

Monday
23 March 2026

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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 23 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.

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. SIR KEIR STARMER KCB, KC, MP, JULY 2024)

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The Rt Hon. Sir Keir Starmer KCB, KC, MP

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE—The Rt Hon. David Lammy, MP
CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Rachel Reeves, MP

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SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT—The Rt Hon. Shabana Mahmood, MP

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SECRETARY OF STATE FOR DEFENCE—The Rt Hon. John Healey, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—The Rt Hon. Wes Streeting, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION, AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Bridget Phillipson, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO—The Rt Hon. Ed Miliband, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—The Rt Hon. Steve Reed OBE, MP

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SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Douglas Alexander, MP

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MINISTER OF STATE, FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Baroness Chapman of Darlington

PAYMASTER GENERAL AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Nick Thomas-Symonds, MP

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Lord Stockwood (Minister for Investment) §

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Baroness Lloyd of Effra CBE §

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The Rt Hon. Sir Keir Starmer KCB, KC, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE PRIME MINISTER, CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS—The Rt Hon. Darren Jones, MP

PAYMASTER GENERAL AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Nick Thomas-Symonds, MP

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Dan Jarvis MBE, MP §

The Rt Hon. Anna Turley, MP (Minister without Portfolio)

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James Frith, MP §

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Lord Coaker

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Louise Sandher-Jones, MP (Minister for Veterans and People)

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Josh MacAlister OBE, MP

Seema Malhotra, MP §

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Michael Shanks, MP (Minister for Energy)

Lord Whitehead CBE (Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero)

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Martin McCluskey, MP

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 The Rt Hon. Ian Murray, MP (Minister for Digital Government and Data) §
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 Baroness Lloyd of Effra CBE §
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CAPTAIN OF THE KING'S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Baroness Wheeler MBE
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Lord Katz MBE
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§ *Members of the Government listed under more than one Department*

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SECRETARY—Lynn Gardner

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE FIRST SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 9 JULY 2024]

FOURTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 783

THIRTY SECOND VOLUME OF SESSION 2024-2026

House of Commons

Monday 23 March 2026

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Asylum Seekers: Recorded Crime

1. **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the number of asylum seekers on levels of recorded crime.

[908431]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): As the right hon. Gentleman may know, data on immigration status and crime was not recorded under the last Government. We have a new programme that will improve data collection, and we have strong local relationships with police and local authorities to ensure that the full force of the law will apply to anyone breaking our laws.

Sir Edward Leigh: The Home Secretary knows perfectly well how much it worries and infuriates people that people can enter this country illegally and commit crimes, and that there is no proper vetting procedure before

they are unloosed on society. To reassure our own citizens, will she ensure that everybody who enters this country illegally is detained and fully vetted, and, as most of their asylum claims are bogus anyway, perhaps deal with their asylum claims while they are in detention and then deport them to protect our own people?

Shabana Mahmood: I recognise the public concern around criminality. That is why this Government are working closely with all our partners to improve data collection and have a risk-based approach so that we can manage those individuals who pose the highest risk on our immigration estate. I gently say that the right hon. Gentleman's suggestions for how we deal with those who seek to come to our country illegally, primarily through channel crossings, would have had more force if his Government had succeeded in stopping those boats, as they often claimed that they would but utterly failed to do so. This Government are using a number of approaches to try to get to grips with illegal migration and will be bringing forward further changes to the House in due course.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): The way to deal with any asylum seeker—or, indeed, any migrant—who commits a crime, is to remove them from the country. That is why it is good to see that removals of foreign national offenders have gone up 40% from what was left under the previous Government. The way we deal with crime in communities is by reinvigorating neighbourhood policing and supporting our police. Does the Home Secretary agree that those are two areas where this Home Office is clearing up the mess left behind by the previous Government?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. Friend is right. It is one of many areas where we are cleaning up the multiple messes left by the previous Conservative Government. He is right to note that the removal of foreign national offenders has increased hugely under this Government and will continue to do so. Removals from this country are at nearly 60,000 since we have been in office. They will continue to rise.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I recently met Siobhan Whyte, the mother of Rhiannon. Rhiannon was brutally murdered by Sudanese illegal immigrant Deng Majek, who stabbed Rhiannon 23 times. Majek arrived by small boat in late July 2024. As the Home Secretary will know, small boat crossings since the election have gone up by 45%. Majek would have been among the first eligible for removal to Rwanda, so Siobhan wants me to ask the Home Secretary this: why did the Government cancel the Rwanda scheme just before it was due to start? If Majek had been removed to Rwanda, Rhiannon would still be alive today.

Shabana Mahmood: Let me say, first and foremost, that the murder of Rhiannon Whyte was an abhorrent, horrifying crime and our thoughts, and I know those of the whole House, are with her loved ones. The vile criminal responsible for her murder is behind bars where he belongs, and he has rightly received the strictest punishment of a life sentence. I do not wish to play politics with personal tragedy and Government policy, but the right hon. Gentleman will know that, as we have discussed across the Dispatch Box on a number of occasions, the Rwanda policy was a gimmick. Hundreds of millions of pounds were spent, with only four removals made from this country. His Government knew that they were already running into problems with that scheme. This Government have focused on measures that we believe will deal with the problems we are facing. It is taking some time, but they are the right measures and they will get to grips with the problem that he left behind.

Child Exploitation

2. **Michelle Welsh** (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle child exploitation. [908432]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): The Government have an ambitious programme to reform and improve how child exploitation is tackled. We are introducing a new offence of child criminal exploitation, establishing the independent inquiry into grooming gangs and the national policing operation, and expanding programmes to improve support to child victims of exploitation and trafficking.

Michelle Welsh: In the UK, a child is reported missing every three minutes. These children are often the most vulnerable in society, as going missing can be a key warning sign of exploitation. Despite the clear connection, the term “child criminal exploitation” is not included in the Department for Education’s 2014 statutory guidance on missing children. Given the Home Office also holds responsibility for protecting missing children, does the Minister agree that Departments must work together to urgently update the guidance, so that relevant safeguarding partners can understand the risks, spot the signs and work together effectively to keep children safe?

Jess Phillips: I absolutely agree. The Home Office is working closely with other Departments to ensure that, where someone goes missing, there is a joined-up response, through child protection reforms, updating key multi-agency

safeguarding guidance and the better use of technology—for instance our investment in the tackling organised exploitation programme.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): With the Government’s plans to regionalise police forces and the potential scrapping of Staffordshire constabulary, many involved in the care of vulnerable young people fear that there will be less focus on protecting children as fewer senior police officers will be working with local authorities to ensure that they are cared for. What actions will the Minister take to ensure that that does not happen?

Jess Phillips: The right hon. Gentleman raises a key point about how safeguarding will be rooted at the heart of the reforms that will be brought forward. I work frequently with the Minister for Children and others to ensure that whatever local multi-agency hubs are set up are fit for now and for the future. I assure the right hon. Gentleman that I will take what he has said in good faith and ensure that that is the case.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Online cowards such as Andrew Tate make money by radicalising boys into viewing women as prey, which has been laid bare once again by Louis Theroux’s documentary “Manosphere”. Meanwhile, we have religious preachers encouraging men to beat and rape their wives if they refuse to give them sex at their request. Will the Home Secretary therefore issue statutory guidance requiring police forces to use existing incitement legislation to prosecute those who incite sexual violence against women and girls, and will she share what a difference that could make? The reality is that we have the laws, but they are not being used in creative ways to crack down on those who use their voices in this way.

Jess Phillips: I feel equally disgusted by the examples that the hon. Lady has laid out. The violence against women and girls strategy makes it very clear that in tackling online misogyny, the Government will look across regulation, legislation and education to do everything necessary to protect both the girls and the boys in our country.

Public Order Legislation: Religious Expression

3. **Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): What guidance her Department has provided to police forces on the application of public order legislation in relation to the expression of religious beliefs. [908433]

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): This Government are committed to building a strong and integrated society where people can express their religious identity without fear of harassment. Guidance is set out by the College of Policing in its professional practice guidance. The Home Secretary has also commissioned Lord Ken Macdonald to undertake an independent review of public order and hate crime legislation, which will consider whether police powers strike the right balance between protecting the public and upholding the right to lawful protest. We look forward to his recommendations soon.

Robin Swann: May I start by condemning the attack on the ambulances of the Hatzola community ambulance service over the weekend?

A core tenet of our system and beliefs is that of civil and religious liberty for all. Does the Minister agree that we all have a role to play in upholding that core British tenet?

Sarah Jones: I join the hon. Gentleman in condemning the attack.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that our British values of diversity, tolerance and freedom of religious belief are one of our country's greatest strengths, and we all have a role to play in ensuring that we uphold them everywhere we can.

Independent Review of Public Order and Hate Crime Legislation

4. Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): What her timetable is for publishing the independent review of public order and hate crime legislation. [908434]

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): My hon. Friend asks for the timetable on the independent review of public order and hate crime legislation. He will know that this has been ongoing for some time—since the Heaton Park attack, which happened in October 2025—and we are hoping to receive the final report by the end of May.

Will Stone: I thank the Minister for her response. This review is incredibly important in protecting people's rights to protest and ensuring that our communities are kept safe. Will she give me her word that she will do everything within her power to ensure that the review comes out by the end of May?

Sarah Jones: I can tell my hon. Friend that although Lord Macdonald is working independently he has assured us that the review will come before the end of May, and we will respond before the summer recess. It is very important.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I led a deputation to Kurdistan about five weeks ago, and was impressed by what the Government were doing there in relation to public order and hate crime legislation. There are many things in Kurdistan that we in the United Kingdom could take on board and have as our core values. It may be outside the remit of the Minister, but if they do something good somewhere else, I think we should look at it here, so will she do that for me?

Sarah Jones: We are always very happy to look at countries where good things are happening and learn those lessons, so I am very happy to do that.

Worker Visas: Rural Businesses

5. Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on the potential impact of changes to worker visas on businesses in rural economies. [908435]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp): We value the contribution that rural businesses make, and our immigration system takes account of their needs. Immigration is not a sustainable solution to the challenges facing our rural economies, and we are committed to controlling migration across the whole UK.

Seamus Logan: Sheep shearing may not be on the Home Secretary's bucket list, but in another U-turn, following pressure from NFU Scotland, the Government have apparently listened to the farming industry and agreed to a sheep shearing visa extension for one year. The Home Secretary is looking a little sheepish in her place, so in order to avoid being accused of woolly thinking, if she cannot commit to a longer-term extension for the farming sector, will she transfer powers to the Scottish Parliament so that farmers, fishers, and the hospitality and care sectors can deal with their labour shortages?

Mike Tapp: I think that was a close shave for really poor humour. The sector has been supported for 14 years to enable it to train up UK workers, reduce reliance on migrant labour and provide a sustained workforce within the United Kingdom. We have extended the immigration concession for sheep shearers to cover this shearing season, but after this final extension, we expect the sector to complete its transition to using domestic labour.

Police Efficiency: Technology

6. Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to use technology to increase police efficiency. [908437]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): Before I give my answer, I want to pay my respects to PC Bradley Corke, who sadly lost his life yesterday in the line of duty. My thoughts and those of the whole House, I am sure, are with his family and friends.

On the matter of police efficiency, we must seize the opportunity to transform policing through technology. Through the creation of a national police service, we will invest £115 million in artificial intelligence and automation, saving 6 million policing hours every year.

Dr Gardner: Live facial recognition technology is being deployed across the country to support the police to prevent and detect crime. While I recognise the importance of improving police efficiency, we have also seen a number of wrongful arrests linked to the use of live facial recognition systems, and only last week one police force paused the use of facial recognition due to racial bias. In the light of that, will the Secretary of State reassure the House that deployment, oversight and auditing of facial recognition technologies are subject to robust and transparent safeguards, and will she state when the facial recognition framework will be published?

Shabana Mahmood: I can give my hon. Friend that reassurance. We are absolutely clear that police forces must comply with data protection, human rights, equality and other relevant laws. This means that the police can use live facial recognition only for targeted, intelligence-led and time-bound deployments to locate specific individuals

on a watchlist, such as wanted offenders or people who may pose a risk of serious harm. My hon. Friend knows that we have consulted on a legal framework on how and when law enforcement should use biometrics and facial recognition. The consultation is closed, and we are going through the responses now. We will bring forward proposals to the House in due course.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Police efficiency is the argument being used to propose the merger of Lancashire and Cumbria police forces, something which I strongly oppose. Lancashire is a wonderful county, but it is a county that has many urban centres with larger populations. Does the Home Secretary agree that there is a real risk that the people of Cumbria will see our police officers being drawn down to those larger, more populous places in Lancashire and that it would be wise to call off the merger?

Shabana Mahmood: There are no planned mergers. An independent review is being carried out by Lord Hogan-Howe. That review will advise the Government on the right number of regional forces to have. This is part of our plan to change policing so that we have a national police service, regional forces and local police areas that are able to police their local communities. Those are the proposals that have been announced. When Lord Hogan-Howe's review reports, I am sure we will be able to debate what he proposes for regional forces, but I can reassure the hon. Member that local police areas will be a key part of the reforms as they are rolled out and will deal with exactly the problems that he has raised.

Shop Theft

7. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): What steps she is taking to help tackle shop theft. [908438]

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): We are giving the police the powers they need to bear down on shop theft, including making it a specific offence to assault retail workers and ending the effective immunity for shop thefts under £200. We are also fighting the organised gangs who often drive these crimes. Our £5 million investment in a specialist intelligence-led policing cell is bringing more criminals to justice.

Robbie Moore: Colin Appleyard Motorcycles in Keighley was recently the victim of a ram raid, which involved a vehicle being used to smash the entrance before a gang of seven individuals entered the business and stole nine off-road bikes worth approximately £80,000. Will the Minister tell me what the Government are doing to work with local police forces such as West Yorkshire police to identify and shut down these Mafia-style criminal gangs that are causing significant harm, distress and suffering for local businesses across Keighley and our wider area?

Sarah Jones: I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are completely focused on fighting crime. In West Yorkshire—his area—100 additional officers will be in place by the end of March, which will help us with our drive to tackle crime. As I said, our £5 million investment in the specialist intelligence-led policing unit will help us join the dots and bear down on the serious organised criminals who often drive much of this crime.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Last week, I met the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, which informed me of increased levels of violence, abuse and intimidation in shops and the retail industry. That includes violence and spitting in people's faces—horrible crimes. Will my hon. Friend say what measures the Government are taking to protect those mainly lower-paid workers in the workplace?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is completely right. That is why we are introducing a specific offence of assault on retail workers, which the previous Government were asked to do repeatedly but failed. That will send a message to anybody who may consider such crimes that they are not acceptable and that action will be taken.

We are also working closely with all the big organisations and retailers in the retail community to target action on those prolific, repeat offenders—we, in our communities, sometimes know who those people are. Through the summer of action last year, we saw real results in bearing down on them. My hon. Friend will be pleased to know that charges for shop thefts, which often come with assaults alongside them, rose by 21% last year.

Antisocial Behaviour

8. **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): What recent progress her Department has made on tackling antisocial behaviour. [908440]

20. **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): What plans her Department has to help tackle antisocial behaviour. [908453]

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): We are ensuring that neighbourhood officers are focused on tackling issues like antisocial behaviour, which can blight our communities. Through our neighbourhood policing guarantee, every neighbourhood now has a named contactable officer dedicated to tackling crime and ASB in their local area. They will respond to neighbourhood queries within 72 hours. Every force in England and Wales also has a dedicated antisocial behaviour lead and will be publishing local antisocial behaviour action plans in April.

Jim Dickson: I am grateful to the Minister for her reply and for meeting me and others at the end of last year to discuss the troubling and growing trend of the use of catapults to target wildlife and people in Dartford and across Kent? I really appreciate the work she is doing to organise a roundtable soon, where wildlife groups, farming representatives, the police and others will meet to discuss how we can take action to reverse the dangerous and illegal use of catapults. If, after that roundtable, the evidence supports doing so, will she consider adding catapults to the list of offensive weapons, which would enable the police to act promptly and effectively to disarm those using catapults to harm people and wildlife, while protecting legitimate uses?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his campaigning and drawing attention to a significant issue in parts of the country, where its impact on wildlife and people seems to be on the rise. I am pleased to have the roundtable and am grateful to him for the advice he has given as we have put that together. Of course, when evidence is there, we will look to see what we can do, whether through

legislative change, more policing resources or other measures, because this crime is unacceptable. We are keen to work with him on finding solutions.

Mary Kelly Foy: Residents in Langley Moor, Belmont, Esh Winning, North Road, Pity Me and the Sunderland Road estate are seeing growing levels of antisocial behaviour. From yobs on e-bikes to intimidation of shop workers, public disorder and arson in parks and woodlands, antisocial behaviour is getting out of hand. My constituents do not feel safe and, despite the efforts of our police and crime commissioner, Durham constabulary officer levels remain lower than 2010 due to the outdated funding formula used by previous Governments. Will the Minister reassure my constituents that this Government are investing in policing, with a plan to tackle antisocial behaviour? At present, they are not seeing it.

Sarah Jones: As someone who used to live in Pity Me, I know what a wonderful area it is. I say “live”, but I was at university when I lived there, as did Mo Mowlam when she was at university. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the fact that low-level antisocial behaviour, as it is called, is actually deeply damaging to our communities, and this Government are taking it very seriously. Of course, her area will see, I think, 26 additional officers by the end of this month, and we are bringing forward legislation on respect orders and more powers to tackle theft, public disorder, shop theft and all these things, but I will work with her to make sure we get the results that she and her community deserve.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Antisocial behaviour in social housing in my community is creating a living nightmare for some council and social housing tenants. Does the Minister agree that if we have prolific offenders responsible for antisocial behaviour from these council houses, the tenants should be asked to leave? They should be kicked out and never given social housing again.

Sarah Jones: I think probably every Member has had cases where antisocial behaviour is ruining lives and it feels like the right action is not taken. In many cases, and certainly in mine, the local authority's resources have been hollowed out, and enforcement and antisocial behaviour teams are often one of the first to go. The hon. Member is absolutely right: people have to adhere by the agreement they sign when they get a tenancy.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): May I join Members in condemning the attacks last night on the four ambulances? In my constituency of Birmingham Perry Barr, antisocial crime is on the rise, yet since 2010, West Midlands police has had 520 fewer officers to tackle it. Now, thanks to this Government leaving a funding shortfall of £41 million, residents must either pay more council tax to fill the gap or lose another 80 police officers. Labour promised more police officers on our streets, and now they are pedalling backwards on their word. Why should the people of Birmingham, who have seen their council tax rise by 24% over three years, be squeezed even more to keep what little police presence they have?

Sarah Jones: By the end of this month, there will be 3,000 extra officers across our communities in our neighbourhoods and 13,000 by the end of Parliament.

An extra £2 billion has gone into policing in the last two Budgets, including over £700 million extra this year that our police forces can use. That is a 4.5% cash increase and a 2.3% real-terms increase. We will invest, but we will also reform, because the problem with policing is that it has been unproductive. We need to make sure our officers are not behind desks, like they were under the last Government, but in our neighbourhoods fighting crime.

Non-consensual Filming: Legal Frameworks

9. Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of existing legal frameworks in relation to the non-consensual filming of women in public. [908441]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): Sadly, as technology becomes entwined in our day-to-day lives, we recognise the threat that tech-enabled harm poses, which is why the violence against women and girls strategy sets out how we are seeking to tackle it. I am pleased to say that, from 1 April, measures under the Protection from Sex-based Harassment in Public Act 2023 will come into force, making it an offence to film where the intent is to cause harassment, alarm or distress because of the victim's sex.

Wera Hobhouse: Secretly filmed videos of women on nights out have been viewed more than 3 billion times over the last three years, and the videos are often accompanied by vile, degrading comments. These videos have real victims, but they sit in a legal grey area between voyeurism and harassment, so there is very little that the police can currently do. Will the Minister discuss this legal grey area with me, and possibly look at strengthening the law?

Jess Phillips: I am more than happy to discuss the issue with the hon. Lady. I spent this morning in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology with the violence against women and girls sector and Ofcom to look at some of those gaps that she has identified. We will do whatever we can, but absolutely, where it is harassment and is in the public realm, it should be covered by the public sex-based harassment law, but I am more than happy to meet her.

Financial Abuse

10. Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help tackle financial abuse. [908442]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): Economic abuse can have devastating impacts on victims, even after the relationship ends. The VAWG strategy included ambitious commitments to tackle economic abuse, and it was considered as a cross-cutting theme in HM Treasury's financial inclusion strategy. Since 2022, we have funded Surviving Economic Abuse to the tune of £767,000 to strengthen financial systems, raise awareness and support victims.

Fred Thomas: Abusive ex-partners often continue their abuse by withholding funds from children and former partners, deliberately causing financial hardship.

That has a huge impact on survivors, forcing them into contact with the perpetrator and enabling their abuser to continue to influence their lives. In Plymouth, I have a constituent who left an abusive relationship, but is now owed £48,000 in child maintenance payments. Despite court orders and liability orders being in place, the money continues not to be paid. Sadly, this is not a rare case limited to Plymouth; I know from speaking to my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) earlier that this is a national problem. How is the Home Office working with the DWP and other agencies to close enforcement gaps and tackle financial abuse effectively?

Jess Phillips: It is not unusual to hear of such cases, and that is why the Department for Work and Pensions sits on the interministerial group on violence against women and girls. The VAWG strategy commits to removing direct pay, which will enable the Child Maintenance Service to manage and transfer payments, preventing the system from being used as a tool of abuse, which has in the past had fatal consequences.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): Following on from the previous question, financial abuse between couples sadly does not always end in separation, and many women struggle to access child maintenance safely. Is the Home Office working with DWP colleagues to strengthen income assessments, such as by using His Majesty's Revenue and Customs data, and to remove the 2% collect and pay surcharge so survivors can secure child support without direct contact with their abuser?

Jess Phillips: As I said in answer to the previous question, the Department for Work and Pensions is absolutely fundamental and a core part of the interministerial group that works on the violence against women and girls strategy because of the financial tools—not just through mortgages and other assets—that people have and use in cases of domestic abuse and coercive control. It is absolutely vital that we ensure that our benefit system and the state systems that relate to children are not used as a tool for abusers.

Knife Crime

11. Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): What recent steps her Department has taken to help tackle knife crime. [908443]

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): We have set an ambitious but essential target to halve knife crime in a decade, and we are already seeing results. Since the start of this Parliament, knife crime has fallen by 8% and knife homicides are down 27% to their lowest level in a decade, but we must and will go further. We are working on the final plans for our cross-Government plan to halve knife crime, which we will publish soon.

Harpreet Uppal: Child criminal exploitation is a significant driver of knife crime in the UK. Around 15,500 children were identified as at risk or involved in exploitation in the year ending March 2025. Children are often coerced by gangs into carrying weapons for protection, storing drugs and trafficking illegal goods, often being criminalised themselves rather than treated as victims. What work is the Home Office doing to

target the organised criminality behind CCE, and what structures are in place to support children and families in vulnerable situations?

Sarah Jones: We are introducing legislation to bring in a new offence of child criminal exploitation. Our county lines programme works extensively not just to tackle the criminals and to shut down the lines, but to safeguard young people. More than 4,000 safeguarding referrals have been made since July 2024, so while we are catching the criminals, we are also protecting the children.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): Knife crime and drugs are destroying too many lives in our country, and stop and search is the best tool we have to take them off our streets. Does the Minister agree that the only people who should have anything to fear from stop and search are criminals? If so, why will she not adopt our proposal to allow the police to act on a single suspicion indicator, so that we can treble stop and search, and take weapons and drugs off our streets?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Gentleman thought that the way to tackle crime was to recruit more officers and put them behind desks, so I will not take any lessons from him. Stop and search is a powerful and important tool in tackling crime—nobody would disagree with that—and it is part of a range of interventions with which we can tackle knife crime. Knife-enabled robbery, for example, has plummeted in areas in which we have focused our resources since the election. We must use all the tools in our armoury, and stop and search is one of them.

Ukrainian Refugees: Permanent Settlement

12. Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): If she will take steps to provide Ukrainian refugees with a route to permanent settlement. [908445]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp): The Government remain grateful for the generosity shown towards the Ukrainians who sought sanctuary here. The recent 24-month extension of the Ukraine permission extension scheme demonstrates our intention to ensure that people have stability through the Ukraine schemes. The Government have always been clear that that bespoke offer of sanctuary is temporary and in line with the wishes of the Ukrainian Government—that position has not changed. We are, however, monitoring developments in Ukraine and intend to update the House on long-term plans later this year.

Mike Martin: I know that the Minister will listen carefully to this question because he used to live in Tunbridge Wells. Elena is a Ukrainian woman who works in our local hospital. She has not been able to advance her career because her visa restrictions mean that she cannot study. I know that the Government do not want to give the Ukrainians permanent settlement—they have made that very clear—but will the Minister at least devise a pathway by which to give visa security to Ukrainians so that they can study and get mortgages and jobs? They are restricted in their ability to do those things.

Mike Tapp: I assure the hon. Gentleman that I am listening and take these concerns seriously. I assure the House that the UPE scheme provides continuing access to work, benefits and services for those who provide proof of immigration status using a share code. We have been clear that this bespoke cohort is temporary, and we will lay out long-term plans for them later this year.

Asylum Seekers: Accommodation

13. **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): How many asylum seekers were in asylum accommodation on (a) 30 September 2025 and (b) 30 June 2024. [908446]

16. **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): How many asylum seekers were accommodated in asylum accommodation on (a) 30 December 2025 and (b) 30 June 2024. [908449]

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Alex Norris): Home Office quarterly statistics show that there were 103,426 individuals in asylum accommodation on 30 December 2025, compared with 108,085 on 30 September 2025 and 96,642 on 30 June 2024. Of course, these time periods are not like-for-like comparisons, but for reference colleagues will be interested to note that in the final September under the previous Government there were more than 119,000 asylum seekers in accommodation, so the comparable figure from September 2025 is well down on that level.

David Simmonds: The figures published by the Home Office show around a 7% rise in the asylum and dispersal accommodation numbers. My Hillingdon constituents would know, because we have the highest number of asylum seekers per capita of any local authority area in the country, and it is putting huge pressure on the supply of temporary accommodation. My local Conservative council argues that it should put the housing needs of long-standing local residents ahead of the needs of those who have newly arrived as asylum seekers. Does the Minister agree?

Alex Norris: I wish that the previous Government—I suspect that the hon. Gentleman would say the same—had used their time to build some houses, because that is the root of our housing crisis. However, it is undoubtedly true that the estate is running hot, which is why he will be pleased to hear of the figures falling from September to September. Without running ahead of its publication, future data is likely to show that trend—one we all support—continuing.

Sarah Bool: Since Labour came to power, the number of people in asylum accommodation—be it in hotels or dispersal accommodation—is up by more than 6,000. With figures like that, no South Northamptonshire resident believes that the Government are tackling this issue, especially given the continued operation of the migrant hotel in my constituency. With better weather coming, boat crossings will increase, so what will the Government do differently to stop the boats, as they promised they would?

Alex Norris: The hon. Lady will know that the statement on asylum policy set out the most significant reforms to the asylum system, certainly in my lifetime. We have already introduced the reduced protection period, we

are making quicker and better decisions than ever before, and removals have increased by 30% on our predecessors. Together, such measures are decreasing those numbers—that is from September to September—with perhaps future good news to come.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): May I thank the Minister for the work he is doing to close asylum hotels, including the Crewe Arms hotel, and encourage him to go further still and close the Royal hotel in my constituency? Will he join me in reminding Conservative Members that it was under the Tory Government—prominent members of which now sit on the Benches with the turquoise Tories—that the concept of asylum hotels was invented? Indeed, they presided over the opening up of the business model for small boat crossings in the first place.

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend is right. Reform Members say they are a new voice in politics, but they look very similar to the old voice if you ask me. The important thing, which his constituents will know, is that the Tories opened those hotels when in government, and it will be Labour that closes them.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): On 30 June 2024, 96,642 people were in asylum accommodation. Latest figures show that there are now more than 103,000, so despite the creative interpretation, that number has gone up, not down. There is a distinct lack of gang-smashing, crossings are up by 45%, and the Government's new border security commander has already given up and quit. When will the Government accept that their approach is making things significantly worse?

Alex Norris: I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that creativity is pointing at different dates in the calendar for a profile that he knows has seasonal elements to it, and trying to compare them as like for like—he knows that that does not work. He was, however, kind to give me the opportunity to say that work on tackling organised immigration crime is at its record level, with a 37% increase under this Government and 5,000 disruptions. That is serious work. Conservative Members will throw rocks from the sideline, but that is what they do, isn't it?

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The Home Secretary's authoritarian tendencies often please the Reform party and the Tories, but some Labour Members are apparently less happy with that approach to immigration and asylum. In particular, changes to indefinite leave to remain risk busting efforts at social cohesion while harming public services and the economy, and creating unworkable bureaucracy in the Home Office. Liberal Democrats have expressed concerns about those proposals, and many Labour Back Benchers are reportedly very unhappy. Does the Home Secretary feel comfortable that she might be reliant on support from the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) and the Tories to force through her flagship project?

Alex Norris: I am slightly concerned if the hon. Gentleman thinks that people who come as part of economic migration schemes are in some way in the asylum population, as those two things are significantly

different. Nevertheless, we have made significant proposals in that space, including increasing the main basis time to settlement to 10 years, with the ability to earn based on working, not committing crimes, and learning the English language—all sensible changes. Our consultation, which closed last month, had more than 200,000 responses, and we are looking at them closely.

Visa Brake: Chevening Scholars

14. **Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the potential impact of the introduction of the visa brake on Chevening scholars. [908447]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mike Tapp): We have discussed the introduction of visa brakes across Government, including the impact on Chevening scholars. Chevening scholarships continue to attract and support exceptional future leaders across the globe, and will continue to do so. Restoring order and control to our system is a top priority. Through the visa brake we are acting quickly and decisively to address high numbers and proportions of visa-linked asylum claims. By the year ending September 2025, asylum applications from students from Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar and Sudan had risen to over 470% of their 2021 level.

Siân Berry: Including prestigious Chevening scholarships in the Government's clampdown on certain study visas is devastating for those who have been shortlisted, including students who are set to join our world-leading programmes at Sussex University. It raises questions about the value that the Government put on nurturing talent, particularly for women from Afghanistan, from whom I have seen heartbreaking accounts of terminated applications. Will the Minister and the Home Secretary urgently revisit that decision?

Mike Tapp: I have laid out the concerns, and the reasons for this brake. For example, 93% of those coming over from Afghanistan as students are claiming asylum. The Green party may well want open borders; that is not what we stand for. We stand for control and order, but, at the same time, compassion. That is exactly why we are looking at safe and legal routes, while working to control the borders.

Violence against Women and Girls

15. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help tackle violence against women and girls. [908448]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): We are delivering the cross-Government freedom from violence and abuse strategy, published in December, which sets out concrete actions for halving VAWG in a decade by preventing violence and abuse, pursuing perpetrators, and supporting victims. As part of that, we have already launched our behaviour change campaign, rolled out domestic abuse protection orders, and embedded domestic abuse specialists in police control rooms under Raneem's law.

Catherine Fookes: Survivors in Monmouthshire tell me that economic abuse not only featured in their relationships, but stopped them rebuilding their lives long after they left. For some, the separation compromised their business. Others face continued control through child maintenance disputes. In what measurable ways will the VAWG strategy tackle economic abuse, and how will progress on that be reported to the House and elsewhere?

Jess Phillips: In the launch of the violence against women and girls strategy, I committed to annually updating the House on progress across a number of metrics—both the overarching metrics, and those that sit in different Government Departments, some of which are having to take responsibility for this issue for the first time. On working with the financial sector and regulators, the strategy talks about exploring how financial products, including joint mortgages, can be used as a tool of abuse. We will work with Departments, such as the Treasury, on exactly how we can monitor progress against all our aims, and I will report on that annually.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): One of my constituents suffered such coercive violence that her partner forced her to allow him back into the home. She could not tell anyone, and he continued to assault her daily. She reported the behaviour to the police, but they did very little. He is in prison for less than five years, and authorities are concerned that he will target her again when he is released. What is the Minister doing to ensure that women are properly protected against coercive violence, and that ex-partners face justice, so that we end this awful cycle of violence?

