the defecting MP is sufficiently confident in their wit, charm and intelligence and that they hold a special place in the hearts of their constituents, they should not be afraid to return to the polls.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): All political parties undertake a vast amount of data collection on their voter base. A good proportion of that data illustrates that the vast majority of people will cast their vote based on the political party rather than the individual. The individual carries less weight in someone's mind when they cast their vote. Therefore, does the hon. Member agree that triggering a by-election on the basis of a defection is crucial to ensure that voters are represented by someone who reflects how the vast majority cast their vote at the ballot box?

Dr Savage: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent and valid point. My main job today, on behalf of the Petitions Committee, is to present both sides of the argument, but the point about data on voting intentions, which we work so hard to glean on doorsteps, is a key factor in the debate.

Others raise concerns that a requirement for a by-election could have unintended consequences, including potentially strengthening the power of party leaderships or discouraging MPs from following their conscience due to legitimate dissent. At this point, I want to clarify that when talking about defections, I am not talking about

[*Dr Savage*]

the case where an MP loses the Whip for reasons to do with the leadership, but about voluntary defections undertaken by an MP themselves. I do not think any of us would want a world where party Whips could threaten an MP with a mandatory by-election if we displease them in some way.

Public opinion on this question appears to be mixed, although polling suggests it is an issue on which many people hold strong views. Some surveys indicate that around 40% of respondents believe that it is unacceptable for an MP to defect, while others suggest that a majority of voters think a defection should trigger some sort of electoral test. Those numbers do not resolve the constitutional question, but they suggest that people far outside Westminster really care about this matter.

It is also worth putting the question into perspective. Party defections in this country are relatively rare, although they obviously sometimes occur in clusters during periods of political turbulence—possibly such as we are going through now. The last MPs to resign their seats and seek fresh mandate after defecting were Douglas Carswell and Mark Reckless in 2014, when they left the Conservative party to join UKIP. They refought their seats in by-elections.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): The hon. Lady is making the case well on behalf of the Petitions Committee. Over the years, there have been a number of examples of some of my former Conservative colleagues ending up alongside Lib Dems in the House of Commons. In those circumstances, is the hon. Lady of the view that there should have been a by-election for those MPs to get their mandates restated?

Dr Savage: I thank the hon. Gentleman for making that point. What we are talking about is the principle of the matter rather than specific defections from any one party to another.

This constitutional question has also been considered by Parliament previously. In 2011, a private Member's Bill proposed that MPs who changed their party affiliation would have to face a by-election, and in 2020, another Bill proposed extending the Recall of MPs Act 2015 so that a voluntary change of party could trigger a recall petition. Neither progressed through Parliament, but the fact that the issue has arisen more than once suggests that it raises enduring questions about representation and accountability.

I would like to share some perspectives from other countries, because this is not a uniquely British debate, and other democracies have taken different approaches. Some, such as India, have adopted strict anti-defection laws under which MPs can lose their seat if they leave the party on whose ticket they were elected. Indian MPs are also, for the most part, compelled to vote with the Whip, which must make votes very, very boring. Others, such as New Zealand, have legislation designed to discourage what is sometimes referred to as “waka jumping”—I am reliably informed that that is effectively jumping from one canoe to another, which I can say from personal experience sounds like a very bad idea—although that approach has also prompted debate about the balance of power between MPs and party leadership. South Africa experimented with allowing MPs to cross

the Floor, but later decided that that was a poor idea and prohibited it. That shows that views can change about how best to preserve electoral legitimacy.

The UK system has its own traditions and constitutional principles. Party affiliation plays an important role in how Governments are formed and how legislation passes, but MPs are also expected to exercise independent judgment. All of that means that there is no simple or obvious answer to the question raised by the petition of whether the current arrangements already strike the right balance between representation, independence and accountability, or whether there might be merit in exploring alternative mechanisms.

What is clear from the petition is that many members of the public care deeply about the relationship between voters and their representatives, how it works in practice and whether they feel that they are being represented in this place. I very much look forward to hearing the views of Members from across the House.

4.43 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for introducing the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. It is unfortunate that although we have a 3-hour allocation to discuss this important topic, other Members of this House that have not felt it worthy of coming along to do so, despite having changed party in this parliamentary Session or in the previous one. It would have been interesting to have gained their views. I thank the over 129,000 individuals who signed the petition, illustrating that they care deeply and are passionate about a subject that is ultimately about trust.

I have been fortunate enough to represent Keighley and Ilkley for more than six years now, facing an election twice in that time in two very different political environments. In 2019, I was elected in a Conservative landslide, and more recently in 2024, I was elected during a time when national results were very much going the other way. Keighley and Ilkley is—or should be—a classic bellwether seat, and up until the last election, there had never been both a Labour Government nationally and a Conservative MP locally since the creation of the seat in 1885. In fact, ahead of the 2024 general election, 12 major polling companies predicted a Labour landslide in Keighley and Ilkley. Electoral Calculus gave me a 97% chance of losing my seat. I do not make these points merely to blow my own trumpet; the point I am making is that politics is ultimately about trust.

When we are elected by our constituents, they are putting their trust in us. They are trusting us not only to be a strong advocate for the area that we represent, but to stand by our manifesto pledges, both at a local level and those of the political party we represent. We stand by the values and commitments of the party we represent. The vast majority of us in this House are supported by volunteers who share our values, often hold party membership and support our policies, which have implications for all our constituencies.

Owing to the Representation of the People Act 1969, at every voting booth across the country our electors are greeted not only by our own names but by our party names and party logos. They put their cross in the box against a name and a party that they wish to represent them. A proportion of people out there will, of course,

vote for the individual who they feel is most committed to representing them, but they are also casting their vote for a political party.

As has been demonstrated by all political parties, through the data that they collect, a proportion of the electorate cast their vote based on the national political party, rather than the individual who has been chosen to stand in that local area. It therefore comes down to the point that was made in the opening remarks from the hon. Member for South Cotswolds: this petition invites us to debate the difference between the individual and the party.

I do feel that when an individual is standing for a political party, if that individual then chooses to defect, cross the Floor of the House and join another political party, it is only right that a by-election is triggered. That would give the electorate the absolute reassurance that they can cast their vote according to political party. Likewise, if they want to reassert their trust in the individual regardless of the political party they are now associated with, that should happen in a by-election.

John Lamont: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I do not want to downplay his greatness as a local constituency MP, but I am sure that, like me, he recalls the 2019 election in which he was first elected, and how many conversations we had with voters on the doorstep about the relative merits of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) and Boris Johnson as Prime Minister. That undoubtedly was the biggest issue driving many people to vote, alongside the desire to get Brexit done. Does that reinforce the point that many people vote on the basis of the national picture and to select a Prime Minister rather than a local MP?

Robbie Moore: That is my point. While a lot of us, as advocates of constituency areas, do our best day in, day out, advocating on behalf of our constituents and campaigning on the local issues that matter to give us the biggest advantage possible by building up our authenticity on those issues, a good proportion of the electorate vote based on the political party with which the candidates are associated.

In 2019, a good proportion of the electorate could not stand the possibility of a Labour Government and voted to get Brexit done, which we advocated for. I know from conversations on the doorstep that there was an element of the electorate who had never voted Conservative before, but who decided to vote for us in 2019 based on the national offering. That builds into my point that, whenever an individual defects—as happened recently north of the border, with the defection of a Conservative Member of the Scottish Parliament to the Liberal Democrats—a by-election should be triggered. It will be interesting to see what the Liberal Democrat policy is on that.

Trust is at stake, because too often disillusionment builds up among the wider electorate, and defections exaggerate that.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): I was following the hon. Gentleman's arguments closely and agreeing with them until he got to the point about Prime Ministers, because is it not a consistent position that if a hon. Member changes their political

party there should be a by-election, therefore if there is a change in leader, as the Conservatives have got into the habit of doing, there should be a general election?