Jess Phillips: I send all my sympathy to the hon. Gentleman's constituent, who sounds like she has had a terrible ordeal. Off the top of my head, one measure that the Government have rolled out is the domestic abuse protection order, which gives police the power of arrest, if it is breached. It is the first domestic abuse order that can be taken out for coercive and controlling behaviour. The evidence so far on the police response to those orders, compared with other orders, has been really heartening. We will roll them out across the country.

Topical Questions

T1. [908456] **Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): I want to address the terrible scenes in Golders Green last night, where four Jewish community ambulances were set on fire. Mercifully, no one was hurt. For that, we owe our thanks to the police and fire services, which responded with speed and professionalism. An investigation is under way. The Metropolitan police are treating this as an antisemitic hate crime, and have stepped up their support to Jewish communities across London. The fact that the attack was directed at Hatzola, a community ambulance service and an institution devoted to saving lives, illustrates how warped those behind the attack are.

I am pleased that the Health Secretary is providing replacement ambulances, but clearly justice is required. There have, as yet, been no arrests, but the perpetrators must be in no doubt: we will pursue them and make them face the consequences of this wicked crime. I urge anyone with information to contact the police, who have the full support of my Department. The incident comes at a time of soaring antisemitism in our country, and today my message to our Jewish community is clear: we stand with you, we will do everything in our power to protect you, and we will fight relentlessly to rid our society of antisemitism.

Mary Kelly Foy: I congratulate Maya's law campaigners, particularly Maya's great-aunts Gemma and Rachael, on their passion and tenacity in lobbying MPs to support their campaign to improve child protection laws in the UK. Does the Minister agree with me that it is unforgivable for someone who is supposed to look after a child to hurt them instead? Will the Minister ensure that the debate that my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist) has secured on Maya's law receives the full support of the Government?

Mr Speaker: Order. This is topical questions.

Shabana Mahmood: The circumstances outlined by my hon. Friend are obviously horrifying. It is abhorrent for anyone entrusted with the care of a child to cause harm to them. I assure her that the Government will absolutely engage fully and constructively with the debate that she mentions.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I have come to the House directly from Golders Green, where I have visited the scene of the appalling attack on the Hatzola ambulance service. I strongly urge the Home Secretary to visit as well. I thank the police, fire service and Hatzola volunteers for their response in the early hours of this morning. The members of the Jewish community who I spoke to this morning in Golders Green feel under attack, so what more can the Home Secretary say about the Government's plans to protect the Jewish community, including potentially by using counter-terrorism-style surveillance powers to identify and disrupt antisemitic attacks before they occur? Does the Home Secretary agree that calls on our streets at marches for jihad and intifada are calls for violence that fuel antisemitism, and does she agree that they should no longer be allowed? Finally, will she ensure that all antisemites and extremists who are not British citizens get deported?

Shabana Mahmood: I assure the shadow Home Secretary and, most importantly, the whole of the British Jewish community—not just those in Golders Green—that this Government take the rise in antisemitism that we have seen across our country very seriously. We are approaching this issue with a whole-of-Government response. My colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government are all taking forward the Government's social cohesion action plan and taking specific measures to tackle antisemitic hate crime. There must be zero tolerance of antisemitism; I know that across this House, there is

unanimity on that, from all Members. The shadow Home Secretary knows that we have an independent review on public order and hate crime legislation. We will bring forward more proposals in due course, but we will never tolerate antisemitism in our country.

Chris Philp: I will pursue these questions with the Security Minister, when he gives his statement later.

Media reports suggest that the Home Secretary is under pressure from the former Deputy Prime Minister on her indefinite leave to remain policy, so will the Home Secretary tell the House who is running the Government's immigration policy now? Is it her, or is it the former Deputy Prime Minister? Will the Home Secretary confirm to the House now—

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to Members on both Front Benches that these are topical questions, and Members from all parties are waiting to ask them. I gave the shadow Home Secretary a lot of leeway during his first question; he has already asked one, and is coming in with another. That is not acceptable to any of the Back-Bench Members who I am trying to look after. Please ask one question during topicals. There will be a statement shortly on the subject that he asked about. It is a very important issue, and I am very concerned about it, but I have to allow Back Benchers time to ask their questions. It is unfair of Members on the Front Benches to take up that time.

Shabana Mahmood: I have almost forgotten the shadow Home Secretary's question, but the assertion he just made is absolute rubbish. He knows that the Government have already said that we will consult on the changes that we wish to make, and I will bring forward those proposals in due course.

T2. [908457] **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): Last week, I visited Estonia with the Education Committee to learn about early-years education, and I heard that even nursery-aged children are taught to spot fake news. What conversations has the Minister had with colleagues across Government about taking a whole-of-society approach to misinformation and disinformation?

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): My hon. Friend is right to raise this matter, because misinformation and disinformation seek to undermine our institutions and divide our communities. The defending democracy taskforce is addressing these threats through a whole-of-society approach, and we are also working closely with partners to hold platforms accountable for harmful content under the Online Safety Act 2023.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The agreement to fund French police activities to prevent small boats from leaving the French coast is about to run out. That risks the resumption of higher numbers of small boat crossings, which place lives at risk and undermine efforts to bring control to the asylum system in this country. Many in the Home Secretary's own party are crying out for the Government to speed up reintegration with the EU, and public opinion on the failures of Brexit is now clear. Will she go to Cabinet colleagues and advise them that it would be easier to fix the asylum system if we had a much closer relationship with Europe?

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Alex Norris): The hon. Gentleman knows that we work very closely with our European counterparts, especially France, our nearest neighbour. He mentions the important work that we do together, which has prevented 40,000 crossings since we took office; we want that work to continue. We are having those conversations with France at the moment, and I do not think he would expect me to negotiate from the Dispatch Box.

T4. [908459] **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): Northumbria police have announced that they had to close the custody suite in Bedlington in my constituency. That means that anybody arrested in south-east Northumberland will have to travel to the city of Newcastle for a custody suite. That will ultimately reduce frontline policing in the already stretched community of Blyth and Ashington. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this unacceptable situation?

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): Without wanting to step in on the operational independence of my hon. Friend's local police force, I am very happy to have a meeting with him to talk about this issue. I take a keen interest in custody suites, and with arrests up by 5% under this Labour Government in the last year, we need to ensure that we are running them properly.

T3. [908458] **Peter Fortune** (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): During the recent London elections, Sadiq Khan made a manifesto pledge not to close Bromley's 24-hour police counter, so Bromley's 24-hour police counter is obviously now closed. Does the Minister think that the closure of this vital service is good for my constituents or the safety of the community?

Sarah Jones: I think Boris Johnson closed a lot more front counters than Sadiq Khan has, but that is a different issue. We are putting more funding into frontline policing. We want police on our streets and in our neighbourhoods—not behind desks, as they were under the previous Government—and that is where the public want to see them.

T5. [908460] **Michelle Welsh** (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): What urgent steps is the Minister taking to tackle antisocial behaviour in town centres such as Hucknall's? We have had persistent disorder there, including a recent racist attack on a shop owner. This is impacting on community safety and confidence, and residents expect a visible police presence.

Sarah Jones: As well as increasing the number of police officers on our streets and in our neighbourhoods, we are introducing respect orders to tackle antisocial behaviour. We are seeing shop theft charges going up in our town centres, and we are taking a targeted approach in policing, so that we really tackle our town centres. We take antisocial behaviour very seriously. We will continue to ensure that we make our streets safer—and they are becoming safer. They will be even safer when we have 13,000 additional officers on our streets.

T6. [908461] **Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Residents in Devon want visible community policing. The new towns taskforce recommended a new settlement called Marcombe in east Devon. When new towns are built, how are additional police officers allocated to the area?

Sarah Jones: We are ensuring that each police force has the additional funding that it needs, and we are rolling out our target of 13,000 additional police officers. The hon. Gentleman asks an interesting question about new towns and ensuring that we have policing in them. We are reviewing the police funding formula, which is outdated, as everyone in this place knows. Through all those things together, we will ensure that his community is supported.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary's commitment to community sponsorship of refugees who come here under proposed new safe and legal routes; we have several good examples of that in my constituency. What steps is she taking, in line with the recent asylum policy statement, to allow more communities like mine to sponsor refugees and support the Government's safe and legal routes programme?

Shabana Mahmood: My hon. and learned Friend knows that we have announced three specific types of safe and legal route for students and workers, as well as a community sponsorship scheme. The student scheme will go live later this year, with the first applicants arriving in the autumn of next year. We are designing the community sponsorship route with community organisations and international partners. I am sure that he will want to make representations on what his community wants to contribute to the new routes, but the design is under way, and the routes will be rolled out in due course.

T7. [908462] **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Given the ongoing national security concerns, including the risk of foreign interference in elections, will the Home Secretary set out what her Department is doing to ensure that individuals convicted of terrorism offences are prevented from standing for elected office in the UK?

Dan Jarvis: As the hon. Gentleman knows, these are matters that we take very seriously and are addressing through the work of the defending democracy taskforce.

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): I am currently supporting a constituent who, after leaving her abuser, was locked out of her home, left with thousands of pounds of arrears that had been run up in her name, and denied access to her own bank account. Does the Minister agree that post-separation abuse is too often overlooked and still not recognised widely enough? What steps is she taking to better protect victims?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The violence against women and girls strategy will focus on the specific issue of ensuring that services such as the police get it right about post-separation coercive and controlling behaviour.

T8. [908463] **Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Criminal gangs are targeting isolated farmland and woodland, dumping lorry loads of illegal waste, which poses serious environmental risks. The Environment Agency reports that offenders are saving thousands of pounds in disposal costs while landowners face the financial responsibility of clearing the site. Will the

Minister support the National Crime Agency in preventing and effectively prosecuting serious and organised rural waste crime?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Rural waste crime is completely unacceptable; it is often driven by larger, serious organised criminal gangs, and we are determined to bear down on it.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): The Home Secretary has been commendably robust in her response to antisemitism and attacks on Jewish institutions, particularly since the two members of the congregation at Heaton Park synagogue were killed. After that attack, the Macdonald inquiry was set up to look into hate crime and public order. I think this afternoon is the first time that we have heard that that inquiry is not going to report until May, when it was promised for February this year. Can the Home Secretary speed it up, please?

Shabana Mahmood: It is an independent review. I am in constant discussion with Lord Macdonald, who has requested a short extension in order to deal with the matters comprehensively. It is right that the independent review has the time it needs, but it will be brought forward very soon.

T9. [908464] **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It has been reported that under the SNP, Police Scotland has written off 25,000 crimes without investigation, including shoplifting, theft and vandalism. Does the Minister agree that that is a surrender to criminals which leaves people wondering why they report crimes in the first place and shows that life in Scotland is a soft touch to criminals under the SNP?

Sarah Jones: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that England and Wales policing, which I am responsible for, will get the support it needs and bear down on criminals in exactly the way it should.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I regularly meet lead stakeholders in my constituency who work passionately to keep children safe and reduce knife crime. What work are the Government doing with grassroots organisations to support them in their work to prevent knife crime?

Sarah Jones: This Government fund violence reduction units. Where we do not have them, our police and crime commissioners make sure that we are funding a raft of organisations that know what is happening on the ground, what the right interventions are, and how we can drag children out of crime and into making better choices. I see that in my constituency, and I know my hon. Friend sees it in hers. As she knows, those community leaders are the bedrock, and we must support them as much as we can.

T10. [908465] **Sarah Pochin** (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Is the Home Secretary comfortable with the reality that, as a woman, she could not stand and pray alongside the Mayor of London at last week's event in Trafalgar Square?

Shabana Mahmood: I am, and will always be, a very proud British Muslim.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): I commend Northumbria police for overseeing a huge and safe policing operation at the Newcastle-Sunderland match over the weekend, one of the many matches successfully policed every season. However, given that those officers are taken from normal day jobs in response teams, neighbourhood policing and so forth, does the Minister agree that it is time to think about the Premier League contributing more than the 20% it currently contributes to those costs, so that we can put that money back into policing?

Sarah Jones: Yes, and we are looking at that issue as we speak, making sure that we strike the right balance. At the moment, there is a huge cost to policing from football matches and other events more widely that is not covered. That support is not there, so we think it is right that we look at the issue.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Small boat returns run at around 6% of the total numbers arriving in this country, but the Home Secretary denies that this is anything to do with the European Convention on Human Rights. If not the ECHR, which part of the Government's flawed policy is responsible for that feeble rate?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman will have heard me say that under this Government, removals have now reached 60,000. That is up by 31% on our predecessors, so I cannot accept the argument that we are not removing people at pace and at scale. The routes by which people come generally depend on which country they come from and how likely they are to have their claim accepted.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent was just 13 months old when she came to this country. As a teenager, she was taken into care. She was then groomed and exploited in county lines and is now serving time in prison. Why are this Government deporting her, when she has only known this country? Will they instead look at giving her proper rehabilitation and getting her life back on track?

Alex Norris: The Secretary of State has a strict legal liability to remove anybody who gets a sentence of a year or more and, from today, anyone who gets a suspended sentence of a year or more. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend has raised an important case. If she sends the details, I will look at it closely.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Government are making top-up payments to asylum support enablement cards, but have refused to answer my written parliamentary questions regarding how many payments have been made and how much is being spent. That is even though that is information the Department must have. It is held digitally, and the accounting officer under chapter 3 of "Managing Public Money" has a duty to demonstrate that such payments constitute value for money. Can the Home Secretary say why she is covering up this information?

Alex Norris: If the right hon. Gentleman checks the record, he will see that I answer an awful lot of questions from colleagues on a daily basis. I seek to give the fullest available information, so that we can have the best and most based in fact debate on what is a very contentious issue. I will have to look more closely at the element

he raises, but he will know from his time in government that cost and person time are factors in what we can and cannot pull together to release.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): In the past few weeks, the Home Secretary has announced a whole swathe of new restrictive asylum and immigration policies which, as we know from over the weekend, are at best contentious. When will we have a vote on them?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman secured and hosted a good debate on this subject only last week. It was well subscribed, and we had a very good conversation. As he is well experienced in this place, he will know that when we need primary legislation, there will be primary legislation. When we need secondary legislation, there will be secondary legislation. If things are a matter for policy, they will be a matter for policy.

Middle East

3.37 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (John Healey):

I want to update the House on the UK military operations in the middle east, but before I do so let me express my total disgust at the antisemitic attack in north London overnight. Our thoughts are with the Jewish community today. The House will have a statement on the attack from the Security Minister after this statement.

I will start this statement by thanking every single person across defence. They are working flat out, whether they are our senior leaders, our junior ranks—military and civilians alike—our planners in Permanent Joint Headquarters, our counter-drone units protecting coalition bases, our air defence teams in Cyprus, our fast jet pilots across the region or our sailors in the eastern Mediterranean. I say to them, on behalf of the House: you are proving yet again that you are the best of Britain in action.

In the fast-moving events in the middle east, we are maintaining a clear, consistent approach. As I said in my statement to the House last week, the UK Government's decisions and actions are founded on three principles. The first principle is defensive and taking the necessary action to strengthen our collective defence. That is why I have been putting vital military assets into the region since January. The second principle is co-ordination with allies, and leading and co-ordinating our responses with NATO allies and with partners, including the US, the G7, the E5 and Gulf nations. The third principle is ensuring a legal basis for our decisions, allowing Ministers to make sound choices and allowing our military to operate with the fullest confidence. UK action remains grounded in those principles and our purpose: to protect British people, protect British bases and protect British allies.

Iran is a threat to us all. It is lashing out, and its attacks across the region are escalating. Since the start of the war it has attacked 12 countries, and has fired more than 3,500 ballistic missiles and drones. Both military and civilians are in its sights. Oil refineries have been bombed, embassies and bases have been targeted, and commercial ships have been hit. Some allies, such as France and the United States, have had service personnel killed, and the House will want to join me in offering our condolences to their families and to their comrades. In conflict it is never possible to remove risk, but I am able to say that all UK personnel so far are fully accounted for.

Iran's attacks are widespread and disruptive. I can confirm to the House that in the early hours of Friday morning two Iranian missiles were launched in the direction of Diego Garcia, our joint UK and US base. One fell short of its target, while the other was brought down short of its target. Neither got close to Diego Garcia. The UK was not required to take action, and normal operations continue. I totally condemn Iran's reckless attacks. Iran must stop; it must de-escalate. We want to see this war end now.

My priority as Defence Secretary is the protection of UK personnel, and I continue to keep the force protection across the region at the very highest levels. Those measures are reviewed daily by both the Chief of the Defence Staff and the Chief of Joint Operations to ensure that our personnel are as safe as possible. We know, however,

that Iran's aggression and intent reach beyond the middle east, so we continue to track the potential threats here at home. Over the last year we have been boosting our defence, including our cyber defences, and tightening base security. I want to thank the military police and Police Scotland for their quick work to arrest and then charge two individuals who approached the Clyde base last week and unsuccessfully attempted to enter.

Let me turn to our UK defensive operations in the region. Since January, weeks before this conflict started, we took significant steps to pre-position Typhoons, F-35s, counter-drone teams, radars and air defences in the region. Those advanced preparations made a real difference, and meant that from day one we have been defending actively and mounting those actions to protect ourselves and to protect our allies. When Iran started hitting out, putting British people and British allies and service personnel at risk, I committed further resources to the region, including more fighter jets, helicopters and a warship.

RAF and Navy pilots have now racked up nearly 900 flying hours in defence of Cyprus, Jordan, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. We have more jets in the region than we have had at any time in the last 15 years. There are an extra 500 air defence personnel in Cyprus, and as more military capabilities are committed to the eastern Mediterranean, we are working closely with the Republic of Cyprus to co-ordinate the contributions of allies, including the US, France and Greece, to reinforce the security of Cyprus. I can confirm that HMS Dragon has arrived in the eastern Mediterranean, and will tonight begin operational integration into Cyprus's defence alongside allies. More widely, UK Space Command is monitoring daily Iranian missile activity, and provided early warning to our armed forces and our allies operating across the region.

Our military and our industry in the UK have a shared mission: to step up support and to help defend Gulf partners during this conflict. Last week, we brought together Gulf ambassadors, defence attachés and UK defence firms, and the Ministry of Defence has now established Taskforce Sabre with industry to support partners across the middle east with rapid procurement. We will soon deploy lightweight multiple launchers to Bahrain, along with training, and we will deploy Rapid Sentry to Kuwait. Rapid Sentry is a battle-tested, ground-based air defence missile system that has already proved highly effective for UK forces in taking down drones in the region.

I turn to the strait of Hormuz. People and businesses are increasingly worried about the economic impact of this war, and the Prime Minister will chair a Cobra meeting later this afternoon to discuss the economic impact, which I will attend. Iran is holding the strait of Hormuz hostage by laying mines, targeting ships—including red ensign vessels—and putting lives in danger. This is complex, and any resolution requires close work with allies and multinational support. The UK, along with 29 other nations, signed a joint statement late last week that condemned in the strongest terms the attacks on unarmed ships, strongly backed the freedom of navigation, and expressed our readiness

“to contribute to appropriate efforts to ensure safe passage through the Strait.”

I discussed this matter with E5 Defence Ministers last week, and we have now deployed UK military planners to US Central Command to develop options. We are

[John Healey]

looking to accelerate new UK minehunting and drone technology, and on Friday we confirmed that the current permission that we have given for the US to use UK bases for defensive strikes against specific Iranian targets extends to missile sites and capabilities that threaten the strait of Hormuz. We are determined to ensure that the UK plays a leading role in securing the strait, so that commercial ships can move freely and confidently again.

This House knows that the demands on defence are rising. While we rightly focus on dealing with the immediate conflict in the middle east, we will continue to step up our support to Ukraine, to fulfil our NATO commitments, to sign vital defence contracts, and to deal with Putin's serious threats to the High North. This House also knows that our adversaries will want us distracted and may try to take advantage of events in the middle east for their own gain. We will not let them. As a Government, we remain determined to make Britain safer, more secure at home and strong abroad.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

3.47 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): May I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, and for the briefing I received from his officials this afternoon? I join him in putting on record my utter condemnation of the arson attack committed in Golders Green last night. On behalf of the Opposition, I offer our sympathy to all who were affected and to the wider Jewish community. I also join the Secretary of State in expressing our condolences to the families of all allied personnel who have lost their lives in the current conflict, and in thanking the police for preventing potentially serious nefarious activity at Faslane.

The potential economic ramifications for our constituents from Iran's aggressive closure of the strait of Hormuz should concern us all. In that context, can the Defence Secretary tell the House what he understands to be the implications of the US President's latest remarks, specifically on deferring strikes on power plants? Can he also tell us what further naval capability he intends to deploy to assist in securing the strait of Hormuz?

It is extremely concerning that Iran fired long-range ballistic missiles at UK sovereign territory on Diego Garcia. I am grateful for the Defence Secretary's update, but why did it take so long for the Government to confirm something that the whole world had been reporting on, and what action will he take to respond to those wholly unjustified attacks? Can he confirm whether the potential firing range of this Iranian missile implies that it could reach well into Europe?

When it comes to our own air defence, it is very welcome that the RAF Regiment has excelled in using Rapid Sentry, procured under the previous Government, to intercept multiple drones, and we pay tribute to all our personnel in the region at the present moment. We also welcome the fact that this capability is now being deployed to support our allies in the region, and we hope that the air defence system the Secretary of State is sending to Bahrain will be in position as soon as possible.

However, we note reports that at least one of the Iranian missiles fired at Diego Garcia was intercepted by a US destroyer. Is it correct that the US intercepted this missile before the Government decided on Saturday

to grant the US further permission for the use of our bases? Does this not once again underline Labour's extraordinary double standards in that, until their latest U-turn, the Government had been relying on the US to defend us while denying it the use of our bases? The reports that an Iranian missile headed for Diego Garcia was intercepted by a US destroyer underline the critical importance of our Type 45s to our own air defence, so while we welcome HMS Dragon finally arriving, does the Secretary of State regret not sending her much sooner?

As the Secretary of State knows, the Type 45 Sea Viper air defence system relies on Aster missiles. Last week, I wrote to urge him to use HM Treasury reserve funding for the middle east operations to urgently procure the missiles needed, including the lightweight multi-role missile for the Wildcat and Rapid Sentry, ASRAAM—advanced short-range air-to-air missile—for our fighter jets, and Aster for the Type 45s. Since then, he has confirmed the order of the LMM, which I welcome. Will he now use the reserve to order more air defence missiles for our ships and fighter planes?

If our Type 45s are to intercept the most sophisticated ballistic missiles, they need the Sea Viper system upgraded to Sea Viper Evolution, which I have repeatedly asked Ministers to accelerate, as it is currently scheduled to enter service in 2032. When I was a Defence Minister, HMS Diamond, which was under attack by the Houthis in the Red sea, was using expensive missiles to intercept cheap drones, so I scrapped a load of red tape to accelerate the in-service date of our DragonFire anti-drone laser from 2032 to next year. Will the Secretary of State take similar steps to accelerate Sea Viper?

There is, of course, a problem. In a written answer about Sea Viper Evolution that I received in January, the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry responded:

“Continued progress...remains subject to”—

guess what?—

“the Defence Investment Plan.”

In Defence oral questions on 15 December, there were just four sitting days left before the rise of the House, and the Secretary of State could not tell us whether the Government would publish the DIP before recess. Given that there are once again just four sitting days left before recess and that he must know his diary for the week ahead, can he tell us whether the defence investment plan will be published before the rise of the House on Thursday, and if not, will he publish it during purdah? Above all, if the DIP is not going to be published this week, will he—to break the logjam with the Treasury—urge the Chancellor to take the difficult decisions required to set a course for spending 3% on defence in this Parliament, not the next?

Finally, surely even the Secretary of State can see that hypothetical legal action under the United Nations convention on the law of the sea by a country without a navy or a standing army is less of a threat to our base on Diego Garcia than long-range missiles fired by Iran. Is not the best way that he could stand up for our sovereign territory of Diego Garcia be scrapping Labour's crazy Chagos deal and spending every penny on the British armed forces?

John Healey: I welcome the shadow Secretary of State's initial comments about the loss of French and US personnel, and I recognise and respect those. He asked me,

first, about the comments from President Trump today. I am sure the whole House will welcome President Trump's statement today, with its recognition that there is progress in conversations about the

"COMPLETE AND TOTAL RESOLUTION OF OUR HOSTILITIES IN THE MIDDLE EAST",

and his instruction to hold off further strikes against Iranian power plants. That creates the opportunity and opening for further de-escalation, and the onus is now on Iran to respond.

The shadow Secretary of State went on to the strikes that I have reported on, or the missiles fired in the direction of, Diego Garcia. I just say to him that we have been blunt and open about the threat Iran poses—the threat it poses to British nationals, British bases and British interests and partners—and to suggest otherwise is completely false. That is why we have been conducting the defensive operations throughout the region since day one of this war. Those missiles were fired towards Diego Garcia early on Friday morning, the same day I offered the shadow Defence Secretary the chance to come into the MOD for a secure briefing. I welcome his thanks for that, but he, as a former Defence Minister, will know that no Government routinely comment on the detail of such threats, due to the nature of intelligence sharing. He will also know that no Government immediately confirm such events, partly because in any conflict events are fast-moving, but mainly because to do so may put at risk the safety of military personnel or compromise ongoing operations. I just say to the hon. Gentleman that he should bear that in mind for the future.

I want to reassure the public, however, on the concern that the hon. Gentleman raises about long-range Iranian missiles and any question of Iran targeting the UK, and to say, quite clearly, that there is no assessment that we are being targeted in the UK in that way. We have the resources and the alliances in place to keep the United Kingdom safe from any kind of attack. We operate a layered defence of this United Kingdom. Our Navy, our RAF and our Army are all involved, and we operate our defence with other NATO allies. That layered defence against missiles or any other sort of threat is an important part of keeping this country safe.

It seems to have taken a war in the middle east for the hon. Gentleman to realise that air and missile defence systems for the UK are important. *[Interruption.]* No, because in the last year of his Government, they slashed defence spending on ground-based air defence by 70%. When he was Defence Minister, he promised a munitions strategy, which he never published and was never funded. It was down to this Government, last June, as part of the strategic defence review, to announce an extra £1 billion for air and missile defence above the Tory plans that he left. It is the UK, under this Government, that has been leading NATO's DIAMOND—delivering integrated air and missile operational networked defences—air and missile defence initiative. It is this Government who in this year alone have boosted spending on counter-drone systems fivefold from his last year in government, and spending on ground-based air defence systems by 50%. It is this Government who are delivering for defence after 14 years of underfunding and hollowing out under the previous Government.

I have to say that I am still very confused about the Conservatives' position on the war in Iran. One week, the Leader of the Opposition said that UK jets must

"go to the source" in Iran and that "we are in this war" whether we like it or not. Then the next week, she said:

"I never said we should join".

The week after that, the shadow Defence Secretary said on Sky News that there are no easy answers to this.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman talks about defence investment planning and spending. We are working to finalise the DIP, but he was, of course, the Defence Minister who left 47 out of 49 major defence programmes not on budget, not on time. He was the one who left a defence programme that was over-committed, underfunded and deeply unsuited to the threats we now face. It is this Government, a Labour Government, who are now delivering for defence: 1,200 major contracts signed since July 2024, 84% of them awarded to British businesses, and the largest increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war.

Mr Speaker: I call the Mother of the House.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Ind): The Iranian regime is a threat to us all, not least to its own population. I implore Ministers to remember the importance of a debate in Parliament, just as we had on Iraq, if we move further in our involvement with Trump's war.

John Healey: The Mother of the House speaks with long and deep experience of these matters. I would just say to her that the Prime Minister himself has said that while we are taking

"the necessary action to defend ourselves and our allies, we will not be drawn into the wider war."

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. We are four weeks on from the start of President Trump's illegal assault on Iran, and still there is no plan and no end in sight. It is not Trump or his partner in this ill-conceived war, Netanyahu, who is paying the price, but hard-pressed British families who are seeing it in their energy bills and at the petrol pump, billions around the world who are suffering the economic fallout, and more than 100 little girls who will never be coming home from school. Rather than de-escalating the crisis, Trump is just making more threats; instead of accepting responsibility, he is pointing fingers at allies, including Britain.

There is much that I hope the House can agree on at this critical moment—most importantly, that Britain's interests are served only by rapid de-escalation of hostilities. Liberal Democrats have not wavered from this view, which in many ways reflects the broadly responsible approach that this Government, including the Defence Secretary, have taken to the war, emphasising the need for multilateral diplomacy while protecting our personnel and citizens under immediate threat in the region. None the less, the Government's decision over the weekend to expand the use of UK bases for US strikes is grave and risks dragging Britain down the slope of Trump's war. It appears to be a significant shift in the Government's position.

I therefore wish to ask the Secretary of State three questions. First, does he agree that the Government's definition of "defensive" is different today from when

[James MacCleary]

the House last sat? Secondly, will he commit to releasing in full the legal advice that the Government have received about this latest expansion of the rights of US planes to use UK bases? Thirdly, will he support Liberal Democrat-proposed legislation to ensure proper monitoring of US sorties conducted from UK bases, to ensure that they are truly defensive in nature?

John Healey: The country's best interests are served by our actions both before and since the start of this period of the war—actions taken to defend our personnel, our bases, our allies and our interests throughout the region. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that our interests are served best by an end to the conflict, which we want to see happen now. We therefore welcome President Trump's move to step back from further attacks on Iranian power plants and oil infrastructure, which creates the opportunity for further de-escalation, which the hon. Gentleman calls for. I hope that he would recognise that the onus is now on Iran to respond in kind.

In response to the hon. Gentleman's specific question, there has been no change in the principles on which our approach, action and decisions are based. These are permissions for the US to use UK bases for defensive action, as it is striking at the very Iranian sites and capabilities that are attacking our interests and those of our partners in the region.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right to draw to attention to the fact that when he became Secretary of State, our armed forces were underfunded and very stretched. He and his team and the Government have done much to improve that, including bringing about additional funding for the armed forces. However, I am concerned that this further commitment, because of what is happening in Iran, will put a lot of strain on our already overstretched armed forces, and I am concerned about the sustainability of our continuing investment there. What discussions are taking place in Government to accelerate expenditure to at least 3% in this Parliament and as quickly as possible?

John Healey: Having been a Defence Minister and having served for some time on the Defence Committee, my hon. Friend is more knowledgeable than perhaps anyone else in the House about defence matters. I appreciate his recognition of the way that, since the election, we have stepped up the scale of investment in autonomous systems, counter-drone systems and integrated missile and air defence systems, all of which were badly lacking under the previous Government. He will have followed an important speech that the Prime Minister gave three or four weeks ago at Munich, in which he recognised, as this House does, that demands on defence are rising; that this is an era of hard power, strong alliances and sure diplomacy; and that we need to spend more, faster, on defence.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I remind Defence Ministers yet again that they should be comparing increases in defence expenditure not with the post-cold war years, but with what we used to spend on defence during the cold war years, which was between

4.5% and 5% of GDP? Can the Secretary of State look the House straight in the eye, as it were, and say that, given the very close relationship between China and the Mauritians, which includes a 25-year treaty of co-operation, it would be a sounder situation if Mauritius had sovereignty over Diego Garcia and we were only lessees to them?

John Healey: I respect the right hon. Gentleman, and the straight answer to his question is yes, I can. The deal that we have in place, which is awaiting ratification, would give us operational sovereignty over Diego Garcia for at least 99 years. This base is central and essential to our and the US' security and military around the world. The deal now on the table, which we have negotiated with the Mauritians, gives us greater protections in the waters around the island and a greater veto over developments on the other islands. It is so much better than the deal the previous Government left when they left office, reached after 11 rounds of negotiation.

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): I join my right hon. Friend in paying tribute to members of the armed forces, and I acknowledge too the difficult path that he has to tread. The Government's stated objective was to achieve de-escalation of this war led by diplomacy, yet the truth is that the US planes leaving British soil, which he authorised without parliamentary consent, are carrying not diplomats but heavy payloads. The Secretary of State said that he wants these actions to be legal. What protocols has he agreed with the United States to ensure that those bombers are operating within national and international law and in a defensive capacity only? Anything else leads to a slippery slope from defence into offence.