Robbie Moore: I absolutely take the view that a defection at the local constituency level should trigger a by-election, which will ultimately restore the voters' ability to decide who they want to represent them, whether that is the individual who has changed political party or someone else. When there is a change in the leader of any political party, it is up to the MPs of that party to determine whether that individual represents the party in the role of its leader. That applies to all political parties. The reason is that when an individual goes to vote at the ballot box, they are predominantly voting for two things: the individual who represents them at a local level, and the political party. The name of the leader of that party is not on the ballot paper; the name of the party is.

I believe that there is a difference, regardless of who is in charge politically at a national level, between a change of leader and a change in the direct relationship between the constituent and the individual who represents them while standing on behalf of a political party. As I say, the name of the leader of the political party is not on the ballot paper, so I think there is a difference.

Graham Stringer: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving away again and I do not wish to push this point too far, because I personally do not think that there should be a general election if the ruling party changes its leader. However, the thrust of his argument was that what is in people's minds when they vote is the political party and the name of the leader; he said it was about the difference between Boris Johnson and the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). If that is important, and the leader changes, and so does the party's political programme—that relates to the wording on the ballot paper of the political party and has been there since the Representation of the People Act 1969—I think there is a solid argument for holding a general election. It is not an argument that I completely agree with, but I would be interested to hear his response to it.

Robbie Moore: I thank the hon. Member for that point, but my point is that when a general election takes place, the individual voter casts their vote for an individual associated with a political party, which has a mandate—if it gets into power—based on a manifesto. The party leader's name is not on the ballot paper. It is the manifesto that is associated with that political party. I do feel there is a difference.

I am strongly of the view that if an individual Member of Parliament associated with a political party decides to change course and stand for a different political party—crosses the Floor of the House—an automatic by-election should be triggered, which ultimately gives their constituents the right to choose. That is slightly different from the debate about political leadership, because a party leader's name is not on the ballot paper; the name of the party is.

John Lamont: Having reflected on the point made by the hon. Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer), I would add that the key difference is surely that MPs are elected by their constituents, but the Prime Minister is appointed by the monarch, on the basis that that person can command the confidence of

[John Lamont]

the House of Commons. That is the basis of the monarch's decision. We do not have a presidential system, whereas we do elect constituency MPs. The appointment of the Prime Minister is based on the monarch's judgment on who has the confidence of the House of Commons.

Robbie Moore: I thank my hon. Friend for his point, which I think aligns with my own point: it is the make-up of the political party that gains the confidence of the House, and therefore its leader is appointed Prime Minister, should they get a mandate to be so, based on the numbers.

Where I do not feel that a by-election should be triggered aligns with the points made by the hon. Member for South Cotswolds. If a Member of Parliament is unfortunate enough to lose the Whip and therefore sits in the House as an independent, I do not feel that that should necessarily trigger a by-election, because it might be subject to circumstances outside that Member's control—political difference associated with a particular policy and therefore voting the other way. The Whips may use that as a mechanism for removing the party Whip, but I do not think that that should trigger a by-election in those circumstances. I want to be clear on that.

To summarise, politics is about trust, and at a time when the relationship between politicians and the electorate is, unfortunately, becoming increasingly fractious, it is vital that our democratic system holds us to account for the promises on which we as individuals associated with a political party were elected, the platform on which we chose to stand for election, and ultimately the manifesto commitments that we stood by.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): I am sorely tempted to say that if somebody else would like to take the Chair, I will come down and do an hour on this myself, but happily for colleagues, I am not allowed to.

4.56 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am loath to say that I am delighted to have you in the Chair, Sir Roger, because I feel we are all missing out on a good hour's worth of content with you there rather than here, but it really is a pleasure to serve under you.

Since the 2024 general election, we have seen the start of a slow procession of former Conservative Ministers and Members of Parliament moving to Reform UK. These are people who spent years in government and claimed they were there to make a difference—and they did leave a difference behind them, but that difference was far too many crumbling public services, a cost of living crisis and a legacy of broken promises. Rather than accepting responsibility for their actions, they have crossed the Floor for a new start, making no attempt to rebuild the public trust they broke.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) alluded to a pattern of very large concentrations of signatures making their way on to this petition—one of politicians prioritising their own political future over the parties their constituents voted for. I understand why some voters feel betrayed and that their MPs are not moving to another party from a principled stance.

These MPs clearly feel they are fleeing a sinking ship and are hoping that voters are too distracted to notice. But their constituents have noticed, with almost 130,000 people signing the petition that has resulted in this debate, including more than 200 in my Hazel Grove constituency. I understand people's frustrations, especially as many of the constituencies that had the highest numbers of signatures were those whose MPs had defected. They feel, rightly, that something has been taken from them. For that reason, some feel betrayed.

Most voters will not have read the full manifestos of all the candidates standing for election, but I can see why people would be unhappy, particularly when their MP joins a party that does not align with their views and values or whom they thought they had voted for. We are talking about a party whose former Welsh leader was imprisoned for a bribery conviction related to Russian connections, a party filled with swivel-eyed Trump supporters, a party that platformed a vaccine conspiracy theorist at its most recent party conference—it is hardly surprising that people do not feel their values are reflected in Reform UK.

However, our electoral system means that people vote for an individual to represent their area, not directly for a party. Our system is not set up automatically to call a by-election whenever an MP defects or is removed from a political party, or indeed when a party of government moves firmly away from a manifesto commitment. Nevertheless, the disillusionment that voters are experiencing points to something larger—a fundamental problem with how our democratic system currently works.

The Liberal Democrats believe that our political system needs fundamental change to restore the trust that voters have lost. First, we need to change the way we elect our MPs.

Robbie Moore: Before the hon. Member gets on to how we should change the whole system, I am keen to understand the Liberal Democrats' view on the petition specifically. Should a defection trigger a by-election?

Lisa Smart: No. The Liberal Democrat position is that elections should happen on a regular basis. We would re-implement the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, because we think it is healthy for people to know how long they are electing somebody for, rather than leaving the power in the hands of the Prime Minister of the day. I believe very firmly that the ultimate power should sit with voters rather than politicians, and that voters should know how long the term is. They should be able to boot people out at the next election, rather than having a special election that costs money and that may end up with the same result, but may not. We do not agree with the petition. However, we believe very strongly in people's right to express their views through a petition.

We need to change the system and the way we elect our MPs. Under our current system, a Government can win roughly two thirds of the seats on roughly one third of the votes. Millions of people are represented by someone they did not vote for. Seats bear almost no relation to votes cast, and far too many people feel forced to vote for the person they dislike the least just to stop the candidate they really do not want to be elected. Proportional representation would change that. The Liberal Democrats have been advocating for a change in our electoral system for a long time. We already use

proportional systems in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The vast majority of democracies worldwide use them.

John Lamont: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lisa Smart: If it is on the subject of PR, I will happily give way.

John Lamont: It is. Does the hon. Lady not recognise that we have had that debate in the UK? Part of Nick Clegg and David Cameron's coalition agreement was a referendum on the alternative vote, and the British people rejected it in very large numbers.

Lisa Smart: I could not be more delighted to go into details about different voting systems. The hon. Gentleman will know that AV is a preferential system, not a proportional one. I am talking about proportional representation. AV would have been a better system than first past the post, but a proportionate system would be even better. It has long been in the Liberal Democrat manifesto that that would mean fairer representation and more people having their say.

Graham Stringer: I am sure that everybody in this room is familiar with the arguments for and against PR. In moving the motion, the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) gave a very balanced speech. There was only one thing that I thought was unbalanced: the argument that somehow there would be less tactical voting in a PR system. A PR system is actually set up and designed for tactical voting. I would be grateful if the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) gave an opinion on that.

Lisa Smart: Many people, when talking about tactical voting, mean voting to stop somebody: a person has a preferred party or candidate, but lends their vote to somebody else to stop a third party they really do not want getting in. There are many different proportional systems—indeed, we have different systems in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland—and I would happily debate many of them, but I think it would test the patience of this Chamber if I were to get further into the weeds about my favourites. I recommend the Liberal Democrats for Electoral Reform panel from the Liberal Democrat spring conference, where a number of us spent the weekend. I very much enjoyed being on that panel, which did get into the weeds. It might not be to everyone's taste, but I assure hon. Members that it was a packed house with standing room only.

I will move on to the need to change and reform the House of Lords. It is simply indefensible that unelected peers continue to make laws for life in a modern democracy. The Liberal Democrats are committed to replacing it with a chamber that has a proper democratic mandate—one that reflects the country it serves, rather than the Prime Minister of the day. In a general election, the power sits with electors over who their MPs are. If they do not like something that their MP has done, they can choose somebody else at the next general election. Voters have precisely no power to do so with Members of the House of Lords. There are peers currently sitting in the House of Lords who have moved parties, and there is no mechanism to remove them for doing so.

Thirdly, the ministerial code must be enshrined in law. The fact that scandal after scandal has come out of previous Governments, and indeed this one, shows why there should be a set of legally enforceable expectations for Ministers and those in positions of power. Without that in law, we cannot guarantee that they will act with integrity, especially given that former Conservative Ministers are leaving the party rather than allowing themselves to be held to account. Right now, Ministers who act corruptly or behave improperly face, at worst, a quiet resignation and a comfortable future elsewhere. That is not accountability. Enshrining the ministerial code in legislation would mean that there are real consequences for those who abuse the public trust.

The recipient of a number of these defections is Reform UK, but it is not a party of insurgents challenging the establishment. It is more accurately described as a scrapyard for the very people who were the establishment and failed. Rather than accepting the public's verdict on their failures in government, those politicians are seeking refuge in a party that wants to make us all less safe by dragging the UK out of the European convention on human rights, asking for payment for NHS services and platforming conspiracy theorists. Although by-elections for those who defect may not be mandated, the voters in those seats have the ultimate power—the power of their vote, come the next election—and I hope they will use it at every available opportunity.

5.6 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and to take part in this debate on automatic by-elections following Member defections. I thank everybody across the country who has signed the petition. I have brought with me a list of every MP who has ever defected. Given the lack of a time constraint, we could go through it, but I would prefer to concentrate on the arguments.

I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) on introducing this important debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) made an excellent contribution with some very powerful arguments indeed, made all the more persuasive by the fact that he is a much-loved local Member of Parliament. He has as much personal support as party support, and has defied political gravity in recent times. I absolutely sympathise with and understand a lot of the arguments he makes. I will outline an alternative viewpoint that relates not necessarily to principle, but to practicality and the challenges that may arise if a change of law were brought in to deal with the ongoing issue of Members choosing to change from one party to another.

I fully sympathise with the frustration that many voters feel when their Member of Parliament chooses to defect to another party. At a time when our country faces many pressing challenges, it is easy to understand why many people feel as though their representatives, if they defect, are choosing party politics over real-life concerns. I would not deny the reality that many voters choose their candidate in an election with party labels in mind. We should not be arrogant enough to assume that everyone voted for us as individuals, regardless of our party alignment. Despite my hon. Friend's popularity, it is absolutely party alignments, labels and manifestoes

[*Charlie Dewhirst*]

that persuade people at general elections. We can do our best to be great servants to those we seek to represent, but much of the time that decision is made on a wider, more national position.

Like most Members, I am proud to work alongside like-minded individuals who share my core beliefs about how we can change our country for the better. Political parties have been an established part of our system for more than three centuries, and they have an irreplicable role in ensuring that the business of government and opposition can work effectively.

John Grobham Howe is said to be the first MP to have defected when, in 1698, he switched allegiance from the Whigs to the Tories, so the discussion today is certainly not about a new phenomenon. It is ultimately only Members themselves who can know their motivations for choosing to leave their existing party. I know that many Members would consider it entirely dishonourable to do so without seeking a mandate from their constituents, and I fully understand why many think that allowing a by-election to take place after defecting is very much the right thing to do. However, making that an automatic requirement could have unintended consequences that would only undermine Members' standing as elected representatives of the people.

We who serve in this House do so as representatives of our constituents above all else, regardless of which party we represent. We are elected to do what we think is in the best interests of our constituents, above all other considerations. If a Member chooses to defect, that should be because they have judged, rightly or wrongly, that doing so is in the best interests of their constituents. Their constituents are, of course, free to disagree with that judgment, and may well choose to elect a representative of a different party at a later election. However, if we wish to uphold the principles that have made our political system one of the most enduring in the world, Members must be deemed fit to serve as representatives on the basis of their record of serving their constituents' interests, and not simply on the basis of their party label.

Robbie Moore: I hope that I am not going to lose the Whip by taking a slightly different view from what seems to be my party's position. Why would an individual not stand as an independent, if he or she had the confidence of getting elected? Surely there is a huge advantage in standing under the brand of a political party, because that inevitably brings a good element of the voter base to that individual. Will my hon. Friend expand on the difference between standing as an independent and standing as a member of a political party?

Charlie Dewhirst: Absolutely. There is a real challenge here, and I agree with the point that my hon. Friend made earlier. Leaving one political party in the House of Commons and joining a distinct grouping is one thing, but independence is a challenge, as I saw on local level when I was a councillor: some councillors were in the independent group, but there were also independent independents. The independent group had, in many ways, a political agenda, and started to work around that. If we were to bring in legislation, defining true independence could become quite challenging. Members may start to work together around certain political issues,

and form a political direction, which would actually make them no different from any other small party in the House of Commons.

I am sympathetic to the point, and the challenges around situations that may lead an individual from being party aligned to going independent are varied, but although I agree with the principle, we are concerned with the practicality. On issues such as this, the Conservative party has always been a broad church, so I am sure my hon. Friend and I can agree to disagree today. I do not think that there is any question of his being called into our Whips Office straight after the debate; it would certainly be very unfair if he were.

That the voters choose an individual to be their sole representative is one of the greatest strengths of our constitution, ensuring a direct link between Members and their constituents. I take issue with the views of the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart), on PR, which would break the link between local people and an individual. It would almost make this entire debate irrelevant. How would we have a by-election if someone defected? Would the entire country vote in the by-election, to make sure that it is truly proportionally representative? That would not work. I have always been a supporter of the first-past-the-post system, which I believe is the best way to get representation of the people in this country. We put this matter to the test in a referendum not that long ago, and people made their views very clear.

Lisa Smart: We have not discussed PR sufficiently this afternoon. Does the hon. Member accept that there are different voting systems of a proportionate nature, some of which retain the constituency link?

Charlie Dewhirst: I absolutely accept that there are many different voting systems that one could employ. Those with a mix between a party list and a constituency list create a two-tier system. What if one of the individuals on the party list were to defect? How would that be resolved? It would create a system even more challenging than the one we already have, which has a direct link between local people and their representative in the House of Commons.

One of my concerns is that making the continuation of that representation conditional on membership of a political party might start to weaken that link, which is a strength of the first-past-the-post system, but there is also the question of how it would be dealt with under the varied systems that we have across the range of PR options. Making representation conditional in that way would reduce Members to delegates of their party rather than individuals chosen to represent all their constituents, regardless of who they voted for—a point that is hugely important to us all. As we have discussed, the threat of a by-election could be used to silence Members who feel compelled by their conscience to go against their party.

As I just underlined, that is where the challenge about how to legally define an independent comes in. I am very sympathetic to the point that those who go independent should not face a by-election, but those who move from one established party to another should. The danger is that introducing mandatory by-elections would encourage Members to favour loyalty to the party over serving the interests of their constituents, particularly if they believed that those two things were in conflict.