John Healey: The permissions that we have granted in response to specific US requests are for operations restricted to defensive legal purposes that strike at the capabilities that are doing most to hold at risk and attack our interests, allies and personnel. It is part of an established system of requesting such basing operations, with a system that ensures that the US respects the permissions that it has requested. That system allows us to ensure that that is, and continues to be, the case.

On de-escalation, I hope that my hon. Friend recognises and was encouraged by the leadership that the Prime Minister and the UK played at the end of last week, when we led the work that has produced a statement now signed by 29 other countries calling for the co-ordinated development of options and the condemnation of Iran's attacks and closure of the strait of Hormuz. It also recognises the enormous impact that this is having across the world, including for people and businesses in this country, about which so many are so concerned.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): There is a glaring contradiction between the Defence Secretary's statement, which refers to

"taking the necessary action to strengthen our collective defence," and announcing to the House that we will have another recess without the defence investment plan. Does he recognise that last year the Defence Committee, which has a majority of Labour Members on it, said that "demand signals will not exist until the Defence Investment Plan is published"?

At a time when so many of our allies have invested in defence, does he not recognise that delaying the plan is likely to stoke inflation, undermining the spend as and when it comes?

John Healey: We are working flat out to finalise the plan, but it has not held up important decisions that we have made. Since the election, we have been able to let over 1,200 major contracts, the majority of which are with British businesses and British firms, creating British jobs, reinforcing the innovation base in this country and demonstrating that defence under this Government is becoming an engine for growth.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The availability of Type 45s is a direct result of the severe defence cuts enacted by the Conservatives in 2010, so I am incredulous that they comment on their availability without giving an apology. However, while we recognise that perhaps there is not an Iranian missile capable of travelling the 2,000 km to the Chagos islands, will my right hon. Friend recognise that, were there to be one, that would show a worrying proliferation of technology from North Korea and Russia, and that shows we must continue to support Ukraine in its war against Russia?

John Healey: I do indeed. My hon. Friend speaks with the authority of his service experience and his service on the Defence Committee. He reminds the House, as I did at the end of my statement, that with all eyes on the middle east, we cannot lift our focus and deflect our priority from stepping up support for Ukraine, and, as the strategic Defence review encourages us to do, learning the lessons from Ukraine. He is right to remind the Conservative party that during its 14 years in office it cut the number of frigates and destroyers by a quarter, and the number of minehunters by more than a half, and in its first five years the defence budget was cut by fully £12 billion.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The Secretary of State talked a lot in his statement about British hardware, but coercing an adversary also requires us to understand their war aims and their beliefs. In Iraq, we learned late about the need to develop cultural awareness. Martyrdom is central to Shi'a Islam and viewed as redemptive suffering. Alongside all the kit that the Secretary of State talked about, will the Government also invest in cultural capability?

John Healey: I am a somewhat simple man, and I am not clear what cultural capability really means. If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me with his proposition, I would be happy to have a look at it.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): One of the clearest lessons of the Chilcot inquiry was that the UK must be prepared to say no to the US when British interests, legal standards and global stability are at risk. Will the Government hold firm and not be drawn further into this conflict by a so-called ally whose conduct is unpredictable, insulting, destabilising and, in my view, deranged?

John Healey: Let me say again that while we are taking the necessary action to defend our interests and our allies, as the Prime Minister has made clear to the House and in public, we will not get drawn into the wider war.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The Secretary of State is right that we all breathed a sigh of relief this morning at the American President stepping back from the abyss of an attack on Iran's power network. However, it remains the case that just a few days ago a projectile fell within 350 metres of Iran's only nuclear power station. The Secretary of State spoke compellingly about the courage of British personnel in defending our assets in the region and those of our allies. If it were to come to our attention that, in an era of irrational decision making, an attack against that nuclear power station was contemplated, with the catastrophic effect that would have on the region, what steps would we take to prevent that attack?

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman is an old hand in this House. He has also, I think, served in a number of security posts in government. He would be the last person to expect me to speculate on future hypothetical scenarios like that, but the points he made at the start of his question are really important. The opportunity now, based on the President's declaration this morning and his instruction to his Department of War to hold off further attacks on Iranian power plants and infrastructure for the next five days, gives diplomacy the opportunity, gives further de-escalation the opening and places the onus on this country, I hope across all parts of this House, to urge Iran to seize this opportunity and see an early end to the conflict.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for this detailed update. Further to his earlier comments, it is really important that our constituents understand how serious this is. Energy traders right now are like epidemiologists in February 2020. They are looking at energy sources and shortages, just as epidemiologists looked at covid and how it was spreading around the world, and working out how on earth to warn people of the horrors to come. The brutal reality is that if this war does not end, we could see energy shortages that will have a lasting economic effect on this country for decades. My right hon. Friend says that the President has agreed to a five-day suspension and agreed not to target the Iranian power plants. He will know how serious this is. How confident is he that the President will stick to that five-day pledge and give a chance for the urgent de-escalation that our economy and our world needs?

John Healey: My hon. Friend makes the clearest and strongest possible case for an early end to this conflict and for how imperative it is to embrace this opportunity that President Trump has created. As she rightly says, the impending potential impact on the world economy, and on the lifestyle and costs of all families and businesses in this country, is severe. That is the reason the Prime Minister will be chairing a Cobra meeting this afternoon that will look at the potential economic impacts of the conflict. I will attend that meeting, and no doubt the House will be updated in due course.

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): I remind the House that RAF Fairford is in my constituency, so it is with grave concern that I note the news of two missiles being aimed at Diego Garcia. The Prime Minister previously pledged that we will not be drawn into the wider war, yet we have already shifted from the defensive to the

[*Dr Roz Savage*]

offensive use of air bases on UK land. As almost 60% of the British public oppose the use of RAF bases in this war, will the Secretary of State commit to bringing back to this House the opportunity for open debate and full transparency on all the factors that are leading to this rapid descent down the slippery slope?

John Healey: Statements such as this are exactly the opportunity for Members of the House to express their views and put their questions, but I say to the hon. Lady that she is simply wrong: there has been no shift on the permissions granted to the US for specific purposes, and those purposes are defensive. They are defensive because they are limited to the Iranian missiles and capabilities that are attacking our ships, our bases and our interests, and threatening our interests, our bases and our allies across the region. The basis of the permission simply has not changed, as was confirmed in the statement released by the Government after the meeting of Ministers on Friday.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Despite talk of a “complete and total” resolution of hostilities from across the Atlantic, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) that we cannot give false comfort to our constituents that there will not be lasting economic and military consequences. What detail can the Secretary of State give us, and when, on the leading role that he sees the UK playing in keeping the strait of Hormuz open?

John Healey: As the statement that the UK helped co-ordinate and signed at the end of last week set out, and as I have said to the House today, we are ready to play a leading role in efforts, including all options that may be necessary, with allies to try to secure a resumption of commercial shipping and a freedom of passage through the strait of Hormuz. That is likely to require significant de-escalation, but we are preparing all options. As I confirmed to the House earlier on as well, I have put UK military planners into US Central Command, and their job is to help shape and prepare the potential co-ordination of such activity, which must include a range of allies and multinational support.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Further to the answer the Secretary of State has just given, he has confirmed to the House this afternoon that mines have been laid in the strait of Hormuz. Therefore, one of the biggest problems—whether there was a cessation of violence overnight—will be getting vessels insured. How quickly can the Secretary of State give the other side of that coin to the markets and the insurance companies that, even if de-escalation happened overnight, they can have faith that the strait of Hormuz will be demined? That will take a military operation led by Europe. The Americans will not get involved—we know that. How quickly can he say what the counterbalance is to the fact that he has confirmed this afternoon that the strait of Hormuz has indeed been mined?

John Healey: I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman a timescale. What I can say to him is that we are bending all our efforts in defence and more widely to contribute

to the development of all options, and those must involve allies and they have to be multinational. In the end, as he suggested to the House, the test will be the decisions of commercial shipowners, crews and insurers about the safety that they can have about resuming their commercial trade through the strait of Hormuz.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): What Donald Trump said at the weekend was that unless the strait was opened, he would obliterate Iran’s power plants. I agree that attacking a nuclear plant could be extremely catastrophic. As we have made clear to Putin, however, attacking power plants that supply power to civilians is against international law and is clearly a move from defence to aggression. On that basis, while I join the Secretary of State in hoping that the next five days secure peace, may I ask him to confirm that UK bases will not be used to attack power plants? If there is to be such a change of policy, will he ask the Prime Minister for a debate and a vote in this House, because I want my constituents to know that I am not willing to support such escalation?

John Healey: The permissions for the use of UK bases by the US are defensive. They do not include the striking of Iranian power plants, which is the clarification that my right hon. Friend asks of me. As I and the Prime Minister have said, those principles of defensive actions and decisions with a sound legal basis, and actions in co-ordination with allies to ensure a collective self-defence in the region, will continue to inform the decisions and choices that this Government make.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): One thing that unites the Prime Minister of Israel and the supreme leader of Iran is that neither could care less about what the UK Prime Minister says, and it is difficult to imagine that the US President is not in a similar camp. With fiscal headroom evaporating, business confidence vanishing and household budgets being shredded by this war, what can the Secretary of State offer, over and above the vacuous calls for de-escalation, to ensure that people on these islands are protected from the ferocious effects of this war on the supply of energy?

John Healey: I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman degrades the contribution that the UK is making to the collective defence of allies in the region, and that he fails to recognise that the basing request from the US to which we have agreed is an important and valuable contribution to the US operations and to our interests.

The decisions that the Prime Minister makes are in our national interests. He has said that we will do what we can, with allies, to deal with the risk to worldwide energy supplies and prices. He has supported the release of extra oil on to the markets, he has had the Government put in help for those who use heating oil, and he will chair a Cobra meeting this afternoon, as I have told the House, to consider exactly the things that the hon. Gentleman is concerned about.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I put on record my thanks to the British armed forces, which are working round the clock to defend British interests and British people. My constituents have made it clear that they want no part in the wider war being waged by the US and Israel, but at the same time, they expect the robust

defence of British interests and personnel. Although I welcome the fact that neither Iranian missile got anywhere close to Diego Garcia, will the Secretary of State reassure the House that the UK will play its full part in the defence of Diego Garcia should another such missile attack take place?

John Healey: We will, as we always have done, defend British personnel and British bases. I know that my hon. Friend and his Rochdale constituents will be proud of the fact that RAF pilots have now flown nearly 900 hours during this conflict for exactly those purposes, and that there are now more British jets in the region than there have been for 15 years.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Any assessment of this intervention must recognise that the Iranian regime has made the Iranian people pay with blood for every single act of defiance, so any attempt to apportion blame when a mass insurrection does not materialise would be unjust, and I hope that we will soon hear Ministers say so from the Dispatch Box. Last week, I raised concerns that the assessment of the intent and capability of Iran was clearly flawed, and this weekend's activity has proved that to be true. What action has the Secretary of State taken to challenge thinking internally, and to support British overseas territories by taking action to reinforce their defences and by speaking to their elected Governments, not just governors?

John Healey: I am not sure that I follow the hon. Lady; I certainly do not accept what I understand to be her point. When I was in Cyprus a couple of weeks ago, I met the Defence Minister, as well as the chief of the national guard, who made it clear to me that military co-operation with the UK is closer than it has ever been. As I have said, we are playing a leading role, with the Republic of Cyprus, in co-ordinating the increasing capabilities in the eastern Mediterranean, to help that sovereign base to remain as protected as possible in the circumstances and in the face of the Iranian threat.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): Further to that point, I thank the Minister for Europe for going to Cyprus last week, and I am grateful for the conversations between the Prime Minister and the President of Cyprus. My constituency has long-standing people-to-people ties with Cyprus, so what assurances can the Secretary of State give my constituents that Government are considering not just British personnel but the wider Cypriot family?

John Healey: I can indeed. I hope my hon. Friend, and the Government of the Republic of Cyprus and their military, realise that the steps we took well before this war broke out to reinforce defences in Cyprus and across the region, have been there not just to protect British personnel and step up defences at our base, but they are defending and helping to protect the whole Republic of Cyprus and the island of Cyprus.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): From the first moments that the attempted rocket launches towards Diego Garcia were reported over the weekend there has been growing speculation, fuelled mainly by Israel, that Iran's strike capacity now stretches far beyond what we previously conceived, and far beyond the Gulf region.

Given what the Secretary of State said today when he confirmed that they were Iranian rockets—that goes beyond the NATO Secretary General yesterday—can he confirm how close those rockets or missiles came to Diego Garcia? What is now the MOD's assessment about the effective strike range of Iran's missile capacity? Does it stretch deep into Europe, and is the UK even now at risk?

John Healey: As I have said, the missiles that were fired in the direction of Diego Garcia fell well short. One came down, and one was brought down well short. The specific capabilities of adversaries like Iran, and what they hold, are certainly not details that the hon. Gentleman would expect me to disclose to the House or in public.

Darren Paffey (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): May I associate myself with the comments by the Secretary of State when he commends our brave servicemen and women? Far from “hanging around”, which the Leader of the Opposition thinks they are doing, they are working night and day to protect us at home and abroad, and as one of many Members across the House who have been part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme, I add my thanks to them. Precisely because the first priority of any Government is to protect British citizens, can the Secretary of State assure the House that those facing Iranian aggression, and who are closer to it than any of us will be, have everything they need to defend our people, our bases, and our allies?

John Healey: I can indeed. As I reported to the House, we have the highest levels of force protection in place, and they are reviewed daily by the Chief of Joint Operations, who reports to me each week. My hon. Friend is completely right. I was in Cyprus a couple of weeks ago, talking to the pilots and crews that allow our F-35s and Typhoons to fly those defensive missions, as they have done from day one of this conflict, and they were frankly insulted that the Leader of the Opposition had accused them of “just hanging around”—[*Interruption.*] There has never been an apology from the Opposition for those remarks, but Labour Members know that those pilots and crews are working flat out and doing an important job to defend our personnel, our bases, and our allies.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I need to squeeze in many people, so questions need to be short, and answers just as short.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): We can debate what the armed forces think or do not think, but I always think it best to leave them out of these debates. However, there is an issue here at home, and defence of the realm is defence at home first and foremost. We know that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has threatened us on these shores endlessly for a number of years, and many colleagues across the House have called for it to be proscribed. As yet, in the middle of this war, we have not proscribed the IRGC, but it would make the life of our security services so much easier if we did so. Will the Secretary of State please get up and say that it is his determination that the IRGC should be proscribed and

[Sir Iain Duncan Smith]

kicked out, or arrested for all the awful deeds that it does by chasing, hounding, and killing people on British shores?

John Healey: The right hon. Gentleman makes his case. He knows, as I do, that our British services have foiled around 20 sabotage or assassination plots with the Iranian hand behind them on British soil. He makes the case for proscription. That is a decision in other parts of the Government, but it something we keep under review, and a decision we will take with a broader view of the way that we are challenging, confronting, and working with allies to deal with the Iranian threat.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): BBC News Ukraine recently published an outstanding report on the demand for drone interceptors, such as the British-made Octopus and the Wild Hornets Sting drone. Will the Government update the House on what work they are doing to bolster UK and Ukrainian drone interceptor production so that these devices can be in the skies to defend against Shahed drones, which are threatening the interests of Britain and Gulf partners alike?

John Healey: I am proud to say that there are interceptors in the skies above Ukraine now that have the British hand and British production behind them, working closely with Ukraine. The Octopus interceptor that my hon. Friend talks about is a special link-up between Ukraine and the UK. We look forward to being able to produce them en masse and return them to Ukraine to help them defend their skies against Putin's invasion.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Six days ago, the UK Government's security group rightly launched a leak inquiry into the leaking of very sensitive information from the National Security Council. I do not expect the Defence Secretary to comment on an ongoing inquiry, but does he agree on these principles? First, the very least that our armed forces should expect when they are being sent into harm's way is for the political leadership of this country to not leak secret and top-secret information. Secondly, whoever it is—a Cabinet Minister, a senior official or a junior official—when caught, they should be sacked.

John Healey: I do not think anyone can doubt the determination of the Prime Minister to prevent such actions or to take the action required when such activities are going on. I can give the right hon. Gentleman my reassurance that that is the case.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I join the Defence Secretary in paying tribute to our civilians and armed forces personnel who are defending the UK national interests. I have had the privilege of meeting many of them overseas during my time in the House. Those serving overseas have been putting themselves in harm's way, and they will have families back at home who are understandably worried, especially given the situation with personnel from the US and France being killed. What support is the Secretary of State putting in place back at home for the families of those who are serving in the middle east?

John Healey: I will certainly write to my hon. Friend with the detail, but the House can rest assured that this issue is foremost in our mind. We have a system in place that is doing exactly what my hon. Friend urges.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Against the backdrop of this illegal, counterproductive and reckless war, next month, Palestinians in the west bank and in parts of Gaza will take part in municipal elections, which include candidates who are committed to peaceful dialogue with Israel and who reject Iranian-backed terrorism. Does the Secretary of State acknowledge the significance of those elections for building peace in the middle east, and will he and the Government do everything in their power to ensure the deployment of independent observers so that the elections are fair and safe?

John Healey: We will.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): US military aircraft departed from the Scottish Government-owned Prestwick airport up to 32 times in the 10 days before American and Israeli strikes started on Iran. Like many of my constituents, I am worried about the prospect of a Scottish airport being used in an illegal war. Will the Secretary of State definitively say today who has the authority to stop the US military using Scottish civilian infrastructure? Is it the Prime Minister or is it the First Minister of Scotland?

John Healey: There is no use—there has been no use—of Prestwick airport for US bombing strikes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call John Cooper.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—[Interruption.] Excuse me; I have swallowed a fly.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Ready?

John Cooper: I think I just about am, yes. The situation we are talking about today is a shooting war, but of key interest to us is the tug of war going on between the MOD and the Treasury over the defence investment plan. We have some indication of what is going on—I think we have gathered that it will not come out this week. Can the Secretary of State give us some indication of whether the purdah period for the upcoming elections in Scotland in May will further impact the announcement of this critical plan?

John Healey: I don't know why he swallowed a fly, and I do not know why the hon. Gentleman imagines that there is a tug of war, especially when he can look at the Government's record over the past 18 months in putting in place a record increase in defence spending, the degree of support that the Chancellor has given to recognising the rising demands on defence and the commitment that the Prime Minister has given that in this era of hard power—"the currency of the age", as the Prime Minister calls it—we need to do more and spend faster.

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): The humanitarian implications of this war are already severe. In Lebanon, 1 million people have been forced to flee their homes, including Palestinian and Syrian refugees who had found

safety in the south of Lebanon, but who are now being forced to flee for their lives again. Meanwhile, the airspace closures in the Gulf and the closure of the strait of Hormuz are affecting global humanitarian supply chains. For example, the International Rescue Committee has warned that \$130,000 of pharmaceutical supplies for Sudan are now stuck in Dubai. What is the Secretary of State doing to support access to humanitarian relief during this crisis?

John Healey: That issue is a part of the discussions, particularly those being undertaken by the Foreign Secretary and her team, that we are having with Gulf nations and with Lebanon, and the Foreign Secretary spoke to the Lebanese Prime Minister in recent days.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The expansion of US use of UK bases announced over the weekend represents an escalation of UK involvement in this war. At a time when we all agree that de-escalation is urgently needed, we are being dragged into Trump's illegal, reckless war, with huge ramifications for the region and for households in this country. Last week, the Secretary of State said that he would get involved only if there was a "viable, collective plan", but where is that plan? This afternoon, the Prime Minister said to the Liaison Committee that we must beware of

"the false comfort of thinking that there will necessarily be a quick and early end to this"

conflict. Given all that, when will we have a Commons vote on the escalating UK involvement in this illegal and reckless war?

John Healey: I reject almost everything that the hon. Lady has said. We will not get drawn into a wider war. The decisions that we are taking are de-escalatory and defensive, not escalatory, and we will work in whatever way we can to bring an early end to this conflict.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): The long-range missile attacks have raised the spectre in my mind, and surely in those of others, of attacks on the United Kingdom. I have listened to the Secretary of State's reassurances about the defence of this country, but we have all seen the value of the Iron Dome. What is being done to create such a system for the defence of this country?

John Healey: An extra £1 billion is being put now into integrated air and missile defence for Britain. That was not part of the previous Government's plans and it stems directly from the assessment that the strategic defence review set out when we published it last year.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Given that it takes about a month to move a minor war vessel from Portsmouth to the Gulf, and notwithstanding the meetings that the Secretary of State says that he is having with allies about ensuring freedom of navigation through the strait, would it be a good idea to start shifting those minehunters now, so that when he has the results of his discussions, which I hope will be a bit more than just handwringing, we will be in a position to genuinely do something in an area that we are actually really rather good at?

John Healey: The House will have heard me say that we already have autonomous minehunting capabilities in the region and we are looking to reinforce them. I guess the right hon. Gentleman now regrets being part of a Government that in 2021 accelerated the out-of-commission dates of some of the minehunters.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): Under international law, the use of force is permitted for "individual or collective self-defence" against "an armed attack". Such use of force must satisfy the requirements of proportionality and necessity. In light of the broadening use of British military bases at the request of Donald Trump over the past week, will the Defence Secretary clarify for the British public how this satisfies those requirements? If the lessons of Iraq are to be learned, surely he must understand that the British public will not accept anything other than a parliamentary debate and vote on any further British military involvement.

John Healey: I reassure my hon. Friend, as she invites me to, that the permissions that we have given are for operations that are defensive, in the sense that they are directed only at Iranian missile capabilities that are being used to attack British interests, British allies and British shipping, including red-ensign-flagged vessels in the strait of Hormuz.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Much old ground has been gone over by the Secretary of State, but our service personnel live in the here and now. The defence investment plan is absolutely vital for their future, whether we are talking about operations in the field, or upgrading housing for their families—a subject that we are discussing in the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill. Given that he did not answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper), may I ask if "working flat out" means that the DIP will be published in days, weeks or months?

John Healey: "Working flat out" means working flat out, and we are working flat out to finalise the defence investment plan.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): May I commend our current position of not being drawn further into the US and Israeli operation in Iran? Can the Secretary of State confirm that we will continue to avoid any escalation, and will act only in ways that are in defence of British personnel and interests?

John Healey: I can indeed. My hon. Friend is right: our purpose is the defence of British personnel, our bases, our interests and our allies in the region. We will continue to make decisions and take action based on principles that are defensive and legal, and in co-ordination with our allies.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): On top of the direct attacks by Iran, its principal proxy in the region, Hezbollah, continues to defy the Lebanese Government by using Lebanon as a base from which to fire rockets into Israeli civilian populations. What steps is the Ministry of Defence taking, in conjunction with the Lebanese Government, to help them dismantle this absolute cancer in Lebanon? More importantly, what

[Greg Smith]

steps are being taken to ensure that infrastructure built in Lebanon in recent years using British taxpayers' money is categorically not being used for any of those attacks?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw the attention of the House to Lebanon. Like him, I am gravely concerned about the conflict and the situation there. Like him, I strongly condemn the Hezbollah attacks on Israel, and they must stop, but the forced displacement of 1 million people due to Israel's operations is unacceptable. There must be diplomatic action to prevent this conflict from widening. For that purpose, the Foreign Secretary has spoken recently to the Israeli Foreign Minister and the Lebanese Prime Minister.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the people of Harlow will want me to echo the Secretary of State's comments about our brave personnel and the work that they do to keep us safe every single day. Listening to his statement, it struck me that it is hugely important that our bases here and abroad are safe. Can he outline what he is doing to ensure that the security of our bases is paramount, and that any organisation that seeks to break into our bases faces the full strength of the law?

John Healey: I can indeed. I appreciate my hon. Friend's concern. We are investing in more counter-drone technology and more closed circuit television, and we are tightening up the base security arrangements. My hon. Friend the Armed Forces Minister has taken personal charge of this operation.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Donald Trump may have paused his escalation of aggressive attacks, but we know that the conflict is not over. The Secretary of State said that US access to British bases is restrained by the principle that such use is defensive only. The public have the right to know what safeguards exist. What follow-up checks are made to verify that this use is indeed defensive only?

John Healey: The safeguard is the established system of granting access, basing and overflight. That established system builds in throughout—not just afterwards—the reassurance, checks and controls required to ensure that when the US takes advantage of the permissions that we have given, it does so within those permissions.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I pay tribute to all the personnel at RAF Wyton, who are doing incredible round-the-clock work to analyse exactly what is going on in this conflict in the middle east.

The Secretary of State talks about missile defence for the UK. I appreciate that he has had his Weetabix this morning, but can I gently remind him that he was a Minister in the last Labour Government, who halved the number of Type 45 destroyers, meaning that we do not have enough? They also equipped them with WR-21 engines, and as a result, we have only one that is currently seaworthy, HMS Dragon. The Security Minister, who is also sitting on the Front Bench, told me last week that the Government were informed in advance of the US and Israel's attacks on Iran. Could the Secretary

of State confirm how far in advance the Government were informed of those attacks? Was it hours, days, or weeks?

John Healey: I am not prepared to disclose that sort of data, but the hon. Gentleman should judge us by our actions, and well ahead of this war breaking out, we reinforced Britain's defences in the region. Turning to HMS Dragon, we only have it available to deploy to the eastern Mediterranean because it was ordered by a Labour Government, and over 14 years, Conservative Governments did not order a single new destroyer.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): While the Government have set out their military approach in some detail, there remains far less clarity on the diplomatic strategy that must eventually bring this conflict to an end. Can the Secretary of State set out what the UK is doing to get all sides back to the negotiating table? As we do so, how will the Government ensure that we do not simply follow President Trump down a path that risks replacing one brutal regime with another, rather than securing democracy and freedom for the Iranian people?

John Healey: First and foremost, we are ensuring that we can protect British interests in the region. We are looking to protect our allies in the region, and everything we do is in co-ordination with our partners in the region. I hope the hon. Lady takes some encouragement from the announcement that we helped to co-ordinate and publish at the end of last week about the importance of opening the strait of Hormuz, which has now been signed by 29 other nations.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Does the Secretary of State have contacts at US Central Command that can give reassurance that there is a plan? The President's social media feed gives the opposite impression. Is Britain at war?

John Healey: Yes to the first question; no to the second.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Government may not want to be drawn into a war with Iran, but Iran has declared war on us by attacking our bases, trying to kill our civilians, attacking our economy, and even engaging in acts of terror in our country. We have found this weekend that we rely on the US to protect our bases, and require its defensive capability to do so. Does that not lead the Secretary of State to the conclusion that, rather than begrudgingly providing limited access to our bases, we should be giving full support to the Americans and the Israeli Government in destroying this regime, to stop it fomenting war in the middle east and blackmailing us economically?

John Healey: We have agreed to the requests that the US has put to us. As I have said, one of our major principles is that we are working in close co-ordination with allies on defensive operations, including and especially with the US.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): I welcome President Trump's statement that he is apparently now in talks with Iran. Sadly and predictably, Iran seems to have achieved escalation dominance by closing the strait

of Hormuz, so what plans is the UK making for a post-conflict region in which Iran retains the upper hand because it can dictate global energy prices and continue to threaten Gulf nations?

John Healey: We will work in exactly the way that the joint statement that we helped to co-ordinate at the end of last week sets out, so as to de-escalate the conflict, co-ordinate with allies, and look for a point at which we can see the strait of Hormuz reopen.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Every credible legal analyst will state that this attack on Iran by Israel and the US was illegal. There was never an imminent threat, and the Caroline principles incorporated into the UN charter were simply not engaged. Given that Trump now seeks to withdraw from this war, and given the disquiet in this House about whether our base use is offensive or defensive in nature, will the Defence Secretary allow a parliamentary debate in which Members can vote on whether we should allow our bases to be used? If not, why not?

John Healey: The decisions we have taken as a Government have been taken for defensive purposes, and in co-ordination with allies. This House has plenty of opportunities, including for almost an hour and a half today, to put questions and debate these matters. It is important that we do that, and important that we continue to take the steps necessary to protect our people in the middle east.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Why, alone among our European allies, is the UK facilitating Trump's illegal war by allowing the United States to use RAF bases to launch attacks? The Government admitted last week that they could not guarantee that

such attacks were not made against civilian infrastructure in Iran. In the light of the Government's complicity, have they uprated the risk assessment of the threats faced by the population of these islands? Finally, just what is it about illegal wars in the middle east that the Labour party seems unable to resist?

John Healey: The hon. Gentleman is almost last, but not least. I reject almost every assertion he makes in his tripartite question. The decisions we have taken and the permissions we have given have a sound legal basis. They are for defensive purposes, and are directed at Iranian sites that are attacking our interests and our allies, and that hold a threat, including to British ships and red-ensign-flagged vessels in the strait of Hormuz.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Jim Shannon to ask the final question.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): While we welcome the progress of talks in the middle east, the fact that our Government have to learn updates from the news cycle is beyond disappointing. The deterioration of the relationship between the President of the United States and the Prime Minister is particularly worrying. Will the Secretary of State begin to rebuild that relationship with our American allies, and show willingness to work in the best interests of this nation? The attacks on Diego Garcia prove that this nation is under attack, and that deserves decisive action. How will the Minister secure the right action to put us back in step with our American friends, regardless of any personality clashes?

John Healey: We will always work closely with the US. This is a deep military and security relationship that has seen the ups and downs of politics over many decades, and that will continue to be the case. The Prime Minister spoke with the President last night.

Hatzola Ambulance Attack

4.58 pm

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): With permission, I will make a statement on the abhorrent arson attack in Golders Green, north London.

I will begin with the facts as they are currently known. At 1.45 this morning, the Metropolitan police and the London Fire Brigade were called to reports of a fire in Highfield Road, Golders Green. Officers attended the scene, where four ambulances from Hatzola, a volunteer-led ambulance service run by members of the Jewish community, were on fire. The attack occurred in the car park of a local synagogue, where Hatzola's vehicles for the area are based. I can tell the House that the vital work of this organisation will continue uninterrupted, with its highly trained volunteers responding to calls as steadfastly as ever.

The Government are determined to deliver justice following this cowardly attack. We fully support the police in their efforts to bring the perpetrators to account, and we are equally committed to ensuring that Hatzola suffers no lasting impact. As the Secretary of State for Health has confirmed, four replacement ambulances will be in place by tomorrow morning, and the Government will fund permanent replacements to ensure that this essential service remains strong and fully equipped. Nearby houses were evacuated as a precaution, but residents were allowed to return quickly to their homes. Thankfully, no injuries occurred.

The House will be aware that the police are treating this arson attack as an antisemitic hate crime. The investigation is now being led by Counter Terrorism Policing, although I should emphasise that the attack has not been declared a terrorist incident at this stage. No arrests have been made, but I take this opportunity to urge anyone with information to contact the police. Officers are aware of an online claim from a group taking responsibility for the attack, and establishing the accuracy of that claim is a priority for the investigation team. As the Home Secretary told the House earlier, support for the Jewish community in London is being stepped up. The police have the unshakable backing of this Government—and, I am sure, the whole House—in their effort to find the perpetrators of this awful crime, who should be in no doubt whatsoever that they will be pursued and made to face the consequences. I also wish to echo the Home Secretary's words in thanking the police and the fire and rescue service for the speed and professionalism of their response, which was vital in averting an even worse outcome.

Shocking though it was to wake to this morning's developments, I know that for many this outrage, occurring as it has at a time of profound distress and vulnerability in our Jewish communities, will not have come as a surprise given the vicious torrent of antisemitism that was unleashed following the 7 October attacks, a dreadful manifestation of which we saw, to our horror, in Manchester last year when Heaton Park Hebrew Congregation synagogue was the subject of a sickening act of terrorism on Yom Kippur. Today, as at that profoundly difficult moment and as in the aftermath of the subsequent atrocity on Bondi Beach in Sydney, we declare once more that we stand with our Jewish friends, colleagues and neighbours, and with the oldest hatred on the rise, we assert our unwavering commitment to defeating it.