Of course, defection is only one means by which a Member can change their party allegiance. While the petition speaks only of defection to another party, there are other methods: resignation, the withdrawal of the Whip, parties' restructuring and so on are all means by which a Member may choose no longer to represent the party for which they were originally elected. I am sure that no Member believes that every Liberal Democrat should have been forced to stand in a by-election when the Liberals and the Social Democrats merged.

This is not the first time that the House has considered the issue of Members changing political allegiance. Previous Governments and Parliaments have wrestled with how to reconcile the independence of Members with the expectations of modern party politics, and in each instance they concluded that the independence of Parliament and its Members should not be constrained through major constitutional change.

Graham Stringer: I am rather surprised that nobody has mentioned that there is a constitutional precedent for by-elections when situations change. It used to be the case that when Members were appointed to the Cabinet, they had to face a by-election. In my city, Manchester, there was a famous by-election when Winston Churchill had to stand again, and he lost. I think that was just before the first world war. Then, a change of circumstances meant a by-election. It is a very serious change of circumstances if somebody changes political parties. I am interested in the hon. Gentleman's view on that constitutional precedent.

Charlie Dewhurst: Things have changed over time, and I dread to think how many by-elections we might have had in recent years had we needed one every time someone was appointed to the Cabinet. I suspect that would have cost the public purse something quite significant. In the period of which the hon. Member speaks, there was a slower churn of those in the Cabinet, and there was not quite the political turmoil that we have seen in recent years, which would make such a situation challenging. It is a fair point, though, because the change of circumstance in that situation is far less than the change of circumstance of moving from one party to another.

As I have said, it is not the principle of the issue that concerns me, but the practicality. If Parliament did introduce legislation, it would have to be absolutely spot on and watertight, to ensure that it did not degrade the link between individual Members of Parliament and their constituencies, and that the party system did not become more empowered through any such change. That is my principal concern.

Our constitution and political system have drawn their strength from the respect we have for tried and tested convention, and we must always be wary of the danger of rushed constitutional change and unintended consequences. We need only to look at the recent past to see how previous attempts to enforce rigidity within our system have failed. Most notably, the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, which was seen as an important tool during the coalition Government, ultimately was viewed to have failed and was rightly repealed during the last Parliament.

The independence of Parliament and of an individually elected representative to do what they believe is in the best interests of their constituents is one of the

longest-standing conventions in our political system. While I sympathise with the frustrations of the petitioners and understand their desire to see the proposed change enacted, I believe we would be unwise to surrender that independence.

5.19 pm

The Minister without Portfolio (Anna Turley): I, for one, feel robbed of your contribution to this debate, Sir Roger; I think it would have been fascinating. It genuinely has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship and a privilege to listen to the debate. I have certainly learned a lot about historical precedents and other things; it has been fascinating.

I thank the hon. Member for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, and the many thousands of people across the country who have signed the petition and taken part in our important democratic and parliamentary processes. I also thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for his thought-provoking contributions—it is important that we all challenge ourselves in this place—and, as I mentioned, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Middleton South (Graham Stringer) has given me lots of food for thought as well. I thank everyone for their contributions.

At the last general election, the public voted for change following years of Conservative chaos. We saw a whopping 23 by-elections in just four and a half years prior to 2024. Those by-elections were caused by lobbying scandals, tractor videos, sexual misconduct, bullying—a horrible track record of MPs falling short of the standards that the public rightly expect of them. It is absolutely right that, in such circumstances, we have by-elections and the public are able to get rid of their MPs in that way. However, while I personally share the view of, I think, many of the petitioners from certain constituencies that defecting from the Conservatives to Reform is an awful thing to do—I notice that none of the hon. Members concerned is here today—I am not sure that it reaches the bar of requiring a by-election.

I have listened carefully to the contributions made by hon. Members from across the House, and I understand the concern at the heart of the petition. I am a true believer in party politics. I fundamentally believe, to quote the Labour party's clause IV, that

"by the strength of our common endeavour we achieve more than we achieve alone".

Only by working together with shared values can we ever truly achieve change.

I wanted to flag that in particular in answer to the point that the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley made about being an independent. We can bring so much more when we work together with our shared values, and that is a fundamental way in which we have been able to achieve change throughout history.

I joined the Labour party because I grew up in the '80s and early '90s under a Tory Government who seemed to accept that unemployment, inequality and poverty was a price worth paying. I made that choice to join a political party, and I could never be part of a party that believed in, or sought to uphold, a system of unequal privilege in this country.

[Anna Turley]

I am Labour for a reason: I saw that only one party, throughout its history, has fought to give more power and opportunity to ordinary people, built great institutions for the many, such as the NHS, the Open University and Sure Start, and provided rights and protections for working people—and that only one party, at its heart, has the fundamental view that every child deserves to flourish, whatever their background.

Robbie Moore: I am always amazed when a Minister says at the Dispatch Box, “I have listened very carefully to the contributions,” yet they are reading from a speech that was written before they turned up to the debate. Let me ask the Minister this. A proportion of people will vote for the individual based not only on their name, but on their association with a political party. If they change their political allegiance during the Parliament, how does the Minister think that is fair to the wider electoral base?

Anna Turley: The hon. Gentleman is very impatient, because I was barely getting started on my speech. I will address that, because it is an important question that we have to challenge ourselves with, and it is right that we are here to debate it today, but I wanted to set out the primacy of party politics because, to me, it is about values. It is about what we believe in, and what kind of country and world we would like to build.

While I disagree fundamentally on many issues with Opposition Members, I recognise and respect that so many of them hold equally strong beliefs and values as those of us on the Government Benches, and that they are here to champion those party values in the name of public service, too. I appreciate—I am sure the hon. Gentleman will share this view—that when we cast our ballots at general elections, so many of us do so with a specific party manifesto, set of values or policy priorities in mind. People often elect the party that they want to govern based on a set of principles and priorities that they support or at least believe are preferable to those of the other parties.

As we have heard, people are also voting, albeit indirectly, for a particular Prime Minister. We cannot assume that the public do not see the weeks of general election coverage. The Prime Minister was on the front of our manifesto. People know that they are voting for a Prime Minister, because they know that the party with the largest number of MPs will send that person to 10 Downing Street.

When an elected MP leaves a political party, it is entirely understandable that voters may feel that the contract between them and their local MP has been broken, that trust has been broken and that a remedy, such as a by-election, is required to repair it. They may feel that they voted for that person not as an individual, but because of the shared values they believed they represented. They may feel strongly that they do not share the values of the new party that the MP has moved to. All of that is entirely understandable.

While I acknowledge why the petitioners—and, as we have heard, some in this place—may want to see a by-election to repair that, I believe that it is up to those MPs themselves to examine their conscience and their relationship with their voters, and not for this place to

tell them what their principles should be. I have enough respect for and faith in the British public that, when that individual next goes back to their constituents to ask them for the sacred privilege, which we are so lucky to hold, of representing them in this place, the public will make their decision on the basis of all the evidence. They will decide whether that MP has their interests at heart, and whether they jumped ship out of principle—we have heard examples of that—or out of shameless political ambition. I will not point to any particular instances that we may have seen of that recently.

It is true that, while values tend to stay the same, parties can shift and evolve. I have seen that with my own party, as hon. Members have discussed. For example, in 2019, the British public had their say on whether they felt the Labour party had moved too far from where they were, or from where they felt we ought to be. Many people wrestled with that. Ultimately, we should have enough faith in the British public that they will assess the decision that their MP has made in defecting to another party and have their say. Some MPs have won after defecting to another party; others have lost. Ultimately, the public will weigh it all up and pass their judgment.

As the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley flagged, it is also important to remember that the public will make their judgment on the basis of a number of issues, not just the party allegiance of the MP. Despite the political differences I have with colleagues in this House, we have all come here to champion our communities and constituencies. Day in, day out, we support our constituents with casework issues, highlight the noteworthy work our local charities and organisations undertake across our communities, raise local issues closest to our constituents’ hearts and fix problems. As we all know, that vital work is personal to us individually, no matter which political party we come from. As such, much of the value of being an MP comes directly from our work with constituents, and they will ultimately price that into the decisions that they make.

It has been a long-standing constitutional principle in this country, most famously put forward by Edmund Burke, that MPs should deliberate and use their reason and judgment, as the hon. Member for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhurst) said, and not simply be a delegate of either party or populist opinion. A by-election on the basis of a defection would undermine that principle.

If we mandated that an MP must lose their seat the moment they leave their party, we would fundamentally alter the nature of our democracy. We would also shift from a system in which an MP’s first responsibility is to their constituents, to one where, once elected, they are accountable to their party’s leaders in Westminster. As the Prime Minister himself has said, “Country first; party second.”

John Lamont: I am grateful for the Minister’s analysis. I wonder whether she applies the same logic to her colleagues who have lost the Labour Whip because they have not complied with instructions to vote for Government policy that their constituents do not agree with.

Anna Turley: The hon. Gentleman raises a really important point. There is always a balance and a trade-off, which we all make as MPs, between that judgment and a sense of shared and collective responsibility. It comes back to the point I made at the beginning: we cannot

achieve much on our own. We achieve much more when we are together, and political parties rise or fall on unity. It is for every MP to decide where their conscience lies. If they genuinely believe that their party is going against the principles and the will of their constituents, they have the opportunity to make that decision, but, ultimately, they must pay the price by losing the Whip. That is party discipline and collective responsibility. The hon. Gentleman raises a really important challenge, which we all think about often.

In the scenario that I described, in which we shifted to a system in which, once elected, an MP is accountable to their party's leaders in Westminster, MPs who disagree with their party's leadership, or feel that their political party is moving in a direction that they are uncomfortable with, may lose an important way to express their dissatisfaction. In the last Parliament, former MPs defected from the Conservative party because many felt that they were unable to deliver on the promises they made to their country. I understand the appeal of an automatic by-election to petitioners and to some Members of this House, but that would not make our parliamentary democracy stronger.

We must also consider the more practical impact of the petition's proposal on our constituents. We all know the importance of our constituents having their own voices represented in Parliament. A by-election is a significant event. Members across the House know that it is costly to the public purse but, more importantly, it disrupts a constituency's representation in this place. During a by-election campaign the seat is effectively vacant; casework stalls, the community loses its voice in Parliament for weeks or months, and the focus shifts to campaigning and the result's implications for the Government of the day, rather than the issues that matter most to local residents.

Under our current system, when an MP changes affiliation, that work continues uninterrupted. The MP remains in post, serving their constituents and helping to support them with local issues. Naturally, that does not mean that MPs should be unaccountable for defecting to another party, but, as I have said, the remedy for that already exists in a general election. Of course, if an MP feels it is necessary to seek a fresh mandate, they are free to resign from both their party and their seat and fight a by-election immediately. I personally think that that would demonstrate an integrity that the public would welcome. In either case, the crucial thing is that MPs remain accountable to their constituents.

We do, of course, have a mechanism—

John Lamont: I apologise for disrupting the Minister's flow, but I would like to ask her to clarify what she just said. She seems to be arguing that she is opposed to a by-election happening at the point of defection, but I think she hinted at a personal view that was contrary to the view that she had previously been articulating.

Anna Turley: Forgive me; my view, and that of the Government, is very clear. It is for each hon. Member to decide; it is not for the Government or Parliament to have a mechanism that forces people. People should examine their conscience: if they feel that a by-election would enable them to rebuild trust with their constituents, it is important that they consider that. However, it is not for Parliament to mandate that for those who defect.

It is about integrity. If they believe that they have broken a promise that they made to people, then that is up to them.

We already have a mechanism to remove MPs during the course of a Parliament. Under the Recall of MPs Act 2015, by-elections are triggered by custodial sentences, suspension from the House or false expenses claims. Some have argued that we should add defection to that list, but I strongly urge against that. The core philosophy of recall is that it is triggered by conduct, not a change in values or even, dare I say it, political ambition. Of course, I agree that it is right that MPs who fall below ethical standards or break the law are held to account for their behaviour, but to conflate political disagreement or even naked opportunism with ethical misconduct would set a dangerous precedent. Finding oneself at odds with the direction of one's party or wanting to jump on the latest populist bandwagon is not a lapse of behavioural standards; it is part of political life, and I believe the public can be trusted to see that and make a judgment for themselves.

The Government believe—and I believe too, just to clarify for the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont)—that our current constitutional arrangements strike the right balance. They preserve much-needed stability in democracy and enable MPs who do change political parties to continue their vital constituency work, while reserving the public's right to judge the work and principles of that MP at the ballot box. As chair of the Labour party and a proud member of this Labour Government, I strongly believe in political parties providing competing visions of the kind of world and the kind of country we would like to see and seeking a mandate from the public to enact them.

It is in the nature of our democracy, to support effective government in this country, that a party is able to command a majority in this House. Party values allow us to build our vision, turn our manifestos into reality, provide collective leadership and service, and enact the change that the country voted for at a general election. I understand why the petitioners and some Members across the House feel that an automatic by-election would add another layer of accountability in this place, but for the reasons I have set out, I do not believe that those changes would in any way enhance our parliamentary democracy.

5.33 pm

Dr Savage: At the start of the debate, I suggested that we might make up for lack of quantity with quality, and I think we have delivered on that promise. I thank colleagues from across the Chamber for their most thoughtful, fascinating and wide-ranging contributions to the debate. I especially thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) for her interesting diversion into the many other ways in which we could help to restore faith in our democracy, such as a fairer voting system and House of Lords reform.

I echo the regret expressed by a number of colleagues that parliamentary procedure precludes the Chair from jumping into the conversation. I am sure that that would have been a most fascinating—

Lisa Smart: Hour.

Dr Savage: Yes—but I believe that this Chamber will be available until at least 7.30 pm, so perhaps we could have an impromptu seminar.

I trust that Mr McIlhinney and the other signatories to the petition will feel that we have done justice to their concerns and will appreciate the calibre of the debate, even if the constituencies that I mentioned at the outset are not going to be dusting off their ballot boxes any time soon. I thank everyone present for their most valuable contributions.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): As the hon. Lady said, there are occasions when quality makes up for quantity, and the House has behaved in an exemplary manner this afternoon. Thank you for your courtesy.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 737660 relating to automatic by-elections following Member defections.

5.35 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 16 March 2026

DEFENCE

Single-source Defence Contracts: Profit Rates

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): The strategic defence review makes it clear that we are entering a new era of threat. This demands a new era for UK defence—one focused on warfighting readiness and the ability to scale and sustain capability at pace. A resilient, productive defence industry and strong supply chains are essential to that work.

To deliver this, we need to ensure that our suppliers receive a fair return on their defence contracts, while also protecting the interests of the taxpayer. Each year, the independent Single Source Regulations Office undertakes a rigorous analysis of the profits earned by companies that undertake comparable work to our major defence suppliers. I am therefore announcing today that the Secretary of State has accepted the SSRO's recommendation that the baseline profit rate for single-source defence contracts in financial year 2026-27 be set at 9.10%, an increase of 0.54 percentage points from 2025-26. He has also accepted the other rates recommended by the SSRO, which will come into force on 1 April 2026. These rates, which are set out at table 1, strike the right balance: they are fair to suppliers, reflect prevailing market conditions, and deliver value for money for the taxpayer.

Alongside this, the Government are progressing at pace the wider review of the Single Source Contract Regulations, as commissioned in the defence industrial strategy. We have already held workshops with industry and the SSRO, and we intend to publish the full report later this year. That review will consider how the framework can better support productivity, pace, innovation and access, while continuing to safeguard value for money.