The Prime Minister has made it clear that this Government will lead the way, through, for instance, the relentless national security effort that is being mounted around the clock by MI5 and the police, who of course have our full backing in their work to detect and disrupt plots targeting the Jewish community in our country. While those activities must necessarily take place away from view, our willingness to take strong and decisive action when threats present themselves has been underscored again in recent weeks, with three men jailed over a foiled terrorist plot targeting the Jewish community in Greater Manchester and a separate investigation of suspected surveillance of locations and individuals linked to the Jewish community in the London area, which resulted in two men being charged last week under the National Security Act 2023.

While our country's national security and law enforcement agencies retain a relentless focus on the threat, such is its perseverance and potency that we have a responsibility to do more. It is a terrible indictment that we should need to do this, but we must do it and we are doing it. The demand for extra measures and precautions, such as those provided so expertly by the Community Security Trust, is only intensifying. That is why, in the wake of the Manchester attack, we increased the funding available via the Jewish community protective security grant to a record £28 million, a level that we are maintaining in the next financial year. We are also strengthening police powers for dealing with repeat protests, which have been a source of concern for many in the Jewish community, and the Home Secretary has commissioned Lord Macdonald to undertake a review to consider how public order laws can be improved to keep hate and intimidation off our streets.

However, we can only prevent the manifestations of this evil if we address the cause by tackling the very existence of antisemitism in this country. That means adopting and enforcing a posture of zero tolerance in every part of our society. The Online Safety Act 2023 will compel tech platforms to protect UK users from illegal antisemitic material. Meanwhile, we are acting to drive antisemitism out of the NHS, with stronger mandatory training and an urgent review led by Lord Mann. In recognition of the importance of education in preventing young minds from being polluted, we have committed £7 million to combat antisemitism in schools, colleges and universities, and we have launched a review, led by Sir David Bell, into antisemitism in schools and colleges, which is expected to conclude in the autumn. We do all of this and more because it is right, because it is our responsibility and because, as the Home Secretary has repeatedly made clear, no one should have to live a smaller Jewish life in this country.

I will finish by addressing our Jewish community directly: whether you live here in London or in any other part of the United Kingdom, please know that we stand with you, we are here for you, and we will do everything in our power to keep you and your family safe—not just today, after this appalling incident, but every day. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

5.6 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): As always, I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

This was a hideous antisemitic attack on a charity that provides ambulance services not just for the Jewish community, but for the whole community. I saw that for myself some months ago when I visited the Stamford Hill branch of Hatzola, and my hon. Friend the Member for Castle Point (Rebecca Harris) has been a great supporter of the Hatzola branch in her constituency. Let me start by thanking Hatzola and the emergency services for their response this morning.

Antisemitic incidents are on the rise. The Jewish community has been targeted again and again, including through the Islamist murder at Heaton Park synagogue last autumn. The Community Security Trust recorded the second highest ever number of antisemitic incidents last year. The truth is that the Government must do a lot more to fight antisemitism. We have seen a recent antisemitic murder and a surge in antisemitism, but too little has been done, as this morning's outrage demonstrates. This morning I visited the Hatzola branch in Golders Green with the shadow Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel). I spoke to dozens of people in Golders Green who are now living in fear, including a mother who is worried about sending her children to school.

Antisemitism often goes hand in hand with Islamist extremism, a threat we know all too well. Fifty-two people were murdered on 7/7, we had the murder of Sir David Amess, and 22 victims were killed in the Manchester Arena attack—all perpetrated by Islamist extremists. Some 75% of MI5's terrorism caseload relates to Islamist extremism, and 94% of terrorist murders in the last 25 years have been perpetrated by Islamists, yet only 10% of the Prevent caseload is Islamist. I ask the Minister again, just as I have asked before: what is he going to do about that?

In October, I asked the Home Secretary to use her power under section 3(5) of the Immigration Act 1971 to remove any foreign national who expresses extremist views, sympathy for violence, or terrorism, antisemitism or any other religious hatred. She said that she can exercise that power where someone is not

“conducive to the public good”.

It is a wide-ranging power, and she should use it. The Home Secretary said that she was reviewing the use of the power and promised to update the House, but we have heard nothing since, so will the Security Minister update the House on what the Government will do with that power? Once the perpetrators of today's attack have been caught, will he use that power to deport them if they are not British citizens?

Since Hamas's attack on 7 October, we have seen protesters marching on London's streets and openly calling for jihad and intifada. These are express calls for violence. We should no longer tolerate chants at these marches that encourage and endorse violence, and which fuel antisemitism. They must simply not be allowed. We must do more to prevent antisemitic attacks from happening in the first place, so will the Security Minister commit to authorising the intrusive surveillance powers usually reserved for counter-terrorism or to counter state threats to be used to identify and prevent antisemitic attacks that are in the planning?

Finally, since July 2024, 67,000 illegal immigrants have arrived here by small boat, which is a 45% increase on the period before. As I have said, the small boat crisis

is not just a border crisis, but a national security crisis. How can we be sure that these unvetted illegal migrants are not linked to terror groups or extremists, such as the small boat illegal migrant Mosab Al-Gassas, who had previously posted on social media brandishing a gun and spouting support for Hamas? If we are serious about protecting the public, we must leave the European convention on human rights and remove all illegal immigrants within a week of their arrival.

Warm words alone for the Jewish community are no longer enough. We need to take the tough actions that will make a difference, some of which I have mentioned. The litmus test is not the good intentions the Minister has expressed today; the litmus test is taking the tough, difficult actions that will actually eradicate antisemitism from this country.

Dan Jarvis: Let me begin with what I hope is a point of consensus between the shadow Home Secretary and me. I think he will agree that any attack on the Jewish community is not just an attack on the Jewish community or on London, but an attack on our whole country. I think we send a very powerful message as a House of Commons if we stand together in saying that such attacks are completely unacceptable.

The shadow Home Secretary referred, I think slightly unfairly, to warm words. These are not warm words; these words are a statement of solidarity on behalf of the Government, and I hope on behalf of all of us in this place, in standing with the Jewish community at what is a very significant point of challenge for them. We recognise that, and we give an absolute commitment to do everything we possibly can and to use every power we have to keep that community safe—and if there is a requirement for additional powers, we will make sure we put those in place.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the Community Security Trust. I want to take this opportunity, and I know he will join me in doing so, to pay tribute to the extraordinary dedication and work not just of those employed by the CST, but of the extraordinary volunteer team, whom I have seen, as other hon. Members will have done, who do an extraordinary job under difficult circumstances. It is an inspiring organisation—I spoke to the chief executive this morning—and I know all of us in this place will want to do everything we possibly can to support it.

The right hon. Gentleman made a number of points, some of which I think were reasonable and some slightly less so. I think he made an entirely valid point about the need to counter extremism in our country, and these are measures that we are seeking to take. Again, I would never want to have this debate in a party political environment, but we do need to clamp down on those who seek to bring hate to our country, and the Home Secretary is absolutely clear that she will use all the powers available to her to do that.

The shadow Home Secretary made a reasonable point about Prevent referrals, and he has flagged that with me previously. That is not new to this Government—it goes back under the previous Government—and we are looking very carefully at what we can do to ensure that there is much less of the mismatch he described. I give him an assurance that we are looking very closely at that. He also referenced the concern that I know lots of hon. Members will have about the protest activity that has

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taken place in recent times. That is precisely why the Home Secretary has commissioned Lord Macdonald to look at the issue, and we expect him to make recommendations as soon as he is practically able to do so.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): I thank my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman), who is sitting beside the Minister for Security, for her urgent action today, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky), who I know will speak shortly, from the other side of Barnet.

The four Barnet MPs are very upset and worried about what happened early this morning, and I just want to put on record our huge thanks to all the partners who have jumped into action, such as the gold group, the Mayor of London, the police and the borough authorities. Everybody is sending out huge messages of support, and we have heard with great gratitude the very strong security message that this incident will be investigated fully, and that no stone will be left unturned until we find the alleged perpetrators of this incident.

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend and to other colleagues for the work they have done. It is at moments like this when we see the very worst of our country, but also the best: the brave men and women in the police, our intelligence services, and the fire and rescue service stepping forward to do everything they can to provide support. The police are engaged in a very significant operation to try to track down the perpetrators of this awful crime and bring them to justice. I know that they will have my hon. Friend's support and the support of the whole House.

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

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I, like so many Londoners, woke up this morning to the news of this cowardly attack. I felt that horrible pit of disgust in my stomach, and a deep concern for my Jewish friends and neighbours. I want to express my heartfelt sympathies to Jews across London and the country, and to affirm that hate like this will never be normalised. It is the opposite of everything our city stands for.

We welcome the Government's commitment to replace the ambulances quickly, but will the Minister set out what immediate safety measures are being put in place for local residents and key Jewish sites across the country? I reiterate that our efforts in this place must be focused not just on responding after the fact, but on making meaningful interventions beforehand to stop distressing crimes like this happening in the first place. That means recognising that we have an antisemitism problem in this country and that, crucially, we must take action to tackle the root causes of it. Will the Minister set out what steps will be taken under the recently unveiled cohesion strategy to bring an end to the scourge that is antisemitism in this country?

Will the Minister finally listen to our calls to reverse the cuts to Metropolitan police officer numbers? Since May 2024, it is estimated that 2,508 officers have been lost,

while the Met commissioner has warned of the increasing difficulty of keeping Londoners safe with a shrinking force. Visible policing plays a key role in deterring and investigating this kind of crime, and it reassures communities, such as our Jewish community, because no one should live in fear as a result of their religion. Will the Minister explain what the Government will do now to get more, not fewer, police officers on London's streets to stop horrific incidents like this ever happening again?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that hate like this will never be normalised. I spoke to the assistant commissioner this morning and, along with senior colleagues in the Metropolitan police, I know there is an extensive operation under way to provide reassurance to communities across London. There will be engagement taking place as we speak. The assistant commissioner met community leaders earlier on this afternoon and we are expecting a statement from the Met commissioner later today. That engagement with communities and that visible policing presence are under way.

The hon. Gentleman is right to refer to the cohesion strategy. Let me give him an assurance on the importance we attach to it. There are lots of different bits of Government engaged, because this is a challenge right across the system—the Home Office, the Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care and local government—and we will ensure that all that work is properly co-ordinated in the way that he would expect.

Let me also agree with the hon. Gentleman's sentiment about police numbers. We inherited a situation in which police numbers were declining. The Home Secretary and colleagues in the Home Office are crystal clear that we want to drive those numbers up.

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, and I echo his thanks to the police and the other emergency services. This antisemitic attack happened only a few hundred metres from my Hendon constituency. So many people in my community, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, rely on the work of the selfless volunteers of Hatzola in both Golders Green and Edgware. It has been my honour to visit Hatzola Edgware on a number of occasions. This is not just an attack on our Jewish community, despicable though that is; it is an attack on Britain and on our core values. It was good to meet the Prime Minister earlier today with community leaders to discuss what can be done to defeat this tide of antisemitism. Can the Minister give more information to the House on what is being done to co-ordinate between the police and community organisations to give the reassurance that my community so desperately wants?

Dan Jarvis: I can provide my hon. Friend with the assurance he seeks. Extensive engagement has been under way throughout the day and it will continue for as long as it is required, along with a visible policing presence in the right place. He is right to pay tribute to all those who have stepped forward to volunteer in the way that he described; I know that it is a huge priority for the Prime Minister to ensure that their efforts are recognised. I know that my hon. Friend will understand the seriousness with which we take this issue.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On an occasion like this, it is right that we should not apportion blame, but try to unite as the House of Commons and say that it is fine to be a critical friend of Israel, but it is not fine to go around fully masked up and call for the destruction of Israel and therefore the Jewish people. I think we should be even more positive and say that we love the Jewish people and think they are the most successful immigrant community we have ever had in this country. They are fantastic, they have our complete, utter and full support, and we will protect them at every opportunity.

Dan Jarvis: I agree with the Father of the House, who makes a very powerful point; hopefully there is consensus on all of that. I want to take the opportunity to reiterate the Government's horror at what happened; what took place in the early hours of this morning was despicable. Extensive activity is under way to try to hunt down those who are responsible, and I very much hope we will see progress on that in the near future.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): In our synagogues each week, we pray for the King and for the Almighty to grant wisdom to all his counsellors. Never has such wisdom been more essential, for antisemitism and Iranian-backed terrorism are evil bedfellows. Will the Minister join me in supporting all the work of the CST and our emergency services at this terrible time?

Dan Jarvis: I will join my hon. Friend in that. The CST is very well known to Members across the House—I have worked closely with it for a long time. It is an inspiring organisation, and the Government are proud to count it as a close and trusted partner. At this time of challenge for the CST and for our Jewish communities, I hope very much that the whole country will stand alongside and support the trust's work.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Hatzola is an organisation that I know very well; it supports many of my constituents and is supported voluntarily by many of my constituents. It was attacked simply because of its connection to the Jewish community, which is why the community feels so deeply fearful right now. The Minister has rightly said that no Jew should have to lead a smaller life, but right now, they are—people are having to hide symbols of their faith. They fear that antisemitism is simply not taken as seriously in this country as other forms of racism. What can the Minister do to reassure my constituents and Jews up and down the country, who are deeply worried right now, that that is not the case?

Dan Jarvis: I can absolutely provide the right hon. Gentleman with the assurance that he rightly seeks. I hope he will have seen the responses earlier from the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary, and I hope he understands the seriousness with which the Government take these issues. He is right to challenge us in the way he has, but I give him an absolute assurance of the seriousness with which we take these issues. We will ensure that the police and intelligence agencies have all the resources they need to target those who would seek to cause division and disruption within our Jewish

communities. Those communities are precious and valued within our country, and this Government will do everything we can to support them.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I heard from my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman), who met Hatzola in her constituency, how only half an hour after the attack, volunteers were taking calls to support people. Hatzola does amazing work across Hackney, the borough that I partly represent, supporting Homerton hospital in particular. It is much more than just a nice-to-have; it is an essential part of our health service.

The Minister rightly raises the wider issues. My constituency has a smallish Jewish community, and I have a few constituents who are frightened to leave their homes and whose children are frightened to bring friends home from school, and not just because of what happened today—this was the case prior to that. They are living their life in a diminished form. Can the Minister give us a bit more information about how the cohesion strategy will help to educate adults, as the Bell inquiry will help to change the curriculum in our schools?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of the cohesion strategy. I assure her that there is a lot of work on this issue being led by colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and we are working to ensure that it is joined up with all the different Departments. We completely recognise the concerns and fears that have been expressed by members of the Jewish community, and we are determined to make sure that the response of this Government is necessary and proportionate, given the nature of the threat that they face.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I join the Minister in condemning this evil attack and expressing my sympathy with the British Jewish community. To build on the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hertsmere (Sir Oliver Dowden), we have been talking about this issue for years, including when I sat on the Government Back Benches in the last Parliament. When I went to a Hanukkah event in my constituency led by the South Bucks Jewish Community in 2024, the rabbi opened the ceremony with words of welcome, saying “even though we no longer feel safe to meet as a community”. That should shock each and every one of us. Does the Minister accept that we need not incremental change or modest change but a sea change in the way that we as a country put our arms around the British Jewish community and protect them?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Member for that point and the way in which he raised it. I do accept that this Government—any Government—need to do everything they possibly can to provide the reassurance that the Jewish community both need and deserve. Some of that is about resource, and I am pleased that we have been able to increase protective security funding for Jewish communities to record levels, but he is right that more needs to be done beyond the allocation of resource. That is why a range of different activities are under way across Government to try to respond to this particular threat. I think that all of us have a responsibility to be led by the Government and to make sure that we are

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crystal clear about our opposition to this activity and in saying that we will always do everything we can to stand against antisemitism wherever it raises its ugly head.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I join the Minister in condemning the abhorrent attacks we saw in Golders Green this morning. I pay tribute to Rabbi Irit Shillor and the work that she does to support not only Harlow's Jewish community but the wider community of Harlow. The Jewish community will rightly be concerned after this morning's events, so what reassurance can the Minister give the Harlow Jewish community that he and his Government will do whatever they can to keep the Jewish community safe?

Dan Jarvis: I can give my hon. Friend the reassurances that he seeks, and hopefully the words I have spoken will reassure those in his community about how seriously the Government take these kinds of threats. It is important to say that this must involve a range of different organisations. That is precisely why, in my earlier remarks, I detailed the work taking place in academia, the NHS and local government. We will ensure that wherever there are challenges in this regard, our response is joined up and properly resourced, and that we are clear across Government and across society that this kind of antisemitic behaviour is not acceptable.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The United Kingdom remains one of the most tolerant nations in the world, but social cohesion can never be taken for granted, as the Minister knows. As well as the welcome work to increase security around faith schools and places of worship, what more can the Government do through the Secretary of State for Education to teach all communities that tolerance and respect for all is a fundamental tenet of being British?

The Minister mentions the Bell review. I welcome the £7 million of funding, but the review is looking at schools and colleges, not at universities. A recent report showed that 49% of Jewish students have witnessed glorification of Hamas and Hezbollah on campus. What more can the Minister do to work with universities, not just schools and colleges, to root out antisemitism?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who made important points about social cohesion and, more widely, about the importance of activity that takes place in academia and education. I referenced the £7 million that the Government have previously invested, and I know that the Union of Jewish Students attended the meeting with the Prime Minister earlier today.

I would like to take this opportunity to commend the extraordinary work of the Holocaust Education Trust—an organisation that many hon. Members will know and will have worked closely with. Let me further reflect on the right hon. Gentleman's important points.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): Alongside many inside the House and outside it, I condemn the attack on the Jewish-run ambulance service in Golders Green. The attack was clearly antisemitic, and it is right that the authorities treat it as such. My constituency is a diverse and inclusive place where many people of all

ages and faiths live side by side peacefully. The Minister has spoken about community cohesion, but will he outline what immediate steps are being taken to reassure communities like mine?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his important points. Immediate steps are being taken by the Metropolitan police, because it is vital that there is that presence, reassurance and engagement at community level. Having spoken earlier to the assistant commissioner, who I have previously worked with closely, I know how seriously the Metropolitan police are taking this issue, and I know that work is under way as we speak. I can therefore give my hon. Friend the reassurances she seeks, but we can never be complacent about these things. While there is clearly a focus on this activity today, we need to ensure that that continues tomorrow and for as long as is necessary.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): What happened at Golders Green this morning was simply sickening and abhorrent, and the rise of antisemitism should alarm all of us in the House. The recent attacks on the Jewish community have been national and international in scope, and we simply do not know where the next attack might be. Will the Minister assure me that he is working with police forces right across the United Kingdom and doing everything possible to share information and seek co-operation when required?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Member makes an important point. He is right that it was sickening, but not surprising. He also made the important point, which perhaps has not been reflected on previously, about the truly international scale of the challenge. Yes, there are significant challenges that we are grappling with here in the UK, but that is a shared endeavour with our international partners; we want to work incredibly closely with them on it. His basic point about co-ordinating activity with the police around the country is a good and fair one. I will ensure that that activity is under way.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): This was an appalling antisemitic incident, targeting those providing urgent medical care. It was not just a criminal act but a direct attack on our shared values of respect and tolerance. Emergency service workers should never have to fear for their safety. Will the Minister outline what immediate steps are being taken to reassure the Jewish community across the whole United Kingdom?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right that it was sickening, and she was right to raise the important issue of reassurance. A reassurance operation will be under way, conducted by the Metropolitan police and other police forces around the country.

It just happens that the Community Security Trust is having its annual dinner this evening, and I know that a number of hon. Members will be attending. Important messages of solidarity will be delivered at that gathering by both Sir Mark Rowley and the Home Secretary. It is important that that event takes place.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The people who carry out such attacks are mainly seeking to terrorise the target community, but the people who plan such attacks often have another end in mind, which is to set

two communities at each other's throats. Without revealing anything that one should not about the techniques of the Security Service, can we spare a moment to pay tribute to those members of the Muslim community who bravely go undercover to infiltrate plots of this sort, who are briefly seen in court, often under an assumed name, when convictions are assured, and without whose work many more such plots would succeed than is the case?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very sage point. I make this point in more general terms, because clearly I am not going to get into the specifics of what happened this morning, but he is right to draw a distinction between those who plan the attacks and those who conduct them. I am beyond proud of the work of our intelligence services, who recruit from lots of different backgrounds in our country. They do extraordinary work. By necessity, they do their work in the shadows, but I know that I speak for the whole House when I say that we owe them a huge debt of gratitude.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): May I express my solidarity and the solidarity of all Rochdaliens with Britain's Jewish community in the wake of this horrific attack on the ambulance station in Golders Green? Whenever such an antisemitic outrage has occurred, my Muslim constituents stress to me repeatedly that it is not done in their name. They want to make that absolutely clear. In fact, antisemitism has now become normalised, not just offline in the playground, but online everywhere, as we saw in Louis Theroux's documentary "Inside the Manosphere" last week. Does the Minister agree that Ofcom needs to take much tougher action against antisemitism online, perhaps by having a specific strategy to target men and boys who are being deliberately targeted by the antisemites in our community?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I can give him an assurance that, through the defending democracy taskforce, we work closely across Government and with law enforcement, and we look closely at the work of Ofcom. He will know that the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology is the lead Department, and it sits as a key member of the taskforce. We will want to assure ourselves that all the powers are being used appropriately, and if not, we will want to ask why not.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): Does the Minister agree with members of the Jewish community who think the hate marches increase the risk of antisemitic attacks, and if he does, will he ban them?

Dan Jarvis: The Home Secretary has just banned a hate march.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): I share the Minister's disgust at the horrific arson attack today, which will further worry the Jewish community and all decent-minded people in Altrincham and Sale West, and across our country. He rightly spoke of the importance of strong and decisive action to tackle the torrent of antisemitism, so can he tell the House when we will see concrete implementation milestones for the Government's "Protecting What Matters" action plan?

Dan Jarvis: These issues are an urgent priority for the Government. My hon. Friend will know that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is the lead Department, but we work closely with all Departments to ensure that our response is proportionate and in line with the nature of the threat. Although people's minds have understandably been focused by what has occurred this morning, I can give him an absolute assurance that we are on these matters seven days a week and are working across Government to ensure that we keep the public safe.

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): These despicable attacks have been claimed by Harakat Ashab al-Yamin al-Islamiya, a group assessed by analysts to be an Iranian proxy linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Hezbollah. Emma Schubart of the Henry Jackson Society has warned that this reflects a pattern of co-ordinated attacks on Jews across Europe. Do the Government share that assessment, and if so, when will they finally proscribe the IRGC? The best time to do that was 10 years ago; the second best time is now.

Dan Jarvis: I know that the hon. Member will understand that, given that there is a live counter-terrorism police operation under way, it would not be appropriate for me to speculate about the linkage of this activity with other activities that have taken place on continental Europe. I hear his point about the proscription of the IRGC. I hope that he will understand that the Government commissioned Jonathan Hall to look at our terrorism legislation. Mr Hall has made a series of recommendations, the essence of which is that we need new legislation to be able to proscribe state-backed entities. The Government intend to bring forward that legislation as soon as we can.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): We should not be surprised by the attacks that happened in Golders Green last night because after all, we have been promoting this antisemitism in various ways across the United Kingdom—whether it is the sectarianism of politics that we have seen from some parties directed towards the Jewish community, whether it is a Labour council in Kent promoting an art show that shows Jews eating babies with blood dripping from their teeth, whether it is a chief constable trying to ban Jewish fans based on lies, or whether it is the leader of the Green party encouraging councils to boycott trade with Israel, even though that would be illegal. Does that not set the atmosphere that Jewish people are a target because Jewish people in some way are doing things that are evil and wrong?

Dan Jarvis: I do not think anybody was surprised by what happened this morning, but it is the absolute requirement of Government to ensure that our response is proportionate given the nature of the threat. Ultimately, all individuals and organisations have a responsibility for their own conduct. Some of the points the right hon. Member makes are not unreasonable. There has been, in my view, an unacceptable climate in recent times where certain sections of certain organisations have thought that it is almost acceptable to allow this kind of antisemitic hate. That is not the view of this Government; the view of this Government is that it is completely unacceptable. That is why we are organising to ensure

[*Dan Jarvis*]

that we have the resources marshalled in the right place at the right time to give our Jewish communities the reassurance that they absolutely need and deserve.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): This was a horrific attack on the Jewish community. While Jewish communities experience disproportionately high levels of antisemitic incidents, offences targeting Jewish victims are statistically far less likely to result in a prosecution. Does the Minister accept that the Jewish community does not trust that the law will work to protect them? What further assurances can he provide them at this difficult time?

Dan Jarvis: I completely understand that many members of the Jewish community are living their lives under the threat of the kind of activities that we saw this morning, but I hope that nobody here thinks that that is remotely acceptable. That is why we all have a responsibility to redouble our efforts and ensure that not only are we seeking to provide that reassurance, but more practically, we are putting in place the right laws and powers and ensuring that we have the right resource to take on that threat.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): My thoughts are with the Jewish community in north London. There is something particularly abhorrent about the destruction of ambulances, and actions motivated by extreme hatred must be condemned. No one anywhere should be made to feel at risk because of their race or religion. How are risks to the wider Jewish community, particularly those communities that are perhaps scattered or individual families or even individuals, being assessed at present—this is of course relevant to Wales—because so many people feel at risk?

Dan Jarvis: I completely agree with the right hon. Member. It is beyond abhorrent that anyone would seek to target ambulances providing an extremely important and valuable public service in the way that we have seen this morning. She is also right to make the wider point about ensuring that no community is left behind. While the attack this morning has taken place in London, as I mentioned in my earlier remarks, we saw a terrible terrorist attack take place in Greater Manchester last October. Wherever we have Jewish communities in our country, we need to ensure that the police and the range of other organisations provide the support that is obviously now required.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): In a previous incarnation, I was fortunate enough to be a parliamentary candidate in Hackney. I was invited to meet Hatzola in Stamford Hill, and I was blown away by its incredible work. The fact that Hatzola is integrated into the London ambulance service and provides such a vital community resource is extremely commendable, and I pay tribute to it.

I am conscious that emergency workers are incredibly vulnerable at the best of times. Given that Hatzola is liveried and clearly marked as effectively Jewish, what steps is the Minister taking to mitigate the additional vulnerabilities of the Hatzola crews going forward to ensure that they are not targeted in any type of copycat attacks?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks about the important work of Hatzola. He makes a good point about whether we can do more to provide support and reassurance to emergency workers who are quite literally engaged in lifesaving activity. He will understand that the incident took place only a number of hours ago, so we are dealing with the immediate response to it, but I commit to considering his point carefully.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I welcome the additional support that the Government are providing to our Jewish community. As a Muslim, I know how reassured the Muslim community was by Government support following arson attacks at a mosque. One of the biggest problems is on social media, particularly X, where extreme antisemitic remarks have been made about this incident. We know that this voluntary ambulance service supports not just the Jewish community but all communities. The perpetrators of this abhorrent and callous act must be apprehended. Does the Minister agree that it is important to expedite their apprehension so as to send a message of deterrence that says an attack on any community member or community asset is an attack on every single person in this country?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks, which I know will be appreciated in the Jewish community. He is right to raise the considerable concern in every corner of the House about the online threat. I hope he sees that we take it incredibly seriously. A lot of work is under way, led by the defending democracy taskforce, and he will know that we have commissioned Philip Rycroft to conduct a review of this area. The Online Safety Act 2023 will provide some protections, but the Government have been crystal clear that if those protections are insufficient, we will have to do more.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Among the many reviews that he cited, the Minister mentioned Jonathan Hall's review, which is getting a bit long in the tooth. Surely, given the events in north London and the middle east this month, its recommendations should now be expedited, as there appears to be cross-party support for the concept that the IRGC should be proscribed. Why can the Wagner Group—a state-linked entity—be proscribed, but the IRGC cannot, even without changing the Terrorism Act?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Jonathan Hall, who has done a lot of good work in this area, made recommendations, which the Government have accepted. We are looking closely at the best way to provide the legislation that he recommended. I take the right hon. Gentleman's point about urgency. As a very experienced Member of this House, he will understand that I would be in a lot of trouble with the Leader of the House if I started speculating about future legislation. However, the Government have committed to bringing that forward, and we will do so as soon as we can.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his statement, and for assuring Jewish people across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland that we stand with them and that they are in our prayers. No one has any doubts about

the Government's commitment to standing alongside the Jewish diaspora, but this latest antisemitic attack shows the depth of depravity that those who hate Jews will sink to even today. The symbolism of an attack on ambulances for the sick and vulnerable cannot be lost on anyone. It is clear that Government steps to combat antisemitism do not go far enough, so what meaningful steps will the Minister take to support the Jewish community, whose only crime is to exist in Britain? They are British citizens, and they deserve full support from their Government.

Dan Jarvis: As always, I am grateful to the hon. Member for the wisdom he brings to these matters, about which he speaks with great experience and passion, as a long-standing champion of all those who seek to practise their religion. I hope that my remarks today and previously have conveyed the seriousness and importance that we attach to these issues. Nobody, regardless of their religion, should be in fear that they will be targeted in this country. That is why it is a priority for the Government to ensure that we have the right resources and legislative framework in place, and that we are taking necessary and proportionate actions.

With your indulgence, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to thank again—I know that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) will join me in doing so—the brave men and women who serve in our police. As we speak, they are out there seeking to apprehend the perpetrators of this attack, and we wish them every good fortune in their work.

TOBACCO AND VAPES BILL: PROGRAMME (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the Tobacco and Vapes Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 26 November 2024 (Tobacco and Vapes Bill: Programme):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion two hours after their commencement.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Christian Wakeford.*)

Question agreed to.

Tobacco and Vapes Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I inform the House that Lords amendments 21, 22, 29, 32 to 34, 37, 38, 43 to 48, 51 to 59, 62, 77 and 78 engage the Commons' financial privilege. If any of these Lords amendments are agreed to, I will cause the customary entry waiving the Commons' financial privilege to be entered in the *Journal*. I call the Minister to move the motion. I believe it is her debut, so congratulations and welcome—enjoy.

Clause 1

SALE OF TOBACCO ETC

5.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mrs Sharon Hodgson): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss:

Lords amendments 2 to 27.

Lords amendment 28, and Government amendments (a) to (c) consequential on Lords amendment 28.

Lords amendment 29, and Government amendments (a) to (c) consequential on Lords amendment 29.

Lords amendments 30 to 123.

Mrs Hodgson: Before I address Lords amendment 1, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), for her work on the Bill and the wider prevention agenda. I also extend my thanks to Baroness Merron for her work in the other place, ensuring that the Bill was expertly steered through the legislative process.

This is a landmark Bill, and I am honoured to have taken on responsibility for it as the House considers the amendments made in the other place. Creating a smoke-free generation is the most significant public health intervention since the ban on smoking in public places in 2007, under the last Labour Government. Tobacco claims around 80,000 lives every year, and in England it is responsible for a quarter of all cancer deaths. Someone is admitted to hospital almost every minute as a result of smoking, and up to two-thirds of deaths among current smokers can be attributed directly to smoking. Those are not abstract figures; they represent lives cut short by an entirely preventable harm.

The Bill also takes decisive action to tackle the rapid rise in the use of vapes and other nicotine products, particularly among young people, protecting a new generation from nicotine addiction. All the amendments to be considered today have been accepted by the Government, starting with Lords amendments 1, 2, 39 and 40, which change the parliamentary procedure for age verification regulations from negative to affirmative in England and Wales, and in Northern Ireland. The regulations will set out how retailers may ensure compliance when verifying a customer's age. The changes were made as a result of a recommendation from the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee, which the Government accept.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV) *rose*—

Mrs Hodgson: I have always wanted to give way to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Jim Shannon: Well done, Minister—it has been a joy to see the hon. Lady's elevation to the position she now holds, and I wish her well. Is she aware that Lord Dodds, a DUP Member of the other House, continued to push for changes to age verification in the Bill, and that my party's primary motivation for the amendments was retailer protection? Without strict parliamentary scrutiny of age verification rules, small businesses will face disproportionate burdens compared with large supermarkets, and the moving age restriction, which rises by one year every year, makes manual verification increasingly difficult for shopkeepers over time. Has the Minister had the opportunity to address that issue, as it concerns many people?