The Government value deeply the contribution of the UK defence industry. A strong, competitive supplier base is essential to our security and growth, and that is what we are delivering through our defence industrial strategy. But that partnership must be grounded in fair returns, higher productivity and faster delivery, ensuring that defence spending translates directly into military advantage.

This approach—fair profit, strong governance, and a relentless focus on productivity and readiness—goes to the heart of ensuring that UK defence is ready to deter, fight and win.

<i>Element</i>	<i>2025-26 rates</i>	<i>2026-27 rates</i>
Baseline profit rate (% on contract cost)	8.56%	9.10%
Baseline profit rate to apply to contracts between the Secretary of State and a company wholly owned by the UK Government, and where both parties agree (% on contract cost)	0.00%	0.00%
Fixed capital servicing rate (% on fixed capital employed)	3.64%	4.05%
Working capital servicing rate (% on positive working capital employed)	4.69%	5.25%

<i>Element</i>	<i>2025-26 rates</i>	<i>2026-27 rates</i>
Working capital servicing rate (% on negative working capital employed)	3.21%	4.18%

Table 1: Recommended Rates by the Secretary of State for Defence

[HCWS1402]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Nuclear Regulatory Review 2025: Government Response

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): On Friday, the Government set out their response to the nuclear regulatory review 2025. The review found that while the United Kingdom has a strong safety culture, the current system for nuclear regulation and delivery is fragmented, slow, and overly cautious. The Government accept this assessment and shall modernise the system so that it is faster, clearer and predictable, while at all times maintaining high standards of safety and environmental protection. This is needed to deliver on the ambition we have for both for our civil and defence nuclear sectors.

The response we are publishing today addresses all of the review's 47 recommendations and sets out a coherent and ambitious plan to streamline nuclear delivery in Britain.

We will simplify regulation. Projects that involve multiple regulators will have a single co-ordinating point of contact through a lead regulator model, with the Office for Nuclear Regulation as the default lead for nuclear fission. We will legislate to establish a commission on nuclear regulation to resolve cross-cutting issues and reduce duplication.

We will restore proportionality in decision making. Government will convene an independent expert panel to review how the tolerability of risk framework is interpreted, to guide regulators and industry in nuclear. Regulators will revise guidance, so that it supports proportionate, evidence-based decisions. We will clarify how proportionality, in nuclear, should be applied under the Health and Safety at Work etc Act 1974, without reducing protections for workers or the public.

We will strengthen culture, skills and digital capability. We will go further with the nuclear skills plan, and launch a nuclear digital programme to drive the adoption of new tools, such as artificial intelligence and digital twins, across design, regulation, and delivery.

We will speed up the wider planning and environmental system to support nuclear delivery. We will use the nature restoration fund and environmental delivery plans to provide clearer routes for meeting obligations, resulting in better outcomes for nature. For defence nuclear, the Government will bring forward an alternative pathway for compliance with the habitats regulations, where this is necessary in the interests of national security. We will introduce a proportionate biodiversity net gain framework for nationally significant infrastructure, and will legislate to constrain the duty for national parks and national landscapes. We will improve our nuclear siting policy by updating the national policy statement for nuclear, EN-7, to support fleet deployment, and will revise the semi-urban population criterion in a way that maintains public safety while expanding the range of viable sites.

We will make the planning pathway faster and clearer. We will streamline the pre-application phase for development consent orders, and strengthen the initial assessment of principal issues, so that examinations focus on what matters. We will also ensure that the geological disposal facility programme has the powers that it needs, including on land access and bespoke permitted development rights.

International co-operation remains important. The ONR is deepening work with partner regulators, including through recent agreements with the United States and Canada, and we will support a joint international strategy to reduce duplication and share effort. Implementation of these reforms will be overseen by a nuclear regulatory implementation panel, made up of senior figures from Government, regulators and industry, which will report regularly to the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister and relevant Secretaries of State.

Delay has a cost, so we are already working on some of the reforms, and aim to complete implementation by the end of 2027, subject to legislative timelines. To ensure that live projects like Sizewell C and the small modular reactors programme can benefit, we will begin updating processes, and will issue interim guidance immediately, so that improvements can start now, while we wait to take through legislation.

I want to thank John Fingleton and the taskforce for their work in bringing these issues to the fore, and I make the commitment to all that through this programme, we will cut duplication, strengthen safety by focusing on outcomes, and give investors and developers the confidence to proceed. We are delivering on these recommendations already. Taking these steps is vital for securing our energy future and sustaining the sovereign capabilities that keep our country safe.

[HCWS1398]

Fusion Strategy

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero is today publishing “A New Energy Revolution: The UK’s Plan for Delivering Fusion Energy”.

This strategy builds on the Government’s record £2.5 billion investment in fusion research and development secured at the spending review, supporting the UK’s growing fusion industry and reaffirming Britain’s leading position in the global race for fusion energy. We are turning the promise of abundant fusion energy into a reality, as we take long-term decisions while delivering tangible benefits now; for example, we are supporting over 10,000 UK jobs by 2030, driving inward investment, and giving industry the confidence to take fusion from the lab to the grid.

In support of this strategy, UK Industrial Fusion Solutions, to become UK Fusion Energy Ltd, has announced details of the STEP—spherical tokamak for energy production—construction partner that will build the world-leading fusion energy plant on the site of a former coal plant in West Burton in Nottinghamshire. Large-scale construction is expected to start by the end of the decade, with jobs supported in the near term through the building of research and development test facilities for key technologies and site preparation.

We are also harnessing the power of artificial intelligence to accelerate fusion design, modelling, and operations. The Government are investing £45 million to fund the world’s most powerful fusion-dedicated AI supercomputer, developed in collaboration between UK Atomic Energy Authority and the University of Cambridge.

We will drive progress towards fusion deployment by making the UK the first to offer a market framework for fusion energy, giving support and certainty to fusion developers as they make capital-intensive investments in new technology. We will work with industry, consumer groups and others to develop options to provide confidence to investors and ensure a fair deal for consumers.

I fully intend for the UK to be the home of fusion skills and innovation, backed by £50 million for skills development to train over 2,000 people in fusion-related disciplines, from apprentices to postdoctoral fellows, ensuring a comprehensive fusion skills pipeline to supply the sector at all levels.

This strategy underscores the UK’s role as a global player in fusion energy, and we intend to develop that further, anchoring a supply chain in the UK that can serve a global industry, as well as attract inward investment. Our forthcoming investment prospectus will set out exactly where opportunities lie for investors, developers and the wider fusion sector, and what capabilities, skills, companies and support they can draw on. As a signal of confidence in the UK fusion programme, the strategy is accompanied by a set of wider announcements, including UKAEA and Eni agreeing to establish a joint venture to advance fusion energy technologies. This new strategy also sets out for the first time how the Government’s record-breaking investment into fusion of over £2.5 billion will be spent.

Together, this package represents the UK’s clean energy superpower mission in action. It demonstrates that the Government are taking a bold and practical approach, addressing the asks of industry, creating the conditions for a globally leading UK fusion sector, and maintaining the UK’s position at the forefront of global fusion commercialisation.

I will place a copy of the fusion strategy in the Libraries of the House.

[HCWS1404]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Sustainable Development for Nature and Growth

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): This Government have committed to building 1.5 million homes and fast-tracking 150 major planning decisions this Parliament—these are essential for growth, communities, cleaner energy and better transport links.

Yet nature and biodiversity remain under pressure, and our planning system has become too slow and uncertain to support either development or nature recovery effectively. In the past, environmental requirements were challenging to navigate, blocking infrastructure without helping nature.

But this can be resolved. Independent reviews have told us that to remedy this situation we need smarter regulation, bringing better results for nature while easing the progress of sustainable development. We have already taken action to streamline the planning process through the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, and to deliver better outcomes for nature through proposals for the nature restoration fund; building on the ambitious commitments set out in our environmental improvement plan. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has also set up the infrastructure board to scrutinise the planning needs of complex projects, and has commenced pilots for the lead environmental regulator to provide a single point of contact to developers on environmental issues.

We must build on this momentum and move decisively to a modern, outcomes-focused framework for environmental planning. That is why I am renewing the priorities of environmental regulation to build on the Government's plan to deliver environmental progress and sustainable growth more effectively, as a genuine win-win.

The Government, regulators and developers must each play their part. Our regulators will continue to move towards a more proactive, solutions-focused approach, prioritising outcomes over process. Developers must have a better understanding of the local nature needs of the area they are building in, and the Government will provide the clarity and investment needed to bring this all together.

I will be driving this progress in five key areas:

First, the Government are setting a clear direction for our regulators, through the new strategic policy statements for Natural England and the Environment Agency. Their publication delivers on one of Dan Corry's key recommendations and sets a clear mandate for outcomes-focused, place-based decision making that supports economic growth while upholding all legal and environmental standards.

Secondly, to support this, we are confirming £100 million of investment over three years in our regulators for specialist staff, digital casework systems, and improved guidance, all of which builds on the significant progress made in the past year to deliver quicker and better environmental advice.

Thirdly, to keep critical national projects on track, we are establishing a new DEFRA infrastructure unit, which will oversee major projects and resolve issues early and quickly. This builds on the work of DEFRA's infrastructure board.

Fourthly, for the first time, I will also bring developers and Government together through a development industry council, to work through practical challenges and agree shared, sustainable solutions.

In addition, we are continuing to develop our lead environmental regulator model and are announcing East West Rail as the third major project to benefit from this streamlined approach. This model strips out duplication, provides better co-ordination between regulators, and removes the potential for conflicting advice, and will help the project unlock £6.7 billion in economic growth, support 100,000 new homes, and deliver better, more frequent rail connections across the Oxford-Cambridge corridor. I have written to my colleagues who have constituencies along this route to inform them of our progress.

The benefits of this new approach are already visible. The DEFRA infrastructure board has taken early action on issues related to environmental regulation, resourcing and capability, by engaging early with developers and challenging our ALBs to problem solve upstream for priority projects.

This package marks a decisive shift towards delivering growth and nature recovery hand in hand. By strengthening regulators, improving predictability and working more closely with industry, we will deliver the next phase of Government action to accelerate the infrastructure the country needs while protecting the environment.

[HCWS1405]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Angiolini Inquiry Part 3: Terms of Reference

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): On 7 February 2023, the Government published the terms of reference for part 3 of the Angiolini inquiry.

Part 3 of the inquiry was commissioned to examine the career and conduct of former Metropolitan police officer David Carrick, following his conviction for multiple sexual offences in January 2023. He was subsequently convicted of further sexual offences in November 2025.

Following a request from the chair of the inquiry, Lady Elish Angiolini, the Home Secretary has agreed to make some amendments to the terms of reference for part 3. The result of these amendments is that the inquiry will now be able to consider evidence related to allegations of criminal behaviour prior to and during David Carrick's policing career. The amendments also make explicit reference to psychological and/or psychiatric reports written about David Carrick as material that the inquiry may consider.

The chair's intention with these amendments is to better understand the potential drivers and motivation for Carrick's offending, with a view to assisting police forces in understanding how to better identify and disrupt perpetrators of these horrific crimes during the recruitment and vetting stages and ensure those unfit to serve have no place in policing.

The Angiolini inquiry was launched in January 2022 following the horrific murder of Sarah Everard by a then-serving Metropolitan police officer; the report for part 1 was published on 29 February 2024. Part 2 of the inquiry, examining broader issues in policing such as vetting, recruitment, and culture, commenced on 11 May 2023 and is currently ongoing, with a report on the prevention of sexually motivated crimes against women in public published on 2 December 2025.

A copy of the amended terms of reference for part 3 of the inquiry will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS1400]

JUSTICE

Women in the Criminal Justice System

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): My noble Friend the Minister of State for Justice (Lord Timpson) has today made the following statement:

"I wish to update the House on the Government's work to improve outcomes for women in or at risk of contact with the criminal justice system, and to set out next steps following the publication of the women's justice board report today.

Although women account for only a small proportion of those in custody and serving community sentences, they face distinct and complex challenges. Evidence shows that women in custody

are more likely to have experienced domestic or sexual abuse, trauma, mental ill health and substance misuse. They are also more likely than men in custody to be primary carers. Reducing the number of women entering custody is essential to breaking cycles of harm that affect families and communities.

The women's justice board was established to support the Government goal of enabling more women offenders to be managed in the community. At the request of the Deputy Prime Minister, and at my request, members of the board have produced a report offering recommendations to reduce the number of women in prison, and to ensure women receive the support they need across the system to turn their lives around.

A key recommendation in the report is the need for sustainable, long-term investment in women's specialist services for delivering gender-specific, trauma-informed support. In line with this, I am delighted to announce that the Government will provide an additional £10 million in funding for women's community and voluntary organisations over the spending review period, bringing total funding over this period to £31.6 million. This uplift will strengthen diversion pathways and build capacity within the women's community sector—supporting the sustainable, resilient services called for by the women's justice board.

I am very grateful to members of the board for their leadership, expert judgement and unwavering commitment to improving women's justice.

As we move from strategy to delivery, the women's justice board will now come to an end. To support this next phase of work, we will transition to a new women's justice advisory group. This group will act as a distinct advisory forum, providing external insight, expert advice and constructive challenge to support implementation.

Improving outcomes for women in the criminal justice system remains a priority for Government. We are now going to consider carefully the recommendations in this report and how we are best able to deliver reform in this vital area.

I will deposit a copy of the report, 'Women's Justice Board recommendations for reducing women's imprisonment', in the Library of the House."

[HCWS1401]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Media Literacy Action Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan): Today I am laying before Parliament the Government's media literacy action plan. It sets out our commitment to fostering a safe, informed and resilient digital society.

Media literacy is an essential everyday skill that supports people to understand and take part in modern life. It helps people of all ages to: make sense of the information they encounter online and assess whether it is reliable; communicate safely; and navigate the internet with confidence. It supports understanding of how platforms and new technologies, including artificial intelligence, shape what people see and share, and enables informed choices about personal information. It also supports participation in everyday activities, including exploring new interests, connecting with others and taking part in democratic life. It is central to digital inclusion and to ensuring that people can benefit from online services and opportunities.

The importance of media literacy, and the need for cross-Government co-ordination, was highlighted by the Lords Communications and Digital Committee in its 2025 inquiry. While the Online Safety Act 2023 provides the regulatory foundation for safer online experiences,

regulation alone cannot address the challenges created by misleading information, harmful content and rapid technological change. Significant work on media literacy is already taking place, with Government Departments, Ofcom, charities, educators, libraries and industry partners delivering media literacy activity across the UK. Education and public empowerment are essential, and the Government's wider programme of work, including the consultation, "Growing up in the online world: a national consultation", will support skills development and help to build resilience across society.

This plan sets out a clear approach for a single, co-ordinated, cross-Government framework for the next three years, establishes shared principles and priority areas for action, and provides a clearer picture of the support available across the UK. The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology has provided funding for a pilot media literacy campaign, and the plan otherwise integrates media literacy into existing initiatives within departmental budgets.

Over the next three years, the Government will focus on priorities in building public awareness of media literacy and supporting access to trusted information; preparing children and young people for a digital future; boosting local initiatives to support people facing barriers to participation; and ensuring a coherent, co-ordinated approach across Government and with partners beyond it.

Through this work, the Government's ambition is to ensure that everyone can take part in the online world with confidence and benefit fully from the opportunities it offers.

[HCWS1399]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Youth Employment

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): At the Budget, the Chancellor committed more than £1.5 billion to back young people through the youth guarantee and changes to the growth and skills levy.