Mrs Hodgson: We do not intend to place undue burdens on retailers. Indeed, it should be easier because there is one only date that anyone will have to remember when verifying somebody's age, which is 1 January 2009. It should be a lot easier as nobody has to do any complicated arithmetic in their head any more. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention.

Lords amendments 3 and 4 provide a narrow exemption to the Bill's ban on vape vending machines, allowing them to be used in adult mental health settings in England and Wales, and only in areas “wholly or mainly” for patients. That aims to support adult in-patients who may face limits on accessing vaping products used to manage nicotine addiction. The Government remain committed to the wider ban on vending machines, to prevent children and young people from being able to bypass age restrictions on vapes and nicotine products. However, we are aware that adults with long-term mental health conditions have a much higher smoking prevalence than the general population, and ensuring that adult in-patients are able to access vapes from vending machines supports smoking cessation.

Lords amendments 6, 7, 9 to 18, 20, 25, 27, 29 to 31, and 92 to 102 relate to the creation of a licensing scheme in England, and allow for the licensing authority to enforce the future scheme in addition to trading standards. The change was made in response to feedback from local government stakeholders that such a measure would strengthen the scheme and help it to be managed more efficiently following its introduction. Lords amendments 21 to 24 and 28 allow the proceeds from the £2,500 fixed penalty notice for licensing offences in England and Wales to be retained by local authorities for enforcement purposes. The Bill previously required them to be returned to the consolidated fund after costs were deducted. That aligns with the Bill's approach to allow local authorities to retain proceeds from the £200 fixed penalty notices. Local authorities will be able to reinvest proceeds into strengthening enforcement of the Bill, and help to tackle the illicit market.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): May I, too, welcome the Minister to her post, and say how wonderful it is to see her leading on this important work? On a point of clarification, I am sure the measure she mentions will be welcomed by local authorities. Certainly the

experience in my area is that there are hotspots where local authorities struggle with enforcement on a range of issues, whether that is antisocial behaviour, noise, or other activities. Will the measure apply to all local authorities, or just those in some parts of the country? It would be wonderful if it is all local authorities.

Mrs Hodgson: As far as I am aware, it is all local authorities—I am getting an affirmative nod from the Box, so I am happy to give my hon. Friend that reassurance.

The Government have also tabled amendments (a) to (c) consequential on Lords amendments 28, and amendments (a) to (c) consequential on Lords amendment 29, to correct an error arising from changes made on Report in the other place. Without these amendments, trading standards officers in Wales would lose the ability to issue certain fixed penalty notices for a short period. The amendments resolve that issue and ensure consistency of approach between England and Wales.

On the Bill's ban on advertising vape and nicotine products, Lords amendments 72 and 106 to 109 create a specific defence and provide additional clarity for businesses, ensuring that they can promote non-branded vaping and nicotine products where that is done in an arrangement with a public health authority for public health reasons. It was always the Government's intention to allow public authorities to continue to promote effective smoking cessation tools, and these amendments strengthen that. I am pleased that we can provide reassurances to healthcare professionals that they can continue to promote smoking cessation materials in agreement with public health authorities.

There are also a number of more technical Lords amendments—71, 104, 105, 110 to 123—relating to advertising. They ensure that the policy works as intended by ensuring consistency of approach, and by taking account of changes to other legislation. They support the implementation and enforcement of the advertising provisions in the Bill.

The issue of filters has been raised throughout the passage of the Bill, both in this House and in the other place. Action on filters has been proposed by parties from across the political spectrum, because of concerns about environmental harms and harms to health. However, parliamentarians have advocated for restricting filters in a number of different ways. Lords amendments 32 to 34, 37 and 38, 42 to 48, 51 to 59, 62, 77 and 78, and 103 therefore contain a suite of powers that will enable secondary legislation to regulate filters, should evidence suggest that this is necessary. Regulations could ban filters in the future, or regulate their packaging, advertising and display. The evidence on the effect of filters, including their direct health impact, is still emerging, so no decision has been made on the use of those powers. The Government will look to consult on using the powers only if we think that there is sufficient evidence to justify action.

6 pm

Lords amendments 89 to 91 bring forward the commencement of the Bill's updated definition of a tobacco product in existing legislation from two months after Royal Assent to the day of Royal Assent, which reflects the Government's position that the existing definition captures all tobacco products currently on the market. There is therefore no need for any notice to be given before the new definition comes into force.

Lords amendments 49 and 50 provide additional powers to allow for the regulation of technology in vapes. This responds to the emergence of concerning examples of technology being used to make vapes more enticing to young people, including puff leaderboards and rewards linked to increased usage. Lords amendment 80 places a requirement on the Secretary of State to review the operation of the Act within four to seven years of Royal Assent, and to lay a report before Parliament setting out the conclusions of the review.

Jim Allister: On the review of the Bill, can the Government give an absolute guarantee that all its parts will apply to the whole United Kingdom, and particularly Northern Ireland? We are still, alas, subject to the EU's tobacco directive, which many believe conflicts with a key part of the Bill. If that aspect of the Bill is overturned in Northern Ireland, will the Government commit to legislating to ensure that it does apply across the whole UK?

Mrs Hodgson: We are content that the measures in the Bill, which are intended to apply to Northern Ireland, are compatible with the obligations under the Windsor framework. I hope that answers the hon. and learned Gentleman's concern.

We hope that the review will be a clear demonstration of the Government's commitment to monitoring progress against our smokefree ambition. Finally, Lords amendments 5, 8, 36, 41, 60 and 61, 63 to 76, 79, and 81 to 88 are technical amendments, some of which are consequential to the commencement of several other Acts. They also improve consistency in drafting across the Bill.

I encourage all Members to support all the amendments. These are meaningful changes that strengthen the Bill and respond to concerns raised by Members across the House and in the other place. The Government amendments tabled today will return to the other place for consideration, and I look forward to their timely agreement, and to the Bill completing its final stages.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I welcome the new Minister to her place; she is stepping in and taking the Bill through this stage, like a technical finishing substitute. I, too, have been substituted for my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), who spent a huge amount of time going through the Bill in Committee. I place my thanks to her on the record. Because of what she did, I have not had to do it, which has been a relief.

Eradicating smoking among young people is a public health priority. There may be differences in how we would achieve that, but the objective is shared by Members across the House, and we will not divide the House on the Bill tonight. There has been important common ground. As my colleague Lord Kamall said in the other place, smoking is harmful, vaping is less harmful than smoking, and not vaping is better than vaping. I think we can all agree that those principles should guide this legislation.

Those principles underpinned the Bill introduced by the previous Government. Since then, it has expanded, and at times it risks losing focus on its central aim of reducing smoking, particularly among young people.

The Opposition have been concerned, for example, about measures that have placed additional burdens on hospitality and retail, and about restrictions on vaping that could undermine its role as a quitting tool for adult smokers. I therefore welcome the changes made in the House of Lords and the Government's acceptance of them.

Further, the exemption of the adult mental health in-patient setting from the ban on vapes vending machines is a sensible and compassionate decision. Ministers were right to respond to concerns raised by peers, including my colleague Lord Moylan, and mental health charities, and we welcome the changes to clause 12. It is also right that local authorities will be able to retain proceeds from fixed penalty notices to support enforcement under the amendments to clause 39.

However, the Bill marks not the end of the process, but simply the end of the beginning. Key questions remain, including about the regulation of flavours and descriptors, advertising, and the designation of vape-free places. Those decisions will pretty much determine whether the Bill works in practice. It is therefore essential that the Government proceed in a way that is proportionate, enforceable and sustainable. We have already seen the importance of that balance. I welcome the decision to drop proposals to extend restrictions in pub gardens, which would have placed further strain on the hospitality sector. However, Ministers should take note. Restrictions should be targeted at areas where there is a clear and significant risk to public health. Possible considerations include restrictions outside schools and playgrounds, and I gently ask the Minister to reflect that approach as further regulations are developed.

The Lords also strengthened the Secretary of State's powers in relation to cigarette filters, enabling more effective regulation of components that contribute to environmental harm. In addition, a series of technical amendments were agreed to, aimed at clarifying definitions, improving compliance mechanisms and ensuring that secondary legislation is subject to the appropriate level of parliamentary scrutiny. For example, Lords amendment 1, relating to age verification regulations under clause 1, requires the affirmative procedure to be used, increasing oversight of a core part of the Bill. Those are sensible improvements that reflect the spirit of constructive scrutiny.

A key and central issue raised throughout the passage of the Bill has been the risk of unintended consequences, and particularly the growth of the illicit market. Whether we are for the Bill or against it, one concern unites us all: the black market. If regulation is too restrictive or poorly enforced, it will drive consumers away from the legal market and into illegal supply, which would undermine both public health and enforcement. The Opposition proposed an annual report on illicit tobacco and vaping activity, which the Government rejected. Given the concerns raised throughout the passage of the Bill, I would be grateful if the Minister could set out clearly how the Government will monitor and respond to changes in the illicit market.

We support the broad objectives of the Bill, but we will be watching closely. Its success depends not on its intentions, but on its delivery. When it was first introduced, I spoke about my experience as a junior doctor on a respiratory ward—my first hospital job. I saw patients struggling for breath, families in distress, and moments when, despite everything, there was little more that

[Dr Luke Evans]

could be done. The true test of the Bill is simple: in years ahead, fewer families should have to experience the same pain, suffering and despair. Let us hope this works.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I declare an interest: I am proud to be the co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health. I am pleased that the Bill has returned from the Lords with minimal amendments. All the amendments before us are either Government amendments or have Government support, so I hope that the Bill can achieve Royal Assent as soon as possible. I understand that the amendments put forward today by the Secretary of State are simply to correct drafting errors, so I assume that they will need only brief consideration by the Lords.

I am proud that the Bill will become law under a Labour Government. I hope that this Government will be remembered as the one that began the end of smoking in this country. In a few decades' time, I hope that people, particularly young people, will look back on smoking with disbelief, and will say, "Can you believe that selling tobacco, a lethal product, with the aim of getting us hooked, was ever allowed?"

Before coming to this place, I was a councillor in Gateshead council, where I held the public health portfolio from 2009 to 2019, and I chaired the Gateshead Tobacco Alliance. Tackling smoking was a central part of my work during that time, and it continues to be so today, because it remains the single biggest driver of health inequality in communities like mine and across the north-east.

In areas of high deprivation, smoking is not just a public health issue, but a deeply entrenched inequality. It is far more common in disadvantaged communities, where people are more likely to start smoking younger, find it harder to quit, and suffer the worst health outcomes as a result. That means higher rates of cancer, heart disease and respiratory illness, and lives cut tragically short. I have seen that reality at first hand over many years, and it is why action like that set out in the Bill is so important.

We should remember that tobacco is the single most harmful commercial product on sale in the world. It is sold for profit, while killing around two thirds of its long-term users and generating enormous returns for the companies that manufacture it. It is highly addictive, and many who start smoking wish they never had. Over 80,000 people die in this country every year because of it, and if it was introduced today, it is unthinkable that it would ever be permitted.

This Government are right to legislate for a smokefree generation, because there is a fundamental imbalance at the heart of this issue. Companies are making vast profits from a product that drives disease, kills two in three of their customers, deepens inequality and places huge costs on our NHS and wider society. We know how important it is to work towards a truly smokefree future, and to drive smoking rates down to as close to zero as possible.

In the north-east, we have a clear declaration for a smokefree future, endorsed by all directors of public health, our integrated care boards, Fresh, all 12 local councils

and all 10 local hospital trusts. That kind of whole-system commitment is vital, not just for improving health but for tackling poverty, supporting a more productive region and preventing the premature loss of loved ones to smoking-related disease. That work is already delivering results. In County Durham, smoking rates have nearly halved over the last decade, reflecting a sustained effort across prevention and support to help people quit. However, rates remain higher in some communities, so we cannot afford to lose focus now.

I am equally pleased about the strong cross-party support for the Bill. We saw that clearly in debates in the other place. The APPG on smoking and health is a great cross-party effort, which I am proud to co-chair with the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman).

There is much to welcome in the amendments. In particular, amendment 80, which requires the Government to review the Act, is an important addition that strengthens the Bill. To be clear, it is not a sunset clause, nor is it a test of whether the smokefree generation policy has succeeded in its health aims—the impact assessment makes it clear that we are playing the long game—but rather it will assess how smoothly implementation has progressed and what burdens, if any, have fallen on retailers. I am confident that it will report positively, and that it will encourage other countries to follow our lead. I note that a similar private Member's Bill is before the French Parliament, which I hope reassures colleagues about the policy's compatibility with EU law.

6.15 pm

The Bill includes a wide range of powers to regulate nicotine products, including vapes. That is very welcome, as usage among young people is far too high and marketing is widespread. It is hardly possible to travel on the tube these days without seeing advertising for nicotine pouches. While such products are certainly less harmful than smoking, and in the case of vapes they are very effective for smoking cessation, their marketing often presents them as lifestyle products for recreational use.

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for all her work as part of the APPG on smoking and health and in her former role as a councillor. Does she find it as shocking as I do that four in 10 adult smokers in this country believe vaping to be as harmful or more harmful than smoking, when it is one of the most effective tools to help people quit?

Mary Kelly Foy: I totally agree with my hon. Friend. We must keep in mind the fact that it is smoking that causes harm and death, not vaping, which can be a very successful cessation tool. I hope that the Bill will continue to push that.

Powers in the Bill cover marketing, display, packaging and product design, as well as flavours and their descriptions. However, there is a crucial balance to strike: reducing youth appeal without limiting access or effectiveness for those using the products to quit smoking. We must keep the harms of smoking firmly at the forefront of our minds.

A review after four to seven years feels appropriate to assess how the regulations are affecting usage and the market, and whether we are striking the right balance. This should be considered alongside the disposable vape ban and the forthcoming vape excise tax. I would

welcome reassurance today that the review will place the harms of smoking and the needs of smokers at its centre.

Many of the other amendments are technical in nature. I welcome the comprehensive definition of tobacco coming into force on Royal Assent, through Lords amendments 89, 90 and 91, as there is no need for a transition period. The exemption for vape-vending machines in Lords amendments 3 and 4 is also welcome, as others have noted, because we must ensure that vulnerable smokers are supported as much as possible to quit.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) has recently taken up her role, I welcome her to her position as Minister for Public Health. I look forward to working with her as this Bill, soon to be an Act, progresses, so that we can continue our work, and hopefully set out a road map for a totally smokefree country and to look again at introducing a polluter pays levy.

Finally, as someone who has spent many years advocating for a smokefree future, free of death and disease from tobacco, I know from speaking and listening to many people affected by smoking just how much the public want and need this action. We have already shifted the social norms around smoking and now, thanks to the work of organisations such as Action on Smoking and Health and Fresh, and the work of colleagues across the two Houses, a smokefree future is now possible. That is truly something to celebrate.

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

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I also welcome the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) to her position as Minister for Public Health. I had the privilege to serve on the Bill Committee, as other hon. Members did—indeed, I see some familiar faces in the Chamber. One of the things that struck me most was when the chief medical officer gave his evidence: he said that the Bill was not only the most significant piece of public health legislation in 30 years, but probably the single piece of legislation that will most help to address inequality. Inequality is multifactorial, but one of the main factors in the difference in life expectancy between certain wealthier areas and certain more deprived areas is the rate of smoking. This Bill will have a huge impact, especially on the communities for which we are really trying to improve life expectancy.

I am very pleased that the Government accepted so many amendments in the Lords. Some of the amendments that the Liberal Democrats are really keen on are regarding fixed penalty notices and require all the money from those fines to go to local public health initiatives, as directed by local authorities. We know that public health is so important, yet funding for such organisations is usually extremely limited, given the pressures on local authorities. Without the Lords amendments on fixed penalty notices, the money would go straight back to the Exchequer. We fundamentally believe that if we are serious about making a meaningful difference to people's lives, that money must be used in local smoking-cessation initiatives.

As the mental health spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, I am acutely aware of the benefits of the Lords amendments that support those with long-term

mental health conditions, who have higher rates of smoking than the general public. We know that going cold turkey is simply unrealistic and can even be dangerous. The exemption on vape vending machines in secure mental health hospitals ensures that people are supported professionally in quitting in a sustainable and maintained way that will not further damage their mental health.

I welcome the Lords amendments on regulating filters, which have cross-party support. Not only are filters an environmental issue, but they provide a false perception of safety to smokers. Ensuring that there is awareness of the lack of protection that these filters provide and of smoking as a whole is imperative if we are to ensure that people can make informed decisions about their health and wellbeing.

I am very pleased to support this Bill as it goes through Parliament; it is momentous and significant. We really appreciate the Government's accepting the Liberal Democrat Lords amendments, which will slightly improve how the Bill will be delivered. We are very pleased that this will be a strong and impactful Bill. We hope that it will deliver meaningful change on public health for generations to come and that we will have a smokefree generation growing up.

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to her new position and thank her predecessors for all the excellent work that they did in getting this legislation through Committee and in their representations in the House of Lords.

As has rightly been said by Members across this Chamber, this is a seminal piece of legislation that puts Britain at the forefront of smoking cessation. It is a Bill that will be modelled in other nations around the world and that reflects the changing nature of tobacco use in the United Kingdom. I remember that when I was growing up in the 2000s—not that many years ago some might say—smoking was a real problem in schools. Among under-18s in particular, 50% of cohorts were smoking. I am a former schoolteacher, and if we fast-forward to today, that figure has dramatically reduced. However, we see new technologies such as vapes and chewable tobacco taking the place of smoking.

I welcome many of the measures in this Bill and the fact that we are the cheerleaders taking it forward. I also welcome the cross-party consensus in accepting many of the Lords amendments and in accepting proposals from representative groups outside the House. Those proposals include the ban and restrictions on filters, which are evolving as I speak; in many cases around the world, filters are quickly changing, so they still remain a problem.

I accept some of the changes regarding vending machines. One of the big things discussed in Committee was vending machines in mental health and other health institutions as smoking-cessation tools. It is welcome that, as a result of the debate in Committee, we have accepted that vaping remains a smoking-cessation tool. Broadly speaking, until evidence is presented that shows otherwise, vapes are a far healthier product than cigarettes, so they continue to have a place in smoking cessation.

I thank the Government for accepting Lords amendments on the issuing of fines of up to £2,500 by local authorities and the ringfencing of that money for those councils. We know that councils do outstanding work in challenging

[Tristan Osborne]

illegal tobacco. My council in Medway in Kent has one of the most successful track records in identifying illegal tobacco and challenging those who market the product, but we know that that is just the tip of the iceberg. These products contain significant quantities of dangerous chemicals and other types of product that can be severely damaging to people's health.

I also want to mention restrictions on advertising. We know that there is gamification around tobacco products. We know that tobacco companies have sought to advertise specifically to young people so that they become addicted at ever younger ages. That is not a new technique; it has been happening for generations. I am glad that the Government have accepted Lords amendments on advertising to ensure that we restrict it on television and in other marketing efforts.

This Bill and all the amendments tabled by Members across this Chamber and in the other place, reflecting the views of different organisations in civil society, are broadly speaking extremely sensible, and I am glad that the House is not dividing on the Lords amendments tonight.

Lastly, I pay tribute to all the people working in our health services, who have been the most clear advocates for this Bill. They are the people who have been at the coalface every single day dealing with the consequences of tobacco, be they lung conditions, heart disease or concurrent conditions. It is because of their work over many years that we are here today with this Bill and these Lords amendments.

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): I served on the Bill Committee, and the subsequent process of scrutiny of this Bill has been entirely as expected. I was disappointed, though not surprised, by a failure to engage critically with its contents and to listen to the real concerns, in particular those of the high street businesses and the hospitality industry, which it will impact on most. I disagree with this socialist Bill on principle. Although I have a lot of time for my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), I am sorry to see my Front Benchers continuing to support the broad thrust of the Bill. It creates two tiers of adults and, at its core, is fundamentally illiberal.

However, I was willing to look beyond that and engage constructively with the Government to improve the legislation, which is why I tabled a series of common-sense amendments both in Committee and on Report. They would have allowed for the advertisement of smokefree products in venues that are already adult-only; required a consultation on the impact of advertising bans on retailers; and permitted the targeted advertisement of vapes and smokefree alternatives to existing adult smokers. Those proposals had some cross-party support in this House, and two of them were taken up by peers in the other place, notably Lord Udny-Lister and Lord Sharpe for the Opposition.

Throughout this process, I have engaged with the Minister and her predecessors through letters and written questions, and I genuinely thank her for her timely responses. However, it quickly became clear that there was little interest from the Government in improving this Bill, which is driven more by puritan ideology than by evidence or practicality. As a result, we have seen it

forced through by the Labour Government and their little helpers, the illiberal Democrats in the other place, with no regard to implementation or unintended consequences. Today, we are likely again to wave through 100 Government amendments from the Lords with minimal scrutiny.

All parties will welcome the fact that smoking rates in this country have declined from 30% in the early 2000s to 10.4% today. The free market has played a key role in that, with companies creating less harmful, smokefree alternatives such as vapes and nicotine pouches. There has been a consistent failure to recognise what an important role such products have played in the decline of smoking, and I hold concerns that the tight restrictions in this Bill on flavours and advertising will stop adult smokers from making the switch.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Although I disagree with much of what the hon. Gentleman is saying, I recognise the passion with which he speaks. Does he recognise that one issue with vape products is that a number of people who smoke vapes have not previously smoked cigarettes? That is a concern. Vapes are not just an alternative to smoking and a means to stop people smoking; young people are being drawn to vapes rather than cigarettes because of their colours. Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that that is an issue that needs to be addressed?

6.30 pm

Jack Rankin: I absolutely recognise that. We should make sure that these products are available to adult smokers—children should never start. However, I am afraid that the heavy-handed nature of this Bill risks sending the broad message to the general public that vapes are bad, which is not a message that we want to send to existing adult smokers. That point was ably made earlier by some of the hon. Gentleman's friends on the Labour Benches. I believe that we would be doing a disservice to, and setting back, the public health aims of the Bill by advancing it as it stands.

Lords amendment 72 rightly protects the advertisement of vapes and nicotine products as part of a public health campaign, but this demonstrates the great irony of the Bill. The Government know that vapes and nicotine products are an effective quit aid and actively promote them for that purpose, but at the same time they are bringing in measures that will reduce their availability and attractiveness to adult smokers.

If Ministers will not listen to Members of this House and peers in the other place, I had hoped that they might at least listen to the hundreds of high street businesses that took the time to write to them. I share those businesses' concerns about the extra pressures the Bill will place on corner shops, convenience stores and hospitality businesses, and how it will change the face of our high streets. That is where the real impact of the Bill will be felt. Those businesses are already under immense pressure from high energy costs, increasing national insurance contributions, the Employment Rights Act 2025 and changes to business rates—I will admit that the Government are nothing if not consistent. Corner shops and convenience stores now face losing custom due to the generational ban, alongside further compliance burdens through advertising restrictions and licensing schemes. The ban alone is expected to cause 7,680 store closures,

to cost 70,000 jobs and to cost retailers £6.52 billion. Those are not my numbers; they are from the Government's own impact assessment.

Dr Chambers: The hon. Gentleman raises legitimate points about the pressures facing small businesses at the moment, but does he not agree that there must be better ways of supporting small businesses than facilitating children to get cancer?

Jack Rankin: I am not suggesting that at all, sir. I am suggesting that the generational smoking ban that applies to smoking adults—I have never met a smoking adult who did not know that smoking was bad for them—is an illiberal policy that will create two tiers of adults. There is absolutely nothing wrong with people making decisions that we individually might think are bad for them. The evidence suggests the same, but people should be perfectly able to make those decisions should they choose to do so.

As legitimate businesses struggle, less scrupulous operators will inevitably fill the gap. The rapid growth of seemingly dodgy vape shops is a real concern for my constituents in Windsor, and it will be a concern for the constituents of Members right across the House. On the high street in Windsor, there are eight such shops. This is not a response to the demand for vapes, so we should ask whether fraud, money laundering or organised crime are taking place. We already have much evidence to say that they are. During a mystery shopper exercise in Windsor and Sunninghill, I witnessed the sale of illicit tobacco in three shops—it was alarmingly easy to obtain. The price difference explains why: a pack of illicit cigarettes can cost as little as £3.50, compared with £16.75 at retail. If such activity is taking place openly today, that raises the question of what else might be happening behind the scenes, and where this activity will go under the Bill.

The Bill risks turbocharging an already thriving black market. Tobacco receipts are down by £414 million, or 10%, in the last six months alone, and have fallen nearly 30% over the past decade, far outpacing the decline in smoking rates. More than one in four cigarettes consumed in Britain are now illicit, amounting to about 2 billion cigarettes each year, and the international evidence, including from Australia, should serve as a warning. Members who are sceptical should spend time with their local trading standards office to see the reality for themselves. That is why hundreds of retailers backed an amendment, tabled by Lord Murray of Blidworth, that would have replaced the generational ban with a minimum age of sale of 21. That would have been more enforceable and less costly. Naturally, that amendment was rejected.

Hospitality businesses have voiced real concerns about provisions in the Bill. That sector is so important to the economy in Windsor, and it is already struggling: since the 2024 Budget, job losses in the sector have made up around 50% of job losses overall. UKHospitality has said that many businesses have no capacity to absorb additional costs. Labour has hiked alcohol duty, is banning smoking and is considering health warnings on alcohol. Labour hates fun—it is no wonder that landlords are barring MPs from their pubs.

Amendments tabled in the other place by Lord Sharpe of Epsom would have protected our beer gardens from being designated as smokefree and allowed the advertising

of products that do not contain tobacco in age-gated venues, in a similar way to the amendments that I tabled in the Commons. Those amendments would have gone some way towards reassuring pubs and venues that the Government are not completely set on destroying them. Again, those amendments were rejected—or am I to understand that the Government have U-turned on that?

Before I conclude, I will briefly raise one further concern regarding the powers granted to Ministers to prohibit cigarette filters in future. The justification for this measure remains unclear, and it is yet another example of the broad and—I would argue—excessive powers that this Bill contains, including the host of Henry VIII powers it grants. Through this Bill, the Government have teed themselves up to bring in further puritan measures in the coming years without needing to consult this House. Any such steps will simply exacerbate the growth of the black market and the decline in duties collected.

Smoking rates are falling naturally, but this Bill may well reverse that trend, as it limits access to quit aids. It will likely mean less revenue for the Treasury as the black market grows, and it will cost our high street businesses billions. The amendment process has done little to address, or even acknowledge, those concerns. However, I will end on a more positive note by saying that I welcome Lords amendment 80, which requires a review of the Bill within four to seven years of its implementation. I believe that review will vindicate me in many of the concerns I have raised today and provide a future Government with the opportunity to address or, indeed, repeal those aspects of the Bill that prove most unworkable—not that I believe this Bill will get that far. It will not survive a change in Government, which will happen at the next opportunity afforded to the Great British people.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my position as chair of the responsible vaping all-party parliamentary group, in which I succeeded my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon).

As a member of the Bill Committee and part of the envious generation who will precede the smokefree generation this Bill promises, I welcome its return to the House and welcome the Minister for Public Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), to her place. It cannot go without saying that we also welcome the immense contribution of her predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), and her mammoth work in guiding the Bill through Report and Third Reading. Finally, I welcome the contributions of Members from all parts of the House to the Bill.

It is critical that the powers enabled by the extensive secondary legislation that this Bill provides for are employed with our constituents' health at the forefront of Ministers' minds. My primary hope is that the Bill will drastically bring down smoking-related illness and early death, which are still far too prominent among smokers in this country. It has been proven by all currently available evidence that for smokers, switching to vaping is a substantially preferable and healthier choice than continuing to smoke. To put it simply, if you do not smoke, do not vape, but if you do smoke,

[*Euan Stainbank*]

switching to vaping is a far preferable choice for your health. That is a message we should never tire of repeating, especially considering that four in every 10 smokers still believe that vaping is just as harmful as smoking, if not more harmful, despite the scientific and medical consensus.

As we pursue a smokefree generation for those turning 18 at the turn of the year, the Government must recommit at every opportunity—including through this Bill—to rebutting this harmful misunderstanding of the relative harm of vaping through both words and actions. Lords amendment 72 acknowledges this by providing a defence for public authorities to the offences in clause 113 on advertising that would enable the ongoing use of vapes and nicotine products for the promotion or protection of public health. I note that that defence applies only to non-branded vaping and nicotine products. When she sums up, will the Minister clarify whether the amendment would permit the use of flavoured vapes or nicotine products in pursuit of the promotion or protection of public health? The written and verbal testimony of ex-smokers across the country who have made the switch to vaping is clear that they rely on flavours to quit, to stay quitting, and to quit for good.

When we consider the use of secondary powers as part of the powers available to Ministers under the Bill, we must fairly balance the crucial public health objective of getting adult smokers to quit for good against the rising concerns about youth vaping across the country. It is the sadly too common gaudy and immediately apparent displays in shops, the ridiculous flavour descriptors and the packaging associated with illicit manufacturing and retailing that are driving youth vaping far more than the flavours themselves. We talk about the proliferation of vape shops on high streets, but it is the illicit and unregulated market that we must pursue as a priority. We certainly should not group that market with specialist retailers that pursue strong age verification, muted displays, safe storage and the ability to support smokers to quit.

On enforcement, Lords amendments 9 to 13 make necessary clarifications on the definition of an enforcement authority in England and Wales. Lords amendments 14 to 20 subsequently clarify where the responsibility to issue fixed penalty notices sits. Enforcement of this Bill will be necessary if it is to achieve its aim to crack down on illegal and illicit vape products, but we must not forget that the proliferation of the illegal vaping business is still concentrated at points of entry to the UK market. We must pursue that important objective, because we cannot prejudice public and consumer opinion against the sale of legal vapes from the regulated industry by allowing them to be displayed alongside illicit and unregulated products that we all want to see off the shelves of our local corner shops. Those are the products that are driving youth vaping, not the regulated ones. We must therefore ensure the adequate resourcing of Border Force, trading standards and local enforcement authorities. Will the Minister provide detail on how the Government will seek to achieve that within the scope of this Bill?

Lords amendments 21 and 22 to clause 38 are a welcome step. They permit relevant local enforcement authorities to retain the sums and reinvest them in connection with their enforcement functions, rather than those sums going to the national Consolidated Fund.

Can the Minister clarify the purposes for which those funds can be utilised? As I understand it, they can be used only in connection with the enforcement function and not to support swap-to-stop schemes or any broader activity. I would appreciate that clarity when she winds up.

The need for enforcement against illicit retail practices has rightly become an increasingly salient issue, especially in Scotland following the tragic fire earlier this month in Glasgow. While it is important for us to state that no cause of the fire has yet been definitively established—that is rightly for the relevant authorities to investigate—will the Minister expand on how secondary legislation and associated Government action around trading standards could better enable local authorities to enforce against the illicit practices that the Bill seeks to address? How will the Government encourage retailers to drag themselves up to the best practice of specialist retailers on display, storage and age verification?

To conclude, the Bill's primary aim to create a smokefree generation is welcome. I welcome that it will directly make that generation healthier and happier, and enable them to live far longer than those who preceded them. We must do all that, however, while enabling the millions of adult smokers in Britain to quit quicker and to get healthier.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I welcome the Minister to her place. I worked with her predecessors when I was Health Minister in Northern Ireland, when this Bill first came about. I am sorry to disappoint the hon. Members for Windsor (Jack Rankin) and for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), because this legislation started its iterations under the previous Government. Very little has changed between what was debated then and what is before us now, because it is the right thing to do. It is the common-sense thing to do for the health of the entirety of our nation.

I remember having those conversations with the then MP for South Northamptonshire, Dame Andrea Leadsom, who was passionate about what the Bill would bring about. She was receiving the same advice as I was from chief medical officers across the nation about how the cessation of smoking across generations would dramatically change not just health, but the income of many families. In respect of that four-nation approach, I seek reassurance again from the Government—I have received reassurance on this from the last Government and this Government—that the Bill will apply equally in Northern Ireland and all parts of the nation.

Jack Rankin: The hon. Member is right that the Bill, if it does apply, should apply to the whole United Kingdom, of which Northern Ireland is an integral part. Under the Windsor framework—the sell-out that is disgracefully named after my constituency—Northern Ireland is subject to the tobacco products directive, is it not? Is it possible, then, for the Bill to apply equally to Northern Ireland?

Robin Swann: That is the concern, but I point out that the Windsor framework was negotiated and implemented by the previous Government, who left Northern Ireland in this current situation. When I was in post, I received reassurances from the previous Government and from this Government. I would like to be in a place that I can take both at their word that they have done their due diligence about the applicability of this legislation, and the Minister responded to the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) on that.

6.45 pm

Within the EU bodies, detailed opinions are being laid against this legislation by Croatia, the Czech Republic, Italy, Romania, Greece and Slovakia. I seek reassurance from the Government not only that, in their opinion, this legislation will apply equally in Northern Ireland, but that, should that legal challenge come from within the EU, this Government will defend the health of the people of Northern Ireland and ensure that everything in this Bill applies equally across all four nations. It should not be the case that the health of the people of Northern Ireland is seen as any less than the health of the people of England, Scotland and Wales.

We support this Bill. It has been through its iterations and has had legislative consent motions from the last Assembly and this one, too. It has received support from all parties—even from Members of the Legislative Assembly who support this Bill there, while their MPs in this place were opposing it.

Jim Allister: Name them.

Robin Swann: Well, it was Democratic Unionist party MPs who were prepared to oppose the Bill in this House while their MLAs supported it back in the Northern Ireland Assembly. That was a strange mixture, but that is where we are and that is where they are at this minute. I am assured that DUP MLAs support this legislation applying equally to Northern Ireland, and I think that was part of the debate in the other place with their peers. I finish by seeking reassurances from the Minister about the application of this Bill, because it is a good piece of legislation.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to have this Bill back before us today. During the many great speeches tonight, but also on Second and Third Reading, the great majority of people have agreed that we should feel proud of this world-leading piece of legislation. It will create that elusive thing: a smokefree generation in this country.

As a former smoker and as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health, I am grateful to have been able to speak regularly in the debates on this Bill, including spending many hours in the Bill Committee going through it line by line. As the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) said, there is a feeling of veterans of the Bill gathering round to see it finally get over the line, and that is a wonderful thing.

As vice-chair of the APPG on smoking and health, I want to put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for their great work over the years leading that APPG to the point where we now have legislation that embodies the APPG's ambitions.

Before I get into the detail, I will offer my thanks to Ministers and officials here and across the four nations of the United Kingdom for the work that they have done to create a Bill that will apply across our entire nation. I welcome the new Minister for public health, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), to her place. It is brilliant to have a champion for public health over many years as the new Minister. She was a very able public health spokesperson for this party while in opposition.

Just under a year ago, I tabled an amendment on Report that would have introduced a ban on all cigarette filters, regardless of whether they contain plastic. I tabled it in recognition of the fact that there are no health benefits at all to cigarette filters, despite the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) seeming to be of the view that there are. Filters were developed by the tobacco industry following evidence that smoking caused lung cancer, in order to give a false sense of reassurance to smokers. The passage of this Bill has also seen discussions of the merits of what have been described as biodegradable filters. As Dr Bas Boots, ecologist and senior lecturer at Anglia Ruskin University—he spoke last year to the APPG on smoking and health—has said:

“All cigarette filters are harmful to the environment. Research from Anglia Ruskin shows the extent of this, with filters leaching toxic chemicals into soils and waterways causing harm to plants and animals.”

Although the Government did not accept my amendment, I am pleased to see other amendments—including Lords amendments 37 to 45—to ensure that regulatory powers in the Bill can apply to filters, and I understand from Action on Smoking and Health that if the UK were to ban filters, we would be the first country in the world to do so. I hope that the Minister, when she sums up the debate, will be able to tell us when a call for evidence related to cigarette filters will be launched.

In Committee, we discussed at length whether the changes in the Bill should extend to vape vending machines in mental health settings. I am grateful to the Government for considering that carefully and altering the Bill, via Lords amendments 3 and 4, to exempt vending machines in such settings from the overall, and very sensible, ban on them elsewhere in the light of their obvious role in helping often vulnerable people to stay smokefree.

The addition of a Government commitment, via Lords amendment 80, to review the implementation of the Bill within four to seven years is really sensible. It is important for us to look at how it is working, and to share any lessons learned with other countries that may be pursuing similar legislation—we know that a number of countries are doing so.

I also support Lords amendments 89, 90 and 91, which will ensure that a comprehensive definition of “tobacco” will apply from Royal Assent, as it should. That will end the practice of illegally marketing heated tobacco products, and will enable the Government to use powers in the Bill to specify that devices used for the consumption of tobacco cannot be promoted.

Finally, I want to reflect on the key impact of the Bill. When the age of sale restrictions for tobacco come into force on 1 January 2027, we will create a smokefree generation, with those born on or after 1 January 2009 turning 18 and never being able to purchase tobacco legally. As this century progresses, millions of UK lives will be saved, and we will genuinely be on the road to a smokefree Britain.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Before I begin my brief speech, may I say how good it is to see my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) in the Chamber? We owe her a debt of gratitude for both introducing the Bill and piloting it through the House. She leaves behind—I was going to say large shoes, but that seems a bit rude—significant shoes to be

[Ms Julie Minns]

filled, but I know they are shoes that the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), is more than capable of filling, and I am very glad to see her in her place this evening.

I wish to speak briefly about Lords amendments 11 and 61, which, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank), clarify what we mean by a “relevant enforcement authority” and, in particular, clarify the duty that will be placed on that relevant enforcement authority to consider annually whether it is appropriate to carry out a programme of enforcement action. As has been said, we acknowledge, and know, that vaping can support adults who want to move away from smoking, but we nevertheless cannot ignore the rapid rise in youth vaping and the growing presence of illegal, non-compliant and counterfeit vapes and cigarettes in all our communities. That is why a robust, mandatory licensing framework is so urgently needed. The Bill will give the Government the power to introduce such a framework, and that can only be strengthened by a requirement for licensing authorities to consider annually the programme of enforcement.

Contrary to what the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) seemed to suggest, one of the strongest arguments for licensing is its ability to combat the sale of illegal cigarettes and vapes on our high streets. Local authorities and enforcement bodies have warned repeatedly that rogue sellers are flooding the market with untested, high-nicotine, incorrectly labelled or counterfeit products, and my constituency is no exception. Just a few weeks ago, Cumberland council trading standards seized 6,000 illegal cigarettes in raids, and that was in addition to the £20,000-worth of illegal tobacco and vapes seized last summer. The introduction of on-the-spot fines of up to £2,500 and the ability to revoke retailers’ licences entirely are therefore welcome.

Mandatory licensing will also make it much easier to shut down dodgy shops that knowingly stock or distribute illegal vapes and cigarettes. Under the new framework, any premises found storing, displaying or supplying unregulated products will lose their licences, because licensing applies not just to the act of selling, but to the possession of regulated products for retail purposes. This means that enforcement officers will no longer have to rely on repeated seizures or warnings; they will have a fast, lawful route to closing down problem retailers for good.

In short, mandatory licensing is not just another layer of regulation; it is a powerful tool to crack down on illegal vapes, remove bad actors from our high streets, and support safer and more responsible retailing. More important, it will give local authorities the powers they need to shut down dodgy shops quickly, decisively and permanently. I therefore welcome both the Lords amendments and the Bill as a step forward to cleaning up our high streets and ensuring that we have a healthier, happier country.

Mrs Hodgson: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to place on the record my sincere thanks to all Members who have contributed to this thoughtful and constructive debate, and throughout the Bill’s passage in this House. It has been a real privilege

to take it through this stage, following in the elegant and tiny footsteps but great ability of my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), who, along with our colleague Lady Merron in the other place, has done sterling work.

I am so grateful for the engagement of colleagues across the House, and for the shared commitment to improving public health and protecting future generations. As Members are aware, smoking remains the leading preventable cause of death, disability and ill health in this country. Despite significant progress, 5.3 million adults were still smoking cigarettes in 2024, and while tobacco remains the greatest threat, owing to its unique harms, we are also seeing a rapid rise in the use of vapes and other nicotine products, particularly among young people, creating a new generation at risk of harm and addiction. That is why this Bill matters, and why the action that we are taking today is so important.

Let me now turn to the points raised by hon. Members, who were small in number but mighty in their contributions. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), made an excellent speech, and I enjoyed hearing his thoughts—but he is not listening while I am talking about him.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): She is trying to be nice to you!

Mrs Hodgson: I am trying to be nice, and the shadow Minister is ignoring me, but I really enjoyed listening to what he said about being a practising doctor, and about his concerns which made it so apparent that we had to do something about this. I am sure that, having got here, he is proud to have played a part in getting this legislation on to the statute book, for those very reasons. He asked me about the illicit market. The creation of a smokefree generation will prevent people from ever becoming addicted to smoking in the first place. When the age of sale was increased from 16 to 18, 1.3 million more people could no longer be sold cigarettes, and would, in theory, be in the market for illegal cigarettes. In practice, the number of illicit cigarettes consumed fell by 25% between 2005-06 and 2007-08.

The Bill takes bold action to strengthen enforcement and crack down on rogue retailers. We are investing up to £10 million of new funding in trading standards annually until 2028-29 to tackle the illicit and under-age sale of tobacco and vapes, and to help enforce the law. That funding is being used to boost the trading standards workforce by hiring 120 apprentices across England. The illicit tobacco strategy establishes a cross-Government taskforce, enhancing the ability of His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to disrupt organised crime. Between April 2015 and March 2023, over 10 billion cigarettes on which UK duty had not been paid were seized by His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and Border Force. The hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) asked about the illicit market, so I hope that addresses some of his concerns.

The shadow Minister asked about an appropriate balance. The Bill rightly takes strong action against youth vaping while recognising the important role that vapes play in helping adult smokers to quit smoking. The Government have been cautious to strike the right balance between reducing the appeal to children and ensuring that vapes remain an accessible tool for smoking cessation. That is why the Bill provides powers to tackle

the appeal of vapes to children through elements such as packaging, display, flavours and device features. However, in order to avoid unintended consequences for adult smoking rates, the scope of restrictions will be carefully considered and consulted on.

7 pm

Dr Evans: I am glad the Minister has addressed many of the questions that I posed. One was about the designation of vape-free places, and I think there is consideration of what that will look like. How will the Government approach that? I would welcome it if she could at least set out the framework of what she might think about in her new role.

Mrs Hodgson: That is being looked at, and I can write to the shadow Minister with the details as we progress. I will commit to doing that.

Mary Glindon: I welcome the Minister to her place and congratulate her on her new role. She has a hard act to follow, but I am sure she will be brilliant in her job. Could she say what metrics the Government will use to measure whether the Bill successfully reduces youth vaping?

Mrs Hodgson: I will definitely write to my hon. Friend, rather than just guess, but I suppose that we will see fewer young people vaping—the numbers should go down. To quote chief medical officer Chris Whitty, as someone did in an excellent speech earlier:

“If you smoke, vaping is much safer; if you don’t smoke, don’t vape.”

That is what we want the message to be, but I will commit to writing to my hon. Friend about how we will follow the metrics.

I come to the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), who asked about the levy. The measures in this Bill to reduce the use of tobacco are world leading. Given that the Bill will create a smokefree generation, and that we have a proven and effective model for increasing tobacco duties, we do not think that introducing a new, bespoke levy is the best way forward.

My hon. Friend also asked about advertising. We must stop the advertising and promotion of products that risk addicting a new generation to nicotine. The Bill delivers on this Government’s manifesto commitment to stopping the blatant advertising of vapes to children while continuing to support adult smokers in quitting. She said that it would be appropriate for nicotine pouches to be in scope of the ban on advertising, and I can commit to that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) made a very thoughtful contribution, which sadly was followed by a not-so-thoughtful contribution from the hon. Member for Windsor. He and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) called this a “socialist Bill”, but I remind the House that it started its life under a Conservative Government, and was lost in the wash-up prior to the general election.

Jack Rankin: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Hodgson: I will finish responding to the hon. Member’s ideological arguments. This is not about liberty or choice for smokers. Up to two thirds of deaths among smokers can be attributed to smoking; three quarters of smokers wish they had never started; and the majority want to quit. That is not freedom of choice. The tobacco industry took away their choice by addicting them at a very young age.

Jack Rankin: I thank the Minister for her implied compliment to the Leader of the Opposition, who voted against this Bill on Second Reading when the previous Prime Minister brought it forward. She voted against it because the Bill does not respect the proper relationship between the state and the individual, and does not deliver equality under the law, so we will take that as a compliment in the new Conservative party, which is being refreshed in an authentically conservative direction.

Mrs Hodgson: The freedom to be addicted—I think that is what the hon. Member has just defended. I am sure that those on his Front Bench will take note of that. He also asked me about smokefree places. No smoker wants to harm people, but they do so through second-hand smoke, as we all know. On 13 February, the Government published our consultation on “free from” places. As we have previously set out, this Government are consulting on making outdoor public places smokefree and free from heated tobacco, including children’s playgrounds and spaces outside a number of health, social care and educational settings. Children and medically vulnerable people who visit such places should not be exposed to harm through no choice of their own. Additionally, we are consulting on making areas outside playgrounds and schools vape-free. With regard to indoor spaces that are currently smokefree, we are consulting on making the majority free from heated tobacco and vape-free. The consultation does not consider extending the proposals to outdoor hospitality.

Moving on to the excellent speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Falkirk (Euan Stainbank), I can confirm that, for smoking cessation purposes, flavoured vapes can still be promoted by businesses if they have an agreement with public health authorities. We recognise that vape flavours are an important consideration for adult smokers who are seeking to quit smoking, which is why the Government recently committed to consulting on regulating flavour descriptors as a first step before considering broader restrictions on flavoured ingredients.

The hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann), in his really good speech, mentioned concerns about Northern Ireland. The Bill is UK-wide and has been developed in close partnership with the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. We are content that the measures in the Bill, which are intended to apply to Northern Ireland, are compatible with the obligations under the Windsor framework, as I said earlier. The UK Government notified the EU’s technical regulation information system—TRIS—that certain provisions in the Bill relate to Northern Ireland; this is a standard process, not an approval process. Certain EU member states issued opinions setting out concerns about the compatibility of the smokefree generation policy with EU law, and it is not unusual for member states to submit opinions on TRIS notifications. For instance, several member states recently

[Mrs Hodgson]

wrote to France when it proposed a ban on nicotine pouches, despite several other member states having already introduced such a ban.

The Government have provided a comprehensive response to the opinions that we have received, which sets out the strong public health justification for the policy, and explains why the smokefree generation policy complies with EU law as it applies under the Windsor framework, and the European Commission has now responded, noting our response. This concludes the TRIS process. I hope that answers some of the hon. Gentleman's concerns.

We had really good contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Dartford (Jim Dickson) and for Carlisle (Ms Minns). If I have not answered any of their questions because I was not quick enough to write stuff down, I commit to writing to both.

I very much hope that this House will support all the amendments under consideration, and that the Government's amendments will return to the other place for due consideration. I hope that this landmark Bill can complete its passage shortly, and that we can move forward with delivering a smokefree UK.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 28 agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived in respect of Lords amendments 21 and 22.

Government amendments (a) to (c) consequential on Lords amendment 28 made.

Lords amendment 29 agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived.

Government amendments (a) to (c) consequential on Lords amendment 29 made.

Lords amendments 30 to 123 agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived in respect of Lords amendments 32 to 34, 37, 38, 43 to 48, 51 to 59, 62, 77 and 78.

NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS (EMPLOYER PENSIONS CONTRIBUTIONS) BILL: PROGRAMME (NO. 2)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),

That the following provisions shall apply to the National Insurance Contributions (Employer Pensions Contributions) Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 17 December 2025 (National Insurance Contributions (Employer Pensions Contributions) Bill: Programme):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after their commencement.

Subsequent stages

(2) Any further Message from the Lords may be considered forthwith without any Question being put.

(3) Proceedings on any further Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(Imogen Walker.)

Question agreed to.

National Insurance Contributions (Employer Pensions Contributions) Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I inform the House that Lords amendments 1 to 12 engage the Commons' financial privilege. If any of these Lords amendments are agreed to, I will cause the customary entry waiving the Commons' financial privilege to be entered in the *Journal*.

Clause 1

EMPLOYER PENSIONS CONTRIBUTIONS PURSUANT TO
OPTIONAL REMUNERATION ARRANGEMENTS:
GREAT BRITAIN

7.13 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): I beg to move, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments 2 to 12, and Government motions to disagree.

Torsten Bell: I welcome the opportunity to consider the Lords amendments to the Bill. I thank Members of both Houses for their careful scrutiny of it, and I particularly thank the Financial Secretary, Lord Livermore, for leading the Bill so expertly through the other place. Before addressing the amendments directly and explaining the Government's decision not to support them—I know that will be shocking—I turn briefly to the need for these reforms.

As the Chancellor set out at the Budget, we are taking action to make the tax system fairer and fit for the 21st century. That requires us to keep the effectiveness and value for money of the £500 billion of tax reliefs under review, and it is especially important to do so when costs are expected to increase significantly. The cost of national insurance contributions relief on salary sacrifice into pension schemes was due to almost treble, from £2.8 billion in 2017 to £8 billion by 2031, without reform, which would be equivalent to the cost of the Royal Air Force. This is not only an expensive tax relief, but one with a very uneven impact. The majority of employers do not offer salary sacrifice at all. The vast majority of salary sacrifice contributions are made by higher and additional-rate taxpayers. Salary sacrifice is unavailable entirely to those earning at or near the national living wage, or to the UK's 4.4 million self-employed workers, and we know that both groups are more likely to be under-saving for retirement.

On this basis, the status quo is indefensible. Change was inevitable, but we have chosen to take a pragmatic approach, with no change until 2029, and a £2,000 cap to allow pension contributions via salary sacrifice to continue.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for bringing this Bill forward. He brings a good story to the House, but sometimes these decisions give rise to questions. My constituents believe that the Bill creates a financial disincentive for middle-income earners to save for their retirement. Does he not agree that this risks creating a pensions gap, with individuals becoming more dependent on the state in later life, which will cost the taxpayer

more in the long run than the tax relief costs today? My constituents feel that, and I am asking the Minister the question. How would he answer it?

Torsten Bell: The hon. Member always raises questions brought up by his constituents, which we know is a valuable part of the work he does in this place. The direct answer to his constituents is that all of them have a very strong tax incentive to save for their pension, without salary sacrifice. We spend £70 billion a year to provide that incentive, whether via the lump sum or the national insurance exemption for employer contributions. I hope the main thing he says to any of his constituents who come through the door is that they have a very strong incentive to save, whatever their circumstances. On the pension gap, that is why we have revived the Pensions Commission. Its work is ongoing, and I am sure he will read in detail its interim report, which will be coming out in the coming months.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I like to think I represent my constituents as well as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) does his, if anyone could. My constituents are really concerned about the pension gap, because the reality for many of them is that they do not earn enough money to begin to think about saving for a pension. Those are actually the things this Government should focus on, not tax reliefs for higher earners who can afford an additional small bit of tax. Personally, as a resident of Harlow, where a number of young people are in poverty, I will not have sleepless nights over this tax change.

Torsten Bell: As always, I thank my hon. Friend for his remarks. He was pretending that the competition is about who is the better MP, but we know it is really about the volume of speaking in this Chamber. The two of them are running it close, but never testing the patience of this House. It is amazing that you have allowed them both in this early in the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, because that is what the closing minutes of every debate in this House should be about. It is important to have traditions, and they both deliver admirably, but I will make some progress before we get sidetracked entirely.

I was talking about the pragmatic approach we are taking to this change. As I have said, there will be no change until 2029, and the £2,000 cap means that salary sacrifice contributions can continue. That recognises the fact that that has become an established process in several companies and for individuals, so we are giving people time to adjust. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised that, and I have responded by saying that this is pragmatic because pension tax relief continues in its entirety. It is important to remember that relief is available to all savers, not just to the minority who have salary sacrifice available to them.

With that in mind—and I am sure that the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) for the Conservatives will have decided to support the Bill in its entirety having listened to those powerful arguments—I turn first to Lords amendments 1 and 7, which would exempt basic rate taxpayers from the operation of the Bill, and Lords amendments 5 and 11, which would increase the contributions limit to £5,000. The Government's balanced and pragmatic approach, with the £2,000 cap, means

that 74% of basic taxpayers using salary sacrifice will be entirely unaffected. The small proportion of basic rate taxpayers with contributions above the cap will still be getting the national insurance contributions relief on the first £2,000 of contributions made via salary sacrifice, in addition to the full income tax relief that is available to all employee pension contributions.

Exempting basic rate taxpayers in the manner proposed would be incredibly difficult to operate. An individual's tax band is not knowable until the end of the tax year, which means employers would be required to carry out complicated calculations at the end of the year to reconcile the figures, and they would need to know their employees' other sources of income, which I do not think anyone would believe is a good idea.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The Lords amendments might not be perfect, but do they not set out the principled objection to the Government taxing some basic rate taxpayers more for choosing to save for their pension and at the same time using that money to increase welfare spending?

Torsten Bell: No, that is not what is going on. What will happen is that everybody will still have a strong tax relief incentive to save for their pension, and by taking a sensible approach to reforming that, we will avoid seeing the cost of the tax relief rise to the same level as the cost of the RAF. I listen to Opposition Members day in, day out calling for more defence spending. There are consequences for that. One of them is that we have to do our job of looking carefully at the quality of our tax reliefs, and that is what we are doing today. Hon. Members should support us in doing that.

Sir Ashley Fox: Rather than raising taxes, could the Minister perhaps not send £36 billion to the Government of Mauritius to rent back an airbase that we already own?

Torsten Bell: That is a question the hon. Gentleman should put to his Front Benchers, who opened the negotiations with Mauritius in the first place. Opposition Members come to the House making cheap points, because they used to take seriously the job of government and they have given up entirely. I will make some progress now, having engaged with the hon. Member who obviously gave up on the job of serious government some time ago.

A world where 95% of those earning £30,000 or less and contributing via a salary sacrifice are unaffected makes the case for the £2,000 cap I have set out, but the Government agree with the sentiment raised in the Lords about keeping it under review. The Bill allows for that to take place in future.

That leads me to Lords amendments 2 and 8, which would exempt salary sacrifice pension contributions over the £2,000 cap from the calculation of student loan repayments. It is right that we focus on the outcomes for younger generations too often let down by the failures of the previous Government. I gently remind Conservative Members—there are only two of them here, but there are some Liberal Democrats who deserve some of the “credit” too—of their track record on this matter: trebling tuition fees, raising interest rates, scrapping maintenance grants and the rest. And that is before I get to not allowing anything to be built. That is what younger generations are being let down by.

[Torsten Bell]

On the specific proposal, it is worth noting that while salary sacrifice arrangements can reduce the student loan repayments made, they do not reduce the total amount due for repayment. Much more important is the fact that the £2,000 cap means that young graduates are broadly unaffected. In fact—these are new figures that were not available for the discussion in the Lords, but as this issue has been raised and brought to the Commons, I will provide them—the £2,000 cap means that 90% of graduates under the age of 30 repaying student loans who are saving into a pension will be unaffected, in the sense that 90% of them save less than £2,000 a year. I hope that provides some reassurance to Members who have raised that point.

Lords amendments 3, 4, 9 and 10 would make the regulation-making powers in the Bill subject to the affirmative procedure, except for those which solely increase the contributions limit. The Government agree on the importance of maintaining strong parliamentary scrutiny, particularly where changes could affect individuals' national insurance liabilities. However, the Bill already contains a series of safeguards and the legislative approach taken follows long-standing precedence for national insurance legislation. In addition, the Delegated Powers and Regulatory Reform Committee has carefully scrutinised the powers in the Bill, including the proposed level of parliamentary scrutiny, and concluded that there is nothing in the Bill that it wishes to draw to the special attention of the House.

Lords amendments 6 and 12 seek to exempt small and medium-sized enterprises, alongside smaller charities and social enterprises, from the Bill's provisions. Again, the Government agree on the importance of supporting small businesses—I am sure that that is a matter of cross-party support—but small businesses are much less likely to use salary sacrifice than larger businesses. Furthermore, the £2,000 cap means that 90% of employees in SMEs making pension contributions through salary sacrifice will be entirely unaffected. Indeed, the largest benefits from uncapped salary sacrifice accrue to larger businesses, not smaller ones. In practice, the changes in the Bill will help to level the playing field between small businesses and their larger competitors. Those wanting to see support for small businesses should support the measures in the Bill. The Government are engaging with employers, payroll professionals and software developers to ensure that the changes are implemented in the least burdensome way possible for employers of all sizes.

I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will understand why it would not be right to support the amendments from the other place, even though we recognise the valuable objectives that have in many cases motivated them. As I said, the Government spend over £500 billion each year on various tax reliefs within the tax system. That is more than double the entire annual NHS budget. The size of the spend means that the Government must always keep the effectiveness and the value for money of those reliefs under review. These are necessary, pragmatic and fair reforms that protect ordinary workers while ensuring that public finances are kept on a sustainable footing. I respectfully propose that this House disagrees with the amendments.

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

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I would also like to start by thanking the Lords for their very hard work. I do not think the Government won a single vote during the Bill's passage in the other place.

Over the past few months, we have seen how enthusiastic the Government are to raid savings. In particular, they are very keen to raid pension pots. Whether by taking powers to mandate private pension funds to invest in Government white elephants or through the Bill we are debating tonight, the Government have established beyond any doubt that they have no interest whatsoever in savers and strivers.

Pensions are important. They provide for security in retirement. The pact that has been established between the state and the pension saver, which goes back to the 1920s, is all about not just helping savers but taking the strain off the state: encourage saving now and there will not be a burden on the state of an impoverished pension in the future. Under the previous Government, we saw the roll-out of auto-enrolment, bringing 10 million people into the savings culture, and we introduced the triple lock to reverse the decline in the value of the state pension under the previous Labour Government.

Despite those positive steps, we recognise that people are still not saving enough for their retirement. As the Government's own analysis shows, 50% of savers are projected to miss their retirement income targets set by the 2005 Pensions Commission, so we need to do better. I know there is cross-party consensus on that point, if nothing else, so let us be honest: the changes to salary sacrifice arrangements will do the complete opposite. As the Association of British Insurers and Pensions UK have outlined, we should be improving our current offering and providing new opportunities. Instead, the Government are making the situation worse in a desperate attempt to balance the Government's books, conveniently in three years' time. Frankly, it makes little sense and that is why we oppose this legislation.

The point of salary sacrifice arrangements is that they incentivise certain behaviours. That is why people are allowed to use these schemes to put money towards not just pensions but workplace nurseries, childcare vouchers and cycle-to-work schemes. Those are all good things. However, in this case the Government have singled out pensions and are attacking one of the most important things that people should be saving towards—their pensions. This is hard-earned taxpayers' money that could be going towards a good thing. Instead, the Bill will remove an avenue that 7.7 million employees are currently using. The Bill will add even more cost to the 290,000 businesses and charities that use it. It will pile more cost on to students already saddled with student loans. It will harm pensions adequacy and force more people to rely on the state, pushing more costs on to the next generation. I am proud that my colleagues in the Lords, as well as Liberal Democrat and Cross-Bench peers, understand those concerns. The Opposition remain opposed to the Bill, but the amendments do go some way to address those issues and support the stated objectives of this policy, even though we disagree with the fundamental policy.

Lords amendments 1 and 7 would make basic rate taxpayers exempt from this policy. That would protect a group who typically under-save and allow them to continue to put savings into their pensions. The hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) may be interested in listening to this, because he raised a very important point about lower rate taxpayers. The amendments are identical to the amendment we tabled in the Commons and that Labour MPs decided to vote down. As the Government's own impact assessment clearly states, they are trying to target higher earners or those making larger contributions. While that might be the stated purpose and the political justification, in reality that is not the case for two reasons.

First, the cap will still affect 858,000 basic rate taxpayers, according to the Society of Pension Professionals. In fact, reporting from the *Financial Times* has highlighted how the Bill will disproportionately affect those people, compared to those on a higher rate of tax. Those on the basic rate of tax pay 8% national insurance contributions, while those on the higher rate of tax pay 2% NICs. That means that on national insurance contributions alone, lower earners are being hit four times as hard by this policy—four times. On Second Reading, I asked the Minister how that could be fair. He did not answer my question then, but I hope he will be able to answer it when he winds up. Maybe he can tell us how the policy is fair for those hard-working people, or whether they are just casualties of rushed policymaking.

Secondly, a behavioural outcome may be that employers will remove salary sacrifice as an option for all their employees. We already recognise that salary sacrifice is mutually beneficial for employees and employers. It is also more attractive to both sides, as it is simple to understand. By enforcing the cap, it will change not only the viability of salary sacrifice arrangements, but employers' perception of them. This may result in many employers removing them as an option altogether, meaning that 4.4 million people who are supposedly protected may be affected. If this Government were really serious about their policy objective, they would exempt basic rate taxpayers altogether. These amendments give them the chance to do just that and to back hard-working people.

7.30 pm

The Government could also show support for hard-working people by backing Lords amendments 5 and 11, which would set the cap at £5,000, rather than £2,000. We support this proposal as we remain concerned that the £2,000 cap is too low and will quickly become valueless through inflation. Indeed, from following the debate in the Lords, it seems that the Government could not provide any rationale for the cap being set at £2,000 in the first place. This House deserves clarity. The Minister should, at the very least, clarify why the Government set the cap at £2,000, and not at a higher level.

By setting the cap at £5,000, as the amendments propose, we could give more value to these arrangements in the future, meaning we will have to tinker less with the cap after years of dilution as a result of inflation. It would also protect lower to middle-income earners and ensure that salary sacrifice arrangements remain viable for them. I hope that the Government will think again here and see these amendments as the practical proposals they are intended to be.

However, while we support this group of amendments, we fundamentally believe that the cap should be indexed and should increase in line with inflation. Given that inflation sits at 3.2%—up from 2%, where it was when the Government came to office—and will likely increase due to events in the middle east, this cap will become valueless in a shorter period of time. It would therefore be logical for the Government to accept this proposal.

Lords amendments 2 and 8, which were moved by my noble Friend Baron Leigh of Hurley, would exempt salary sacrifice pension contributions over the cap from being included in student loan repayment definitions. Colleagues will have seen the growing media coverage of student loans in recent months, particularly relating to plan 2 loans. The Conservatives have accepted that this is an issue that needs to be addressed and that change is needed. As the Leader of the Opposition said,

"Policies that may have been fine for 2012, with low interest rates, are not fine for 2026."—[*Official Report*, 25 February 2026; Vol. 781, c. 327.]

Student loans have become a debt trap. It is time for all of us—all of us, Madam Deputy Speaker—to do something about it.

We are trying to back students, which is why last week we tabled a motion that would have set a fairer interest rate, stopped the freeze on repayment thresholds and created more apprenticeships for 18 to 21-year-olds. Unfortunately, every single Government Member voted against it. Tonight, they have an opportunity to make up for their mistake last week. By voting in favour of Lords amendments 2 and 8, they could make a real difference for our young people.

Take the example of a graduate earning £45,000 a year. Prior to this legislation, if they sacrificed £5,000 of that salary, they would save £1,000 in income tax, £400 in national insurance contributions and £450 in student loans—[*Interruption.*] Of course it is made up! The Minister is chuntering from a sedentary position, Madam Deputy Speaker. We cannot quite shut him up, but we will do our best. This is an important point. The Minister is not that good at maths, although I know he is keen on trying to look good at maths.

Any salary sacrifice above the £2,000 cap will be treated as earnings. If a young graduate originally sacrificed £5,000, under the proposed new cap, £3,000 of that would be subject to student loan repayment contributions, as well as national insurance contributions. The effect of that will be severe: that graduate would now pay an extra £240 in national insurance contributions and an extra £270 in student loans. In total, that graduate would be worse off by £430 a year, as well as having a smaller pension pot.