Today we are going even further. We are announcing almost £1 billion more to help young people into work and training, unlocking up to 200,000 jobs and apprenticeship opportunities by investing in:

The youth jobs grant, an employer hiring incentive worth £3,000 per young person aged 18 to 24 who has been on universal credit and looking for work for six months;

A new apprenticeship incentive, £2,000 for non-levy paying small and medium-sized enterprises in England when they take on new employees aged under 25; and

Expanding the jobs guarantee to 22 to 24-year-olds, meaning all eligible 18 to 24-year-olds across Great Britain will benefit from a fully funded six-month guaranteed paid employment opportunity.

Our ambition is for every 16 to 24-year-old across Great Britain to access opportunity. These changes take the total investment into the youth guarantee and the additional investment in the growth and skills levy to £2.5 billion over the next three years, supporting almost 1 million young people, and creating up to 500,000 opportunities to earn and learn.

This will begin in April, when the first phase of the jobs guarantee will go live for 18 to 21-year-olds in Birmingham and Solihull, East Midlands, Greater Manchester, Hertfordshire and Essex, Central and East Scotland, and South-west and South-east Wales. This will be followed by national roll-out in the autumn of this year for 18 to 24-year-olds.

Further reform to the growth and skills levy

There has been a 40% drop in young people starting apprenticeships over the past decade. This is why the Government are setting out the next stages of the growth and skills levy reforms, to reverse this sharp decline in apprenticeship starts for 16 to 24-year-olds and address the rising number of those not in education, employment or training.

To support this, we are announcing the expansion of foundation apprenticeships into hospitality and retail. These are sectors that traditionally employ large numbers of young people and provide strong entry points into sustained employment, while also supporting retention and progression.

We are also introducing new apprenticeship units aligned to industrial strategy priorities, to give employers greater flexibility in how they upskill their employees.

This will make it easier and faster for businesses to address their critical skills needs in areas including AI, construction and engineering, and we will develop further units informed by ongoing input from industrial strategy growth-driving sectors.

We will prioritise youth apprenticeship starts within the growth and skills levy, stopping the 40% decline in apprenticeship starts that has occurred over the past decade.

This will mean that the Government are no longer funding three leadership and management apprenticeship standards that are largely used by employers for older, established staff as continuing professional development, but are instead using the funding for new apprenticeship starts for young people. A further 13 standards that do not sufficiently support young people or our industrial strategy ambitions will also be defunded.

Streamlining the existing offer ensures that our increased investment delivers maximum value for money, supports clearer routes into skilled jobs, and creates headroom for investment into new opportunities for young people and employers alike.

[HCWS1403]

Petitions

Monday 16 March 2026

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Urgent care provision in Rugby

The petition of residents of the constituency of Rugby,

Declares that the continuing investment in services at the Hospital of St Cross, a much-loved local hospital at the heart of our community is welcome; further declares that, as shown by recent demonstrations, members of the community in Rugby are concerned about ensuring the continued provision of urgent treatment from this site, and that these concerns have been raised at consultation events and meetings with health leaders; and further declares that there is not yet clarity as to how the Integrated Care Board's review of urgent care will affect the Hospital of St Cross.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with NHS Coventry and Warwickshire Integrated Care Board to ensure that urgent care provision at the Hospital of St Cross, Rugby is retained and enhanced, to include a doctor led urgent care service.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by John Slinger, *Official Report*, 10 February 2026; Vol. 780, c. 752.]

[P003162]

Observations from the Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): In July 2025, the Government published our 10-year health plan for England, which set out as one of its three strategic shifts the moving of delivery of care from the hospital into the community. The Government are taking broad action to enable this, and a new neighbourhood health model will expand urgent care at home and in the community, reducing unnecessary hospital visits and improving patient experience.

The Government expect neighbourhood teams and services to be designed in a way that reflects the specific needs of local populations. While the focus on personalised, co-ordinated care will be consistent, that will mean the service will look different in different places across the country. Guidance to provide greater clarity and consistency for systems in developing and scaling neighbourhood health is being developed and is expected to be available soon.

For urgent care, this means: encouraging the use of alternative community services before attending A&E; expanding urgent care access in primary, community and mental health settings, including more support from urgent community response teams; and expanding the use of virtual wards.

Regarding urgent care provision at the Hospital of St Cross in Rugby, the Government are informed that Coventry & Warwickshire integrated care board (ICB) are progressing a phased approach to commissioning an integrated urgent and emergency care (IUEC) model to support both immediate service improvements and long-term system transformation. This is aligned with the Government's wider aims of a greater proportion of care being delivered away from hospital.

The ICB has been working to support this in the shorter term by taking action to improve access, reduce unnecessary travel and better align services to the needs of the Rugby population, particularly around walk-in demand, GP access out of hours and use of the Rugby urgent treatment centre (UTC).

The UTC at the Hospital of St Cross remains available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and patients over the age of five with minor injuries and illnesses can attend the UTC, where trained nursing staff with advanced assessment and treatment skills can undertake an assessment and give advice and treatment. Nursing staff have a direct link to emergency medicine consultants at University Hospital Coventry emergency department 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The Government understand that Coventry and Warwickshire ICB have shared an update on work in this area with John Slinger MP and have offered opportunities for further engagement should this be required.

Written Corrections

Monday 16 March 2026

Ministerial Corrections

EDUCATION

SEND Provision: Kent

The following extract is from Education Questions on 2 March 2026.

Rosie Duffield:... Unfortunately, the Government's funding announcement in their White Paper is just a drop in the ocean compared with what is needed to radically improve SEND services in east Kent. Can the Minister tell me what other steps she will take to deliver urgently needed improvements in SEND provision in my constituency, as the funding looks likely to equate to only a few thousand pounds extra per school?

Georgia Gould: My hon. Friend will know that we have recently announced support to local authorities like Kent in order to address 90% of their deficits. We are building three new special schools in Kent and putting in place £3.7 billion in capital investment, and the allocation for Kent will be coming onboard shortly. [Official Report, 2 March 2026; Vol. 781, c. 567.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for School Standards, the hon. Member for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould):

Georgia Gould:... We are building **two** new special schools **and a new alternative provision** in Kent and putting in place £3.7 billion in capital investment, and the allocation for Kent will be coming onboard shortly.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Eating Disorders Week

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Eating Disorders Week on 26 February 2026.

Helen Morgan: The Minister is probably about to draw his remarks to a close, but can I press him again on the mental health investment standard, which should ensure that the proportion of NHS spending on mental

health goes up every year? In the last year for which we have numbers, it had gone up as a proportion of ICB spend, but had fallen as a proportion of overall NHS spend. Can the Minister commit that the Department will not be abandoning that standard, and that we will see mental health spending go up each year?

Dr Ahmed: I can certainly commit to the hon. Lady that mental health spending **in real terms** will go up every single year. It went up by £688 million in **real** terms this year.

[Official Report, 26 February 2026; Vol. 781, c. 239WH.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed):

Dr Ahmed: I can certainly commit to the hon. Lady that mental health spending will go up every single year. It went up by £688 million in **cash** terms this year.

NHS Capital Spending

The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on NHS Capital Spending on 4 March 2026.

Helen Maguire: The Minister is making an important point about the vital need for capital funding in the NHS. I and a number of colleagues are here in the Chamber because St Helier hospital is falling apart, and unfortunately patients are being affected, but the hospital build programme has been delayed another three years. There has been lots of goodwill in the debate, but we are looking for additional investment in the A&E. I hope the Minister will take that away, and that there might be something about it in a statement soon.

Karin Smyth: The Chancellor has made her key decision to put us back on track, announcing in the Budget that capital health spending would increase by £15.2 billion by the end of the spending review period in 2029-30.

[Official Report, 4 March 2026; Vol. 781, c. 387WH.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for Secondary Care, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth):

Karin Smyth: The Chancellor has made her key decision to put us back on track, announcing in the Budget that capital health spending would increase **to** £15.2 billion by the end of the spending review period in 2029-30.

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