This is just another example of this Government picking on students. That is money that could be going towards their pensions, money that could be injected into local economies and money that could be used to improve their quality of life. Instead, this policy will take their money so that the Chancellor can plug the holes in her economic credibility. I do not think that the Government intended for this policy to make things worse for students—I genuinely hope not. It seems as though they have not thought about it, however, because the reality is that it will make things worse for students. We have an opportunity to address that and to keep salary sacrifice arrangements viable for our young people

paying off their student debts. I would have thought that Labour MPs of all people would be able to support that.

Lords amendments 3, 4, 9 and 10, which relate to the use of the affirmative procedure in the Bill, are common sense. Under the Bill as drafted, the Government would have to use the affirmative procedure if they decreased the level of the cap. That is important, and we are not seeking to change that. However, it was evident during the passage of the Bill through the Lords that there is a lack of clarity on how the Bill will work.

It was very kind of the Minister to send his “Dear colleague”, although I think he neglected to sign it, strangely—it is a small detail, but one worth thinking about. While the letter answered some questions, such as whether the cap applies per job, many questions remain. He admitted in the letter, for instance, that there is an outstanding policy decision on whether this per-job cap will follow the NICs status quo by operating on a pay period basis or operate on a different basis, such as an annualised basis.

These are all serious questions that will not be fully answered until further regulations come forward. Indeed, they are so important that we should be given the opportunity to scrutinise them when they are presented. There should be proper oversight, due process and scrutiny of a policy that will affect millions of people, but under the Government’s proposals we would not get that opportunity and would have to automatically accept the Government’s decisions. We do not believe that that is right. We are simply asking for a minimum level of oversight without imposing a cost on the Exchequer or undermining the Government’s objectives. I cannot see how that would be disagreeable.

Finally, I turn to Lords amendments 6 and 12, which would exempt SMEs and charities. Throughout the passage of the Bill, many have warned about the cumulative burden that this Government are placing on smaller employers. Just listen to their record so far—it is the record of a Government burdening our economy. There is the compliance and regulatory obligations mandated by the Employment Rights Act 2025; an increase in employer NICs of 15%—the jobs tax; the uncertainty around the national minimum wage being equalised for young people under 21; the heightened anxiety around business rates; and, worst of all, the constant U-turns and endless drama from this Government. Altogether, this is making it incredibly difficult for SMEs and charities to thrive.

I think about the many businesses on my high streets in Kidderminster, Stourport and Bewdley and the charities that support people across the whole of Wyre Forest. They all work hard, as businesses and charities do in all our constituencies, in bringing our communities together. The last thing they need is another under-the-radar tax increase.

The Chancellor promised them that she would not come back for more, and yet that is exactly what this Government are doing. It cannot be a surprise, therefore, that we are seeing insolvency rates rise, business confidence plummeting, unemployment continuing to rise and growth stagnating—and that is all before this Bill and their latest Budget come into effect.

The Government’s own impact assessment suggests that 290,000 employers will be affected, but it is even worse than that. As the Lords Minister admitted during

scrutiny, 33% of small businesses offer salary sacrifice arrangements, and therefore one in three of those businesses will potentially be exposed to the new costs and complexity that this Bill introduces. These businesses are already struggling to stay afloat—they cannot afford much more. At the same time, the Government cannot afford to keep sending the same message. These amendments give them the chance to change that messaging and to back our small businesses and charities.

To conclude, I want to state clearly that the Conservatives remain opposed to this policy and that the Government should not be bringing it forward. People are not doing enough to save for their retirement, and we should be encouraging them to save more. Instead, the Government want to take away something that is beneficial to all parties simply to cover for their economic incompetence. If we could, we would stop this Bill proceeding any further; however, as we all know, that is unlikely. I therefore ask Labour MPs to look closely and to help to make a bad Bill better.

The amendments the Lords have sent us are not about making the policy unworkable, but about making it practical. Voting for these amendments will allow Labour MPs to back their rhetoric with their actions, to back their constituents and to say, “I back hard-working people. I back small businesses. I back local charities. I back graduates. I back people who save responsibly.” By voting against these amendments, Labour MPs will send a different message to their constituents: “If you work hard to make a decent income, we will tax you more. If you work hard to grow your business, we will tax you more. If you save towards dignity in retirement, we will tax you more.” There is a clear choice tonight, Madam Deputy Speaker. I hope that Labour MPs will make the right one.

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

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): The Liberal Democrats have been clear throughout the Bill’s stages that we think the Government would be misguided to make this change. While it may raise some tax revenue in the medium term, in the longer term it discourages pension saving. It also puts an extra cost and admin burden on small businesses at the worst possible time. For that reason, we support Lords amendments 6 and 12, which would exempt small and medium-sized businesses and charities.

I would like to note again, as I did on Second Reading, that I am sceptical of the timing of this change. It will, very conveniently for the Government, only kick in during the likely election year of 2029-30, and not in 2026-27 or 2027-28. It seems as if the Government are motivated more by a wish to fix their numbers nominally to meet their fiscal rules than by a genuine belief that this change is the right thing to do. *[Interruption.]* I am asking the Minister to give us a reason why it is deferred and to explain that logic.

Lords amendment 5, tabled by my colleague Baroness Kramer, would raise the proposed threshold from £2,000 to £5,000 on NICs-exempt savings. That would at least mitigate the impact on many lower and middle earners. This would be a sensible way to ensure that it is genuinely those who can afford to pay more who are impacted by this change. The proposed threshold of £2,000 will undoubtedly hit people on relatively modest incomes

who are simply trying to do the right and sensible thing and plan for their future. The CBI has also expressed its strong support for a threshold at £5,000.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that at times like these, we want the Government to be encouraging those on low and medium incomes to invest in their pensions and their futures—and increasing the threshold would help people to do that—rather than disincentivising people from doing so, as they seem to be doing at the moment?

Charlie Maynard: I completely agree. It sends the wrong message and puts in place the wrong incentives, and that is a real problem.

Ministers will have seen the analysis produced by the Office for Budget Responsibility in response to the former Lib Dem Pensions Minister, Steve Webb, highlighting the flaws in the Government's claim that these changes will not impact most lower and middle earners—that is, those not saving more than the £2,000 threshold in any case. The OBR's new analysis highlights three main ways that the Bill could affect the wider workforce. First, employers may move away from salary sacrifice altogether by increasing ordinary employer pension contributions in place of wage growth, all by reducing contractual pay in exchange for higher contributions. The OBR's analysis makes it clear that any change of this kind would necessarily have to be applied across all of the workforce and could not be limited to higher earners, so the impact of these changes could indeed see lower pay rises or reduce base pay for employees who contribute less than £2,000.

Secondly, the new analysis spells out that some employees may move to make standard pension contributions, including through relief at source schemes, thereby losing the NICs advantages of salary sacrifice and increasing their NICs bill, even if they contribute small amounts. Thirdly, OBR modelling shows that employers would pass down around three quarters of the additional NICs cost to employees, mainly through lower wages, which again would likely hit all workers regardless of the amount they save through salary sacrifice.

Not only does this OBR analysis indicate that the Government have been wrong to frame these changes as something that will impact only those with broader shoulders, but, crucially, when the OBR assumed a significant behavioural response from employers and employees, the estimated amount this policy will raise fell by almost half, from £4.7 billion in 2029-30 to £2.6 billion in 2030-31, as these impacts feed through. I am interested to understand whether or not the Minister agrees with that point. Raising the threshold from £2,000 to £5,000 will not solve these issues entirely, but it would mitigate them by exempting a larger number of people on lower and middle incomes from the key change in the Bill. That would, in turn, reduce the number of employees impacted.

Lords amendment 2 relates to the repayment of student loans. This issue was also explored in the Lords, but I think it should be reiterated here, because although it is probably an inadvertent effect, it is none the less a significant issue. I appreciate the Minister's words, but the fact remains that for any graduate who saves above the threshold, not only will their NICs payments go up,

but so will their student loan repayments. This Bill is a double whammy on a group who are already struggling with high interest payments, escalating debt and a very challenging jobs market.

To conclude, with four in 10 people in the country, whether in my Witney constituency or any other Member's, already not saving enough for retirement, and with the pressures on the state pension and social care system well known, it is counterproductive to reduce the incentives for those who can afford to do so to save towards their retirement. Once again, the measures in the Bill are short-sighted, and the Government's justifications for them do not add up. I support the Lords amendments, which seek to iron out problems and mitigate the negative impacts. Overall, my party and I cannot support the Bill.

7.45 pm

Torsten Bell: I am grateful to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard), for their contributions. I will not reiterate the arguments for the Bill as a whole, but I will try to respond directly to the points that they have made.

The hon. Member for Wyre Forest explained that the Conservatives are opposed entirely to these changes, but of course he did not explain at all which bits of the NHS services they would cut, since they obviously do not support the revenue being raised from this sensible—*[Interruption.]* Which bit of the benefits system would they like to change then?

Sir Ashley Fox: The two-child benefit cap. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

Torsten Bell: Here we have it again: when the Conservatives are faced with any difficult choice, the answer is higher child poverty. It is the answer to every question they are ever faced with. They stand up day in, day out and say that what they want to see is higher child poverty—and they cheered enthusiastically for it just then.

I will move on. Not only can the hon. Member for Wyre Forest not say which bit of the NHS he would like to cut because he opposes these changes, but he cannot even explain why the Conservatives were planning to implement exactly these kinds of changes when they were in government—before their whole giving up on being serious people thing.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Will the Minister accept that if these changes go through and people save less for their future, we will have pensioner poverty? That is the impact of these measures.

Torsten Bell: Absolute nonsense. Members of the House should be reminding everybody in this country that they have a strong incentive to save for their pension, not misleading them by implying that they will somehow lose out by saving for their pension. That is not the case, and it is really important that we are consistent in our messaging to the public about that. I will come back to the wider point about the levels of saving in society.

[Torsten Bell]

The hon. Member for Wyre Forest also asked questions about savings gaps, and he was right to do so. Unfortunately, however, he talked nonsense about that. He talked about the self-employed, low earners, women and those working for SMEs, all of whom do have lower pension savings rates, but all those groups who are under-saving are those least likely to use salary sacrifice. He talked about those on lower incomes, but as I said, 95% of those earning under £30,000 and contributing to a pension via salary sacrifice are completely unaffected. He claimed that the impact was largest on those on low earnings. That is nonsense, because 86% of contributions over £2,000 are from additional rate taxpayers. Those are the facts.¹

The hon. Member for Wyre Forest went on to invent a brilliant story of a young graduate struggling to get by who was somehow putting £5,000 into their pension every year. As I mentioned earlier, 90% of young graduates are saving £2,000 or less into their pensions. Why are they not saving more? Because their wages did not rise under the Conservative party. Why are they not saving more? Because that party did not build enough houses to help them get on to the property ladder. He asked—[*Interruption.*] I am glad to hear that all Conservative Members will stop opposing the building of homes in their constituencies in the years ahead.

The hon. Member asked about the implementation. As he mentioned, I have set out that it will operate on a per-job basis. He also asked about how it will operate over a pay period basis. As he knows, national insurance broadly operates on a pay period basis, but we are consulting with employers and payroll providers to ensure that we get that right. As is normal with national insurance legislation, we will set that out in the regulations.

I turn to the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard). It is not surprising that he, as a Liberal Democrat, opposes these measures but set out absolutely no ideas for how to pay for that. I look forward to him calling for more spending later this week—again with absolutely no idea how to pay for it. He raised timing. Directly to his two questions, we think it is pragmatic to give employers and individuals time to adjust—that is the basis for the pragmatic point that he raised. He also raised the scoring of that, which is a technical issue reflecting how the national accounts deal with the claiming back of tax relief for some pensions. He also mentioned the OBR. If he looks at its report, he will find that it set out that the Budget measures will have no material impact on savings levels.

To end on a point of wide cross-party consensus, both hon. Members raised the case that people do need to save more for their pensions—the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) just did so, too—and we all agree on that, and particularly those 45% of working-age adults who are currently saving nothing. As I said, that includes in particular groups such as low earners and the self-employed, for neither of whom is salary sacrifice available. The answer to that is the work of the pensions commission, which I hope will continue to operate on a cross-party basis. Its interim report will be coming forward soon, and I will commend its work to the House. For today, I am afraid that the Government will oppose the Lords amendments.

Question put. That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 1.

The House divided: Ayes 280, Noes 161.

Division No. 454]

AYES

[7.50 pm

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Adam, Shockat
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Lewis
Baker, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Charters, Mr Luke
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil

Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Evans, Chris
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gilbert, Tracy
Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Glendon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Hume, Alison (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry

1.[*Official Report*, 14 April 2026; Vol. 783, c. 12WC.](Correction)

Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Madders, Justin
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorrin, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan

Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Poynton, Gregor
 Quigley, Richard
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Sarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John

Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad

Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Lilian Greenwood and
Jake Richards

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartlidge, James
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Doogan, Dave
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah

Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Law, Chris
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Logan, Seamus
 Lopez, Julia
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdock, James
 Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
 Miller, Calum
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua

Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Swann, Robin

Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Rebecca Paul and
Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 1 disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 2.—(Christian Wakeford.)

The House divided: Ayes 279, Noes 167.

Division No. 455]

[8.4 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Lewis
Baker, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil

Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter

Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Evans, Chris
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gilbert, Tracy
Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Glendon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Hume, Alison (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kumar, Sonia
Kyle, rh Peter

Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Madders, Justin
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMorris, Anna
McNally, Frank
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, rh James
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Onn, Melanie
Opher, Dr Simon
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Payne, Michael
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Poynton, Gregor
Quigley, Richard
Ranger, Andrew
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny

Robertson, Dave
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Scrogham, Michelle
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie

Toale, Jessica
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Lilian Greenwood and
Jake Richards

NOES

Adam, Shockat
Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast
by Mr Mohindra*)
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Cross, Harriet

Dance, Adam
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dewhirst, Charlie
Doogan, Dave
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Evans, Dr Luke
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon

Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Law, Chris
Leadbitter, Graham
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Logan, Seamus
Lopez, Julia
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mathew, Brian
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James
Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast
by Ben Lake*)
Miller, Calum
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti

Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote
cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Swann, Robin
Wayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wishart, Pete
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Rebecca Paul and
Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 2 disagreed to.

*Motion made, and Question put, That this House
disagrees with Lords amendment 3.—(Christian Wakeford.)*

The House divided: Ayes 280, Noes 164.

Division No. 456]

[8.15 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy
vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Addy*)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Adam, Shockat
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik

Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Lewis
Baker, Alex
Bance, Antonia

Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Evans, Chris
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelder, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gilbert, Tracy
Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Fabian
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Hume, Alison (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Jameson, Sally
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kumar, Sonia
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)

Madders, Justin
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, rh James
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Onn, Melanie
Opher, Dr Simon
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Payne, Michael
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Poynton, Gregor
Quigley, Richard
Ranger, Andrew
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Robertson, Dave

Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Scrogham, Michelle
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Toale, Jessica
Trickett, Jon
Tuftnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Lilian Greenwood and
Jake Richards

NOES

Allister, Jim
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter

Bennett, Alison
 Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartlidge, James
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Doogan, Dave
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Law, Chris
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Logan, Seamus
 Lopez, Julia
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mathew, Brian
 Maynard, Charlie
 McMurdock, James
 Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
 Miller, Calum
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Matt

Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wishart, Pete

Wood, Mike
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
 Rebecca Paul and
 Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 3 disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 4.—(Christian Wakeford.)

A Division was called.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Division off.

Question agreed to.

Lords amendment 4 disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 5.—(Christian Wakeford.)

The House divided: Ayes 281, Noes 167.

Division No. 457]

[8.29 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Anderson, Callum
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Daby, Janet
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Evans, Chris
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia

Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gemmell, Alan
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Fabian
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Hume, Alison (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kaur, Satvir
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Madders, Justin
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry

McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Poynton, Gregor
 Quigley, Richard
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevenson, Kenneth

Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony

Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Lilian Greenwood and
Jake Richards

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartledge, James
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Doogan, Dave
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain

Dyke, Sarah
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Law, Chris

Leadbitter, Graham	Robinson, rh Gavin
Leigh, rh Sir Edward	Rosindell, Andrew
Lewis, rh Sir Julian	Sabine, Anna
Lockhart, Carla	Savage, Dr Roz
Logan, Seamus	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Lopez, Julia	Shannon, Jim
MacCleary, James	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
MacDonald, Mr Angus	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Maguire, Ben	Simmonds, David
Maguire, Helen	Smith, Greg
Mak, Alan	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Malthouse, rh Kit	Smith, Rebecca
Mathew, Brian	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Maynard, Charlie	Sollom, Ian
McMurdock, James	Spencer, Dr Ben
Medi, Llinos (<i>Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake</i>)	Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)
Miller, Calum	Stephenson, Blake
Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Stone, Jamie
Moore, Robbie	Stride, rh Sir Mel
Moran, Layla	Swann, Robin
Morgan, Helen	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Morrissey, Joy	Taylor, Luke
Morton, rh Wendy	Thomas, Bradley
Mullan, Dr Kieran	Thomas, Cameron
Mundell, rh David	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Munt, Tessa	Vickers, Matt
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Voaden, Caroline
Norman, rh Jesse	Whately, Helen
Obese-Jecty, Ben	Wilkinson, Max
O'Hara, Brendan	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Olney, Sarah	Wilson, Munira
Patel, rh Priti	Wilson, rh Sammy
Perteghella, Manuela	Wood, Mike
Pinkerton, Dr Al	Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Pochin, Sarah	Wrigley, Martin
Pritchard, rh Mark	Young, Claire
Rankin, Jack	
Reed, David	Tellers for the Noes:
Reynolds, Mr Joshua	Rebecca Paul and
Robertson, Joe	Gregory Stafford

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 5 disagreed to.

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 6.—(Christian Wakeford.)

The House divided: Ayes 278, Noes 164.

Division No. 458]

[8.43 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Barker, Paula
Abbott, Jack	Barron, Lee
Abrahams, Debbie	Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Baxter, Johanna
Aldridge, Dan	Beales, Danny
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Beavers, Lorraine
Alexander, rh Heidi	Begum, Apsana
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Bell, Torsten
Ali, Rushanara	Benn, rh Hilary
Ali, Tahir	Betts, Mr Clive
Anderson, Callum	Billington, Ms Polly
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Blake, Olivia
Arthur, Dr Scott	Blake, Rachel
Asato, Jess	Bloore, Chris
Asser, James	Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Athwal, Jas	Bonavia, Kevin
Atkinson, Lewis	Botterill, Jade
Baker, Alex	Brackenridge, Sureena
Bance, Antonia	Brash, Mr Jonathan
	Brickell, Phil
	Buckley, Julia

Burton-Sampson, David	Hack, Amanda
Butler, Dawn	Hall, Sarah
Byrne, Ian	Hamilton, Fabian
Cadbury, Ruth	Hamilton, Paulette
Caliskan, Nesil	Hardy, Emma
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Harris, Carolyn
Campbell, Irene	Hatton, Lloyd
Campbell, Juliet	Hayes, Helen
Carden, Dan	Healey, rh John
Carling, Sam	Hillier, Dame Meg
Carns, Al	Hinder, Jonathan
Charters, Mr Luke	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Clark, Feryal	Hopkins, Rachel
Coleman, Ben	Hughes, Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i>)
Collier, Jacob	Hume, Alison (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i>)
Collinge, Lizzi	Hurley, Patrick
Collins, Tom	Ingham, Leigh
Coombes, Sarah	Jameson, Sally
Cooper, Andrew	Jermey, Terry
Cooper, Dr Beccy	Jogee, Adam
Costigan, Deirdre	Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Cox, Pam	Johnson, Kim
Coyle, Neil	Jones, Gerald
Craft, Jen	Jones, Lillian
Creasy, Ms Stella	Jones, Sarah
Crichton, Torcuil	Josan, Gurinder Singh
Daby, Janet	Joseph, Sojan
Dalton, Ashley	Juss, Warinder
Darlington, Emily	Kane, Chris
Davies, Jonathan	Kane, Mike
Davies, Paul	Kaur, Satvir
Davies, Shaun	Khan, Afzal
Dean, Josh	Khan, Naushabab
Dearden, Kate	Kinnock, Stephen
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Kirkham, Jayne
Dickson, Jim	Kumar, Sonia
Dixon, Samantha	Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Dodds, rh Anneliese	Lamb, Peter
Doughty, Stephen	Lavery, Ian
Dowd, Peter	Law, Noah
Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Leadbeater, Kim
Eagle, Dame Angela	Leishman, Brian
Edwards, Lauren	Lewell, Emma
Edwards, Sarah	Lewin, Andrew
Efford, Clive	MacAlister, Josh
Ellis, Maya	Macdonald, Alice (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i>)
Elmore, Chris	Madders, Justin
Entwistle, Kirith	Maskell, Rachael
Eshalomi, Florence	Mather, Keir
Evans, Chris	Mayer, Alex
Farnsworth, Linsey	McAllister, Douglas
Fenton-Glynn, Josh	McCarthy, Kerry
Ferguson, Mark	McCluskey, Martin
Ferguson, Patricia	McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
Fleet, Natalie	McDonald, Andy
Foody, Emma	McDonald, Chris
Fookes, Catherine	McDonnell, rh John
Foster, Mr Paul	McEvoy, Lola
Foxcroft, Vicky	McFadden, rh Pat
Foy, Mary Kelly	McGovern, Alison
Gardiner, Barry	McIntyre, Alex
Gardner, Dr Allison	McKee, Gordon
Gelderd, Anna	McKenna, Kevin
Gemmell, Alan	McKinnell, Catherine
Gilbert, Tracy	McMorris, Anna
Gittins, Becky (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami</i>)	McNally, Frank
Glindon, Mary	Midgley, Anneliese
Goldsborough, Ben	Minns, Ms Julie
Gosling, Jodie	Mishra, Navendu
Gould, Georgia	
Griffith, Dame Nia	

Moon, Perran
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, rh James
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Narayan, Kanishka
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
Onn, Melanie
Opher, Dr Simon
Osborne, Kate
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Payne, Michael
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Poynton, Gregor
Quigley, Richard
Ranger, Andrew
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Robertson, Dave
Rodda, Matt
Rushworth, Sam
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Scrogham, Michelle
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick

Smyth, Karin
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Rachel
Thomas, Fred
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Toale, Jessica
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Karl
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Jake Richards and
Lilian Greenwood

NOES

Allister, Jim
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew

Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chope, Sir Christopher
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet

Dance, Adam
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David
Dewhirst, Charlie
Doogan, Dave
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Evans, Dr Luke
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kearns, Alicia
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Law, Chris
Leadbitter, Graham
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Logan, Seamus
Lopez, Julia
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mathew, Brian
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James

Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
Miller, Calum
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Hara, Brendan
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Tugendhat, rh Tom
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Gregory Stafford and
Rebecca Paul

Question accordingly agreed to.
Lords amendment 6 disagreed to.
Lords amendments 7 to 12 disagreed to.

Ordered, That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing to their amendments 1 to 12;

That Torsten Bell, Mark Ferguson, Alistair Strathern, Kirith Entwistle, Chris Vince, Mark Garnier and Charlotte Cane be members of the Committee;

That Torsten Bell be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Imogen Walker.*)

Committee to withdraw immediately; reasons to be reported and communicated to the Lords.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EDUCATION

That the draft Further Education (Initial Teacher Training) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 22 January, be approved.—(*Imogen Walker.*)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Warm Home Discount (England and Wales) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 2 February, be approved.—(*Imogen Walker.*)

Question agreed to.

PETITIONS

River Wye Pollution

8.57 pm

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Water is life, and rivers are the lifeblood of our landscape, but too often they are in a perilous state. Yesterday we celebrated World Water Day, and last month, on Valentine's day, I celebrated the work of North Herefordshire constituents who love the Lugg, the river that flows through the heart of my constituency. Those constituents care for our precious rivers: the Wye, the Lugg, the Arrow, the Frome and others. They run businesses and protect wildlife and heritage, and they include river-friendly farmers and citizen scientists. We are united by our desire to save our precious rivers from pollution, because we recognise that healthy communities and healthy economies depend on healthy rivers. We urgently need a water protection zone to protect the River Wye and its tributaries from damage caused by pollution. I am therefore honoured to present this petition on behalf of my constituents who love the Lugg and all the other North Herefordshire rivers.

The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take further action to save the River Wye catchment, starting with formally evaluating the option of

introducing a Water Protection Zone across the entire River Wye, as a mechanism to address phosphate pollution and restore the river."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the River Wye has been in the headlines since 2020 as one of the UK's most polluted rivers, and that phosphate pollution is especially severe in the Rivers Lugg, Arrow and Frome; further declares that the Environment Agency's plan for reducing pollution levels in the river falls short of what is needed to fix the problem and restore the health of the river; and further declares that introducing a Water Protection Zone would formally identify all sources of pollution, specify who should do what and by when to reduce and prevent pollution, and restrict or ban certain polluting activities with penalties specified for polluters who fail to take the necessary action.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take further action to save the River Wye catchment, starting with formally evaluating the option of introducing a Water Protection Zone across the entire River Wye, as a mechanism to address phosphate pollution and restore the river.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003172]

Hyper-Acute Stroke Unit at Yeovil District Hospital

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Following an online petition signed by more than 12,000 people, I present this petition on behalf of Yeovil residents, who declare that Yeovil hospital's hyper-acute stroke unit should not close unless local evidence supports that decision, particularly evidence relating to travel times to HASUs in other hospitals.

The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to review the planned closure of Yeovil District Hospital's hyper-acute stroke unit and ensure that the plans do not proceed until a comprehensive evidence base has been established regarding the impact of the proposed alternative arrangements on local residents.

And the petitioners remain, etc."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Yeovil,

Declares that Yeovil District Hospital's hyper-acute stroke unit (HASU) should not be closed without the move being clearly supported by a local evidence base, particularly in relation to travel times to HASUs in alternative hospitals.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to review the planned closure of Yeovil District Hospital's hyper-acute stroke unit and ensure that the plans do not proceed until a comprehensive evidence base has been established regarding the impact of the proposed alternative arrangements on local residents.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003175]

Rail Connections to London: Rural Towns

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Imogen Walker.)

9 pm

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): I am delighted to lead this debate to enable the House to discuss the need for rail connections between London and rural towns.

As the Minister well knows, I represent the beautiful constituency of Shrewsbury, the county town of Shropshire and home to some 70,000 residents. We already have the nation's favourite market, winning the national award no fewer than three times, but this weekend we were once again named one of Britain's best places to live, according to *The Sunday Times* in its annual guide. Judges praised our "period-drama backdrop", our fabulous range of eateries and our cool suburbs. *The Sunday Times* went on to say:

"The award-winning indoor market is surely one of the most inspiring places to shop in the whole country... the town centre has enough quirky delis, bakeries, bars and cafés to keep you in top-notch flat whites...and espresso martinis every day of the week. Culture comes courtesy of the cinema in the Old Market Hall and the boldly brutalist Theatre Severn".

It added that Shrewsbury

"even has its own cool suburbs in Belle Vue, where volunteers run an annual arts festival".

That is before we mention the 600 listed buildings, the Tudor castle and the riverboat cruises along the loop of the River Severn.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): Shrewsbury certainly does sound like a wonderful place to visit. I am working hard on the visitor economy for Amber Valley, and an integrated transport system and good transport links are a vital part of that. There was a daily railway service running from London to Alfreton in my constituency until 2021, when it was unfortunately discontinued. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important for us to encourage people to come out of the big smoke and into our rural areas to see what we have to offer in, for instance, her constituency and mine, and that it is important that they have the transport links to facilitate their visits?

Julia Buckley: My hon. Friend has made a powerful point about the need to visit these beautiful spots around the country.

A loop of the River Severn encircles our medieval town with a beating modern heart on the border with Wales. However, before all Members in the Chamber rush to book their weekend break to Shrewsbury, I must tell them that there is a slight problem: how can anyone get there from here? Shropshire is the only county in the UK without a direct train service to London.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): The hon. Member is making an excellent speech, and I empathise with her, because communities in Biggin Hill in my constituency are also completely without a railway station. Although the distance to Biggin Hill is 12 miles as the crow flies, it takes an absolute age to get there. Does she agree that such communities need to be served by efficient bus services, which are just as important?

Julia Buckley: The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point. Public transport must combine both trains and buses to make sure that all communities are well served.

As I was saying, Shropshire is the only county in the UK without a direct train to London. We can change at Birmingham, Stafford or Crewe, but that doubles our chances of a delay or a cancellation, creates extra barriers for those with mobility issues, and reduces work productivity for commuters. Not having a direct service is such a missed opportunity, because our town is the economic powerhouse of the region.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The hon. Lady is my constituency neighbour, and she is making an excellent speech about how wonderful Shropshire is. Also lovely is Oswestry in my constituency, another medieval town with a great history. I support the call that I think she will make for a direct service to London that runs through the whole of Shropshire, but in my constituency the rail line goes to Gobowen, not Oswestry, and that is really important. I support the call for the service, but does she agree that it is really important that Oswestry is linked to Gobowen, so that people in all our medieval towns can benefit from the railway?

Julia Buckley: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point about the inter-regional connectivity between our market towns. We need to get to London, but also to travel to each other. In Shropshire, we have three hospitals dotted throughout the county. Because of the lack of buses between those hospitals, we are reliant on trains. She makes a valuable point.

I was saying that Shrewsbury is the economic powerhouse of the region. Indeed, a recent report on our visitor economy shows that Shropshire's tourism sector is worth a staggering £1 billion to the economy, supporting nearly 10,000 jobs across the county. Transport for Wales recognises Shropshire as a net contributor to the Welsh network, because we offer such fantastic employment, training and leisure opportunities to travellers. The Shropshire chamber of commerce's quarterly business survey consistently reports the need for additional rail services, and states how much economic growth this would unlock, because additional contracts would be secured, increasing employment. Students no longer have the option of studying at a university in Shrewsbury, so travelling to London or stations along the way is hugely important for skills growth.

To fill the gap in services, Alstom UK has a bid for an open-access operation on the proposed Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands railway. It is offering up to four trains daily, based on its economic modelling of the latent demand at Shrewsbury. The railway would provide a total of six underserved rural towns with new connections to London.

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): Nuneaton serves as a valuable interchange for services to the economic centres of Coventry, Birmingham and Leicester, as well as for connections to Peterborough, Cambridge and Stansted airport. Strengthening those regional links is estimated to be worth about £500 million across the region. Does my hon. Friend agree that routes such as the WSMR will deliver greater growth across our region, because by making more connections—not just to London, but to those centres—we will enhance the travel and services that we can offer?

Julia Buckley: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point. Connections between towns give rise to employment opportunities and create connectivity, which adds to our local economy, as well as having wider benefits.

The WSMR bid will not take profit from other operators, because they choose not to serve our town. Instead, open access could save Government funds by adding value and thousands of passengers to the existing mainline routes. Some 2.3 million passengers already use the Georgian station at Shrewsbury to access the gateway between the midlands and Wales. Adding a direct train service to London is projected to generate £9 million in gross value added every year for the regional economy. That would surely magnify Government investment in housing growth and employment.

On the latent demand, it is so encouraging to see that, in just the last month, a petition from passengers in favour of the service has accrued over 6,200 signatures. Our local transport partners, Transport for Wales and Network Rail, have both committed resources to a fresh masterplan for Shrewsbury station that can explore the investment needed to unlock our infrastructure and generate additional capacity.

To conclude, could the Minister outline how the Department for Transport seeks to work with other rail partners to maximise investment in underserved towns such as mine, and what economic assessment has been made of the cost-benefit and the social and economic benefit of a direct train from Shrewsbury to London in the near future?

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): My hon. Friend, who is making a fine speech, is a passionate champion for her constituency. Does she agree that there are many new opportunities for rural communities in a post-covid world because they are really attractive places to live and work, and that the Government have a huge opportunity to harness their potential for economic growth but that we need better rail connectivity to help achieve that?

Julia Buckley: My hon. Friend makes a really important point, because most modelling shows that passenger numbers have not just recovered post covid, but have grown significantly. To achieve modal shift, we need to lean into that latent demand and make sure we provide opportunities for people to travel by train.

I would also like to ask the Minister: how can we unlock the economic potential that comes from increased rail connectivity for high-growth county towns such as Shrewsbury? As part of the 48% that are not yet in a combined mayoral authority, what strategic framework is available to support rural towns such as mine with direct transport investment? To wrap up, when will the Minister book his train trip to Shrewsbury to see for himself what a beauty spot we have to offer, and to find out just how much easier the journey would be with a direct service?

9.11 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I will keep this short, as I am conscious of time. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for allowing me to speak in her Adjournment debate on rail connectivity between London and what she refers to as rural towns. My constituency is not exactly rural—we are on the edge of the west midlands—but the rail line

she talked about runs right through Aldridge-Brownhills, hence I am speaking in this debate. I was very fortunate to travel on a recent charter service that took in the whole of the line—a number of Members were able to travel on that train—but I had to hop on in Walsall. I will come shortly to the reason for that, because the service passed right through Aldridge in my constituency.

The proposed Wrexham, Shropshire and midlands railway line—the WSMR line, as we refer to it—should and could be a huge opportunity for communities such as mine in Aldridge-Brownhills. Finally reconnecting us to the rail network, it would unlock jobs, growth, investment, access to education and social links, some 60-odd years after the last passenger services left Aldridge. Sadly, however, we in Aldridge have no railway station at all, and we are at risk of missing such opportunity because of the Labour mayor.

We saw new stations open at Willenhall and Darlaston just last week—projects delivered thanks to the leadership and funding of the former mayor, Andy Street—but Aldridge, by contrast, is very much in the sidings at the moment, because the Labour mayor has stripped away the funding for our station. The project had been promised to my constituents and funding had been set aside by the previous mayor, Andy Street. I want to be clear about what that means: if WSMR goes ahead—and Members should be in no doubt that I sincerely hope it does so—we could soon see trains running from Wrexham to London, which would be great, and they would be going straight through Aldridge, but they would not be able to stop, all because of the decision not to build the railway station. The reality we face is passenger trains running through our village and our communities, but my constituents being left standing on the trackside watching them pass by, which would be a complete failure of priorities.

I cannot let this opportunity go without saying to the Minister that an open-access bid from WSMR is a great idea—this evening, we can show our support for it—so please will he back this line and the connectivity that our region needs? However, I challenge the decisions that risk leaving communities such as mine behind, because Aldridge does not need or want passenger services that simply run through the constituency; it needs a station where the train can actually stop.

9.14 pm

Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I wish to place on record my sincere thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for her work in championing the Wrexham, Shropshire and midlands railway proposal, a new service that will link north Wales, Shropshire and the midlands, and on to London.

For many families in Wolverhampton and Willenhall, north Wales plays a very special part in our stories. We have all enjoyed day trips and summer holidays with the warmth of our Welsh neighbours. Stronger rail links will bring not just better transport connections, but social and economic connections and more choices for families.

Just as importantly, the service will strengthen local journeys, linking Walsall and Wolverhampton through the long-awaited new stations that opened last week at Willenhall and Darlaston. WSMR will support economic investment, regeneration and growth. It will improve

[Sureena Brackenridge]

access to jobs, apprenticeships and education, and better connect local businesses to wider markets, from north Wales all the way through to our capital.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way when she is making such an excellent and passionate speech. I hope the WSMR bid will succeed, as it would benefit my constituents in Powys and in Wrexham. Does she agree with me that the proposal would be improved by an extra stop at one of the two Glyndŵr stations, Chirk or Ruabon, as Wrexham's second-busiest of five stations?

Sureena Brackenridge: Yes, I have had the pleasure of visiting my hon. Friend's beautiful constituency, and I am sure that cross-connections will be incredibly important to his constituents. He is a champion for that.

The proposal will make the current capacity work better and maximise the investment that has already been made. I urge the Minister to back this proposal. It has cross-party support to deliver the connections that my constituents are ready to use and from which they will certainly benefit.

9.17 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for securing the debate and for enabling me to speak in it.

I would like to welcome once again the news announced at the spending review last June that funding has been allocated to reinstate the railway station at Cullompton. I was pleased to hear that reaffirmed recently in the Railways Public Bill Committee by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Selby (Keir Mather), who is in his place ready to wind up this debate.

Cullompton and Wellington are the two largest settlements on the line between Exeter and Taunton, so it is right that those towns should be afforded the means to enable the people who live there to walk or cycle to stations, giving them access to London via Paddington. A station at Cullompton will be key to its economic growth, enabling connections for work and education. I am glad the Government recognised that case.

Today, I want to bring to the Minister's attention the needs of the people of east Devon on the west of England line, which connects Honiton, Feniton and Axminster. Across south-west railways, 82% of trains arrived at their destinations within three minutes of their advertised time, but on the west of England line it was just 61%. Instead of the usual "leaves on the line" explanation, last autumn the culprit was "soil moisture deficit".

Robert Glen is a professor at Imperial College London who commutes from Honiton. He compares his experience of the west of England line with his experience in Hokkaido in Japan, where he sometimes works. Like Honiton, Hokkaido is also not very populated and far from the capital, but there he travels at 190 mph. We are not asking for the Devon Shinkansen—bullet train—even at HS2 speeds; we just want a route that connects Devon to London Waterloo at the same standard enjoyed by the rest of the country.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman would spare a thought for those even further south-west—nearly 1 million people in Plymouth and Cornwall struggle when there is a storm that affects their one line in and out of Cornwall. Would the Minister consider Great British Railways, when it is set up, having recourse to look at transport strategies for local authorities in places like Cornwall, which have such good transport plans, to make that a thing of the past?

Richard Foord: The hon. Lady makes an excellent point. I recognise wholly the vulnerability of the line at Dawlish, which my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Martin Wrigley) has also been campaigning on. I am sure that together, Devon and Cornwall MPs can keep up the fight.

To conclude, reliable rail links are essential in keeping Devon connected and competitive with a convenient and clean form of transport that is fit for passengers.

9.20 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for securing this incredibly important debate. I will never miss an opportunity to talk about how isolated my community is in terms of public transport.

The ability to get to London by train would be transformational for North West Leicestershire, but as my two main towns of Coalville and Ashby-de-la-Zouch, based in a semirural constituency, have not had passenger rail since the Beeching cuts closed the Ivanhoe line, getting a train anywhere would be a massive step forward. I would welcome the Minister setting out what assessment the Department for Transport has made of the economic benefits of connecting rural towns like mine to the rail network and on to London.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): In my constituency, four rural stations are served by just one train that comes every two hours. I have been fighting to get a train every hour for those stations and their communities. That train goes to Doncaster, which is a great gateway to London. Does my hon. Friend agree that while it is great having that hub in Doncaster, if we cannot get people to it, we cannot get them out to the rest of the country? We need to think about that in all our procedures and processes going forward.

Amanda Hack: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is really problematic if nobody is able to get to these hubs.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Towns across Derbyshire Dales such as Bakewell lack any connection to the rail network, leaving the 13 million people who travel to the Peak district mainly reliant on cars. Reinstating the peaks and dales line would be more environmentally friendly, help young people to get to work and education, and make it easier for millions of tourists to travel to the national park by creating a direct link to Manchester, Derby and then onward to London. Given those major benefits, will my hon. Friend join me in urging the Minister to look closely at the forthcoming feasibility study on the reinstatement of the peaks and dales line?

Amanda Hack: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I think the Minister will be incredibly busy after this debate. The tourism connection my hon. Friend identifies is so important. My constituency is home to the heart of the national forest—I think it is an absolute travesty that people have to travel by car to get there. That is something we have to look at.

Coalville is the largest town in the country not connected to the rail network. For someone in Coalville wanting to catch a train to London using public transport, the most suitable route is via Leicester. The longest part of their journey would be from their home in Coalville to the station in Leicester—it is quicker to get from Leicester to London. It takes three hours to get from Ashby-de-la-Zouch to London by public transport; more than half of that time would be spent getting from Ashby to Loughborough to catch the train.

Since the Ivanhoe line closed in the '60s, it is fair to say that my constituents have been left at a clear disadvantage by the ridiculous and inefficient journeys they now have to make.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): My constituency contains the longest stretch of rail without a station anywhere in the country. In fact, there are only eight stations in Somerset. Langport and Somerton fall right in the middle of that isolated area, despite the Paddington to Taunton line running straight through the towns. A new station could boost access to London and drive economic growth. Does the hon. Member agree that there is a huge opportunity to drive growth in rural areas by boosting access to the railway in underserved rural communities?

Amanda Hack: I absolutely agree. Economic growth and getting people to where they need to go are the most important parts of this debate.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware that I used to own a retail shop in the town of Ashby-de-la-Zouch in her constituency. Quite often, constituents of mine in Atherstone ask if they can have a direct bus service to get to Ashby-de-la-Zouch. Will she join me in campaigning for that direct bus service, which would enable her constituents to catch the train at Atherstone station, where they could get to London in an hour and 20 minutes?

Amanda Hack: I thank my hon. Friend, whose constituency almost neighbours mine, for her intervention. I absolutely agree; buses and trains make up the bulk of my constituency casework, as people are struggling to get to where they need to go. I would happily campaign alongside my hon. Friend on that issue.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is being really generous in taking interventions. Every time I have seen an opportunity to make my point, someone else has jumped in. I thank her for giving me the opportunity to talk about Roydon in my constituency, which does have a train line. One of my concerns with Roydon is that the train is often cancelled at peak times, sometimes at short notice. That means that people have to wait around on platforms for long periods of time, which is particularly concerning if they are on their own—a young lady waiting alone, for example. I recognise

the points that have been made about the importance of having a connected system and about some of the big towns that need a station. Does she agree that we need a reliable train network where cancellations do not happen, particularly at short notice?

Amanda Hack: I have every sympathy with the point that my hon. Friend is making. My train has been cancelled for six decades, which shows the impact in my constituency.

There is a real issue with connectivity. I would welcome the Minister setting out what assessment has been made of the economic benefits of previous lines in the restoring your railway project since the updates to the Green Book, particularly in the light of the recently opened Northumberland line service, which has smashed its projections on putting more passengers on to the network by 40%.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I am sorry for intervening on my hon. Friend, but as my constituency neighbour, I am sure she will understand why I do so. Many of her constituents use East Midlands Parkway station in my constituency to get down to London, and we are fortunate to have that direct line, but it is not electrified, which means that it is not the quickest line and it creates pollution. The procurement of the next phase of the midland main line electrification was delayed by the 2024 general election and then the spending review, despite it being worth £400 million in socioeconomic benefits. Will she support me and other colleagues here this evening—I know that another Member will be raising this point later—in urging that that decision be looked at?

Amanda Hack: Electrification of that line is long overdue, and it is something that I worked on as a county councillor before I came to this place. It really will be important to the east midlands.

My constituents tell me that if they are getting into their car to drive to the nearest station, they may as well just keep driving, and that is what happens. It is therefore unsurprising that roughly 80% of east midlands commuters drive and that the average number of rail journeys per resident is just seven per year, which is half the rate of the west midlands and a third of that of the east of England. I would welcome the Minister's views not only on the economic impacts of connecting rural towns to London but on the added advantage of connecting rural towns to each other, which was a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury.

At my Ivanhoe line debate in Westminster Hall at the start of the year, the Minister told me to keep holding the Department's feet to the fire, and I will continue to do that.

9.28 pm

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I will make a very brief intervention, as I want to make sure that the Minister has ample time to respond to the many points that have been raised. I must congratulate the hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) on securing this debate, and I thank her for telling us about her wonderful constituency. It is indeed a very attractive constituency, but I am afraid it is second best to mine in west

[Andrew George]

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly—we will no doubt have further debates about that. Nevertheless, I did not stand purely to make that competitive point.

It is to an extent justified for west Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly to be engaged in all rail debates as the very first steam locomotive ran in Cornwall and the first steam rail service ran as a goods service from Angarrack to Hayle in west Cornwall, so we were there at the beginning of the story of rail and of rail services across the country. I am proud of the heritage that Cornwall has contributed to the United Kingdom in that respect.

My constituency is at the end of the Paddington to Penzance line, and the primary point that I wish to get across to the Minister is that we should not be mesmerised by speed. The whole High Speed 2 debate has been about cutting a certain amount of time off rail journeys to certain destinations. However, in the case of services from Penzance to Paddington and back, journeys generally take five or five and a half hours, and we have a sleeper service that takes eight hours. The issue in our part of the country is not speed, but reliability, comfort and competitive pricing.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Yesterday I, alongside many constituents, was trapped on the main line—the one line we have between Cornwall and London—as a fire on the line caused havoc for businesses and constituents. I pay tribute to the emergency services, who responded so well to that incident. However, I want to highlight how a journey that should take a couple of hours became much longer—people were trapped, faced disruption and had to take taxis—which is a real indicator of how vulnerable we are in Cornwall. We need resilience built into that line. I look forward to hearing more about that in the debate.

Andrew George: I am enormously grateful to the hon. Member for making that point about vulnerability. At a number of points where the line is singled out—not just at Dawlish—a fire can have catastrophic consequences for the thousands of people seeking to travel on that day. One of my members of staff attempted to travel from Bristol down to the Lizard yesterday afternoon, and instead of that journey taking three hours it took over 11 hours. So often we hear those stories, especially about travelling to the far west of Cornwall—the further west we go, the more affected we are by those vulnerabilities.

My message to the Minister is that if we are to invest in the future of rail, what we really want is reliability, comfort, low pricing and space for people's luggage. I know that the business community in Plymouth has previously lobbied to say, "If only we could take half an hour off the journey, it would change the economic perception of the city," but taking half an hour off a five-hour journey means nothing to people in the far west of Cornwall. We also want reliability on the services so that the toilets do not constantly break down and people do not have to sit in the vestibule.

Jayne Kirkham: Of course, superfast satellite wi-fi has been tested on our part of the line. Although we have slow trains, we have the opportunity for fast wi-fi

to be rolled out, so that while people will be sat on their trains for five and a half hours, they can at least work or watch a film.

Andrew George: Indeed, I was going to come to that point. Busy Members of Parliament, or other people engaged in busy lives, sat on that train do not want those five hours to be dead time in the working day. Reliable wi-fi services can allow people to continue their working days with online meetings and communication as they travel. However, at present, on the vast majority of services the wi-fi is often interrupted and is very unreliable. In contrast to the many billions of pounds required to achieve the HS2 standards set by successive Governments for north-south connectivity, in many parts of the country it would cost significantly less—many millions of pounds—to achieve the kind of comfort, resilience, reliability, superfast wi-fi and competitive pricing that I have described to the Minister this evening.

9.35 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) for securing this important debate. She has spoken passionately, as she always does, about the benefits of a new route to link towns and cities from Wrexham through the west midlands to London. The proposed route would make a real difference to my constituents, particularly those living in Coleshill and the surrounding villages, who currently do not have a direct link to London. For them, that lack of connectivity represents not just an inconvenience, but a barrier to opportunity.

For too long, parts of the west midlands have been left disconnected from each other because of poor planning and under-investment. We are rightly encouraging more sustainable travel and balanced regional development, and the importance of strong local rail connections cannot be overstated. Constituents in Coleshill and the surrounding villages, such as Curdworth, Lea Marston, Nether Whitacre and Shustoke, deserve rail routes that take them directly to London and to other west midlands towns and cities, opening up opportunities for work and leisure, particularly in the motor manufacturing supply chain across the Black Country.

We have already seen the benefits of improved rail connectivity for constituents in Atherstone, who can now travel directly to London from the town's station every hour, although it would be good to have a later service back home, so that we could enjoy the theatre and still get back. It has removed the need to drive to neighbouring stations such as Nuneaton or endure long indirect journeys with multiple changes and cold waits in platform shelters. It has made travel simpler, quicker and more accessible. I intend to work with constituents to ensure that everyone can benefit from that route by improving bus routes from Polesworth and villages in the north of the constituency.

My constituents who use Coleshill Parkway deserve the same quality of rail service—a direct, reliable connection to London. They should be able to travel easily to nearby towns and cities across the west midlands, such as Walsall and Telford, as well as Shrewsbury, without the need to travel into Birmingham only to come back out again. That kind of inefficiency discourages rail use and, as other Members have said, once people are in their cars, they will stay in them to make relatively local journeys.

Helen Morgan: One reason people use their cars instead of the railway is that they cannot access the platform because there are steps and no lift. Does the hon. Member agree that restoring step-free access to stations such as Whitchurch in my constituency is critical to making sure that people can benefit from using the railway and do not get in their cars?

Rachel Taylor: Absolutely. I have disabled constituents and disabled friends who want to use the railway, but sometimes just getting on to the platform is too difficult unless they have pre-booked assistance, and sometimes that assistance is not there when they need it, so I absolutely agree with the hon. Member.

At a time when town centres across the country face unprecedented challenges, strong transport links are more important than ever. For people looking to move into the west midlands, this route will make Coleshill an attractive prospect for anyone who needs to regularly commute to London. It will also provide opportunities for away football fans from Wrexham, which is in the same league as Coventry City, who are also hoping to be promoted—perhaps, unlike Coventry, it will not be an automatic promotion.

Coleshill's businesses stand to benefit enormously from improved rail connectivity as well. A direct link to London would support growth, attract investment and encourage tourism to this lovely historic town.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): Connections to market towns in my constituency are vital for our tourism and hospitality industry. We have a great branch line service, but patrons of the much-lauded Gunton Arms and Suffield Arms will know that Gunton station quite often suffers from having trains only every two hours. Does the hon. Member agree that the frequency of train services is just as important to supporting our rural hospitality and leisure industries?

Rachel Taylor: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I have used that very service myself on many trips to Cromer and Sheringham. I used the service from West Runton either to get into Cromer or to go all the way to Norwich, and also the other way to Sheringham, so I absolutely know what he means. I think I might have had to get a taxi from the Gunton Arms one night because of the lack of trains back from the station there.

This Government have already done so much for rail users, including freezing rail fares for commuters, lowering the cost of getting to work and nationalising West Midlands Trains so that we can put passengers above profit. I hope that this proposal is considered carefully. I wish my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury all the best with the campaign, and I will continue to support her and my constituents to get the rail routes they deserve.

9.40 pm

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I am pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) has secured this debate about connections between London and rural towns by rail because many of the issues on which she touched apply to my own constituency in Derbyshire.

This morning I was at Broomfield Hall college, an agricultural college with a fantastic equestrian centre, to launch the findings of my survey of young people. Over 500 young people in Derbyshire contributed to the survey. It has given me some rich insights into issues that I must take forward in this place on their behalf. One of the issues that came through in that survey was a lack of good transport links for rural and semi-rural towns in Derbyshire. When I come to London every week, it never ceases to amaze me how extensive, resilient and cheap the transport is and how late it runs. That is not the experience of many people around this country, and we must address that so that opportunity is in the hands of people wherever they live and whatever their background, not concentrated in London and the south-east.

I know how serious this Government are about the railways. Great British Railways is a significant intervention, and we are pleased that it will be hosted in Derby, because although there is some contention about this, I contend that Derby is the home of the railways. We have the largest rail manufacturing cluster in Europe, and George Stephenson's final resting place is in Derbyshire too. Despite its railway pedigree, there is no electrified line through Derbyshire—it stops in Leicestershire, and then that section of the Midland main line, all the way through Derbyshire up to Sheffield, remains unelectrified.

The benefits of introducing electrification are significant. We can reduce air pollution and journey times, and improve reliability. Studies indicate that there is potential to add £500 million to the regional economy by pursuing electrification. It is a project that has been kicked into the long grass too many times. I know that money is tight, and we do not have a golden inheritance as a Government, but I urge the Minister to consider the benefits of Midland main line electrification, because we could actually improve the connections to some of our smaller and more rural stations. There are three in my constituency: Belper, Duffield and Spondon.

James Naish: I just need to reinforce the point that my hon. Friend makes, because the east midlands already receives the lowest level of transport spending per head of any UK region or nation—just 56% of the UK average. Although I do not want to undermine the campaign of my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley), which is extremely important and which I support, would my hon. Friend agree that the east midlands in particular has to be looked at, because places such as his constituency and mine have not had the money they deserve?

Jonathan Davies: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am glad that the Government have begun to address this shortfall. The investment of £2 billion into the East Midlands combined authority under Mayor Claire Ward specifically to be used for transport will go some way towards addressing that, but there is a lot more to do because the east midlands has historically been left behind.

The merits of electrification of the east midlands railway will benefit our rural and semi-rural towns. Belper is a town of nearly 25,000 people. It is in the heart of the east midlands and has the region's only UNESCO world heritage site: the Derwent Valley mills. I very much hope that it will be England's, or the UK's, next town of culture—it makes a good case for that. But to help people get

[Jonathan Davies]

to Belper when it is the town of culture, as I am sure it will be, we need to ensure that the rail connections are there. At the moment, there is only one train in each direction on the Midland main line that stops. People have to go to Derby or change, or they drive to Derby and get on the express train from there. I plead with the Minister to please take forward the benefits of Midland main line electrification, because it would benefit rural and semi-rural stations too.

9.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): It is a pleasure to respond to this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) on securing it and for speaking so ardently about the critical importance of rail connections in rural areas. She also set out a strong case for the historic yet modern and classic yet avant-garde town of Shrewsbury, and all that it has to offer people across the United Kingdom.

It would be remiss of me not to reflect on the fact that a debate that began with Shrewsbury grew into a fascinating tour of the rail challenges and opportunities in rural towns the length and breadth of our beautiful country.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): My rural constituency is lucky enough to be only 21 miles from London, but the train from Dorking travels at 21 mph, which, according to my arithmetic, means that it takes one hour to get there. Some 1,900 people have signed a petition calling for a faster train, and the director of South Western Railway is interested. Will the Minister meet me to discuss faster trains to Dorking?

Keir Mather: I am very glad that the hon. Member managed to sneak in before the end of the debate. I cannot fault his maths on the challenge that he describes. I will ensure that his request for a meeting is passed on to the Rail Minister, who, I am sure, will be very glad to meet him.

Colleagues must forgive me, because although I have reflected closely on their points during the debate, and shall feed them into Department for Transport processes on improving rail connectivity between rural towns and London, the substance of my remarks will focus on rail connections to Shrewsbury. My hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury worked so hard to secure the debate and deserves a full response to the issues that she raised.

Members from across the House, including my hon. Friends the Members for Wolverhampton North East (Sureena Brackenridge), for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) and for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), and the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton)—I could go on, Madam Deputy Speaker, but you will be pleased to know that I will not—made the crucial point that good rail connections are vital for connecting people to job, service and leisure destinations. They are catalysts for economic growth. People deserve access, irrespective of where they live, to all the benefits that the railway has to offer. That is why it is so important that we deliver on our promise to bring the railway back into public ownership under Great British Railways.

GBR will bring 14 separate train-operating companies and Network Rail into a single organisation that will be able to plan a fully integrated train service on which passengers can rely. GBR will be better able to offer the fast and frequent connections to, from and between major economic centres. When people need to change trains—for example, when they change from a rural connection to an inter-city service—GBR will be far better able to make connections dependable, as they are for passengers on the world's best-performing railways. Of course, in a system that needs to cater for many needs, and to connect many towns and cities across the country, while improving performance and reducing costs for taxpayers, some compromise is necessary. Although it may not be possible in every instance to provide direct services to all places, we are determined to ensure that GBR offers people excellent access to their nearest major economic centre, for jobs and services, and to major rail hubs for onward connections.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I thank the Minister for giving way right at the end of the debate. My constituency does not contain a single mainline station. The six Cornish MPs would also love to meet the Rail Minister. We have a plan called “Kernow Connect”, and we have huge economic potential, with critical minerals and one of the world's deepest ports in Falmouth, but we do not have the capacity for freight on our railway. I would appreciate the Minister's help in setting up that meeting and moving this forward.

Keir Mather: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will ensure that his request is put through to the Rail Minister.

Let me turn to the matter of direct services between Shrewsbury and London. I fully understand the desire of my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury for a direct connection to London. I reassure her and the community she represents that the Government are determined to improve rail services across her constituency and elsewhere. We will set out some of our ambitions in more detail in our forthcoming integrated national transport and long-term rail strategies later this year.

We have been clear that GBR must be a railway for everyone, and it will be required to engage widely with local leaders on delivering the best service for their area, supporting local growth in a way that is affordable, and supporting a high-performing railway for everyone. I welcome the advocacy of my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury, and that of other Members, and I look forward to GBR working in partnership with them to reshape services so that they meet the needs of the communities they serve.

Wendy Morton: Is there definitely space for open access in GBR? The Wrexham, Shropshire and midlands railway, which the hon. Member for Shrewsbury (Julia Buckley) talked about, is an open-access bid.

Keir Mather: I thank the right hon. Lady for her contribution. She has made similar ones about open access, and I fully agree about how important it is. We believe that when GBR manages capacity across the rail network, it might create more opportunity for open-access services when the railway is run in a more cohesive way. Open access can absolutely be part of the picture in a dynamic railway system.

The majority of passengers from Shrewsbury choose to go to Birmingham, or to other stations along the same route, and very few passengers used the Avanti service that was referenced. When Avanti withdrew its service, West Midlands Trains significantly improved its service by adding a new, limited-stop service to Birmingham, between WMT and Transport for Wales areas. Shrewsbury residents currently have three direct trains per hour to Birmingham. This is an improvement to the most popular services, and it also insulates local train service performance from issues that may occur further down the line. Since the direct service was withdrawn, Avanti has increased the number of fast services between London and Birmingham, improving interchange options for those travelling between London and Shrewsbury. I appreciate that that might not go far enough for my hon. Friend, and I am happy to take the conversation forward.

Such steps represent meaningful progress, and it is not just rail services that are being improved for local communities. We are consolidating and simplifying local transport funding for all local transport authorities. Shropshire county council will receive £8.7 million from the bus services fund, which the council can use however it wishes to deliver better bus services for local people. Shropshire county council will also receive £219 million in integrated transport fund allocations between 2026-27 and 2029-30.

I recognise my hon. Friend's determination to pursue the open-access application from the Wrexham, Shropshire and midlands railway. The Department for Transport agrees that it would provide important connectivity for communities along the proposed route, including Shrewsbury. That is why we have provided conditional support for WSMR's application, subject to the Office of Rail and Road and Network Rail being satisfied that services can be accommodated without compromising network performance, and without adversely affecting the rights of other operators. I hope my hon. Friend will appreciate that under the current system, access to the rail network is a matter for the ORR, as the independent regulator for the rail industry. The Department for Transport is unable to direct the ORR's decision making directly. However, capacity remains constrained on the

west coast main line, and that was a major factor in the ORR's rejection of WSMR's original application. Improving capacity across our rail network is a long-term priority for this Government. We are establishing GBR precisely to put in place the strategic planning and sustained investment that is needed to secure better connectivity and opportunity for communities in every part of the country.

Once it receives Royal Assent, the Railways Bill will establish a new access framework. GBR will in future be responsible for decisions about access to its network, as the single directing mind for the railway. GBR will be required to determine the best use of the network in line with its statutory duties, which include promoting the interests of railway passengers, and delivering the social and economic benefits derived from railway services. Open access will continue to play a role in offering innovative solutions and improving connectivity where it represents best use of the network. The new capacity allocation framework will embed strategic planning, and under the infrastructure capacity plan, GBR will be able to provide greater clarity and long-term certainty for open-access operators in a way that the current system does not. The Government have committed to honouring all existing access rights under GBR, including for open-access operators, for the duration of those access agreements.

In conclusion, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Shrewsbury for her thoughtful and constructive contributions on behalf of her constituents, and all other Members across the House who have raised the transport challenges in their constituency, have sought to hold the Department for Transport to account, and have asked how the Department can go further, faster, in delivering on its aspirations. I have listened to the points raised this evening, and I reassure my hon. Friend and other Members that the Government will reflect carefully on all of them.

Question put and agreed to.

9.54 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 23 March 2026

[DAVID MUNDELL *in the Chair*]

Puberty Blockers Clinical Trial

4.30 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 751839 relating to the clinical trial into puberty blockers.

It is always a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I sincerely thank everyone I met in preparation for this debate: the legal and medical professionals who shared their expertise and the individuals with deeply personal, lived experience on both sides of this discussion. It goes without saying that this is a complex topic. I am grateful for the time and care that people have taken to help inform this debate.

I also thank the petition's creator, James Esses, and petition supporter and campaigner Keira Bell. I had the pleasure of meeting them ahead of this debate, and they are watching today. Their petition asks that the clinical trial for the use of puberty blockers be cancelled. They believe that medical intervention in this area is dangerous, poorly evidenced and ethically questionable. They have asked Parliament to ensure that children are protected from potential harm.

I want to make it crystal clear that this debate is not about trans rights or whether people who identify as transgender have the right to exist and live free from discrimination. This discussion focuses on a clinical and ethical issue: whether puberty blockers should be prescribed to children experiencing gender dysphoria, and specifically whether a new NHS-backed clinical trial into their use should proceed.

Puberty blockers are medicines that suppress the production of sex hormones. They press pause on puberty, delaying changes like periods, breast development, voice changes and facial hair growth. Historically, they have been prescribed to children who enter puberty unusually early and, in some cases, for the treatment of cancers or endometriosis. Importantly, they are distinct from gender affirmation or cross-sex hormones. Blockers temporarily pause development, while cross-sex hormones actively induce the physical changes of the opposite sex and are generally irreversible.

The petition raises two main areas of concern: the possible long-term medical side effects of puberty blockers, and whether meaningful consent can ever be obtained from a child or adolescent.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very good start to his speech. I appreciate that this is very contentious, but I am concerned about the manner in which young people—children—are asked questions. The KIDSCREEN-10 index is a primary outcome measure for the PATHWAYS trial, and when I look at the questions, I wonder how my son would have answered them aged 11. One of them asks:

“Have your parent(s) treated you fairly?”

The truth is that any child at that age would probably say, “No.” Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that these questions are not fit for purpose?

Jamie Stone: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention, but she will understand that it is my job as Chairman of the Petitions Committee to present a fair description of both sides of the discussion, which is what I hope to do.

James Esses, who started the petition, is a psychotherapist, and he impressed on me the benefit that good psychiatric intervention could have, without medicalisation. Puberty, he argued, is rarely a picnic for anyone—it can be confusing, uncomfortable, and sometimes miserable—but it is an essential developmental stage, and suppressing it pharmacologically could alter physical and cognitive development in ways we do not yet fully grasp. His argument is not to remove care for children experiencing gender incongruence, but to focus efforts on careful psychological support.

Others question the trial's purpose, noting that puberty blockers have already been paused for new NHS patients with gender incongruence, following concerns about safety. They fear that authorising a new trial implies a level of confidence that the evidence base does not yet justify, arguing that enough data exists to recognise the potential harms, from reduced bone density to uncertain impact on brain development. Continuing could erode the safeguards that protect young people.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): The hon. Member is making great efforts to be balanced in his presentation on behalf of the Petitions Committee. He says this is a complex area, but surely it is actually quite simple: we should not be experimenting on children, particularly as we cannot do double-blind experiments. Those are two fundamental reasons why these so-called experiments should not go ahead.

Jamie Stone: I note the sincerity with which the hon. Gentleman makes his remarks. There is the legal and ethical question of whether a child can ever truly consent to something like this.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): I have five children, and have watched half of them go through puberty. They continually change their minds about things. Ethically, I can see no justification for allowing children to be experimented on. What might be a short-term solution could become a permanent solution that people often grow to regret.

Jamie Stone: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, which was, I believe, made with as much sincerity as the previous intervention.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I believe many children were treated with puberty blockers, among other drugs, before the Gender Identity Development Service programme was closed down. Does the hon. Member know what has happened to all the data from those children who were previously treated, or why it should be necessary to treat any more children with these drugs until enough time has elapsed to enable that data, and the treatment's consequences, to be verified?

Jamie Stone: What I am about to say relates to the right hon. Member's intervention. It is not unusual in medicine for children to participate in clinical trials, provided that there are robust safeguards, clear parental consent and proper oversight. But can a distressed teenager and a family desperate to help truly grasp these long-term implications? The legal experts I consulted spoke about the delicate ethics at play. Medical research always involves balancing competing risks: the risks of harm from an intervention versus the risks of harm from withholding it.

Puberty blocker trials pose unusual challenges as they cannot include placebos, so the design requires special scrutiny to ensure that informed consent is meaningful. There is still work to do to ensure that children and parents fully understand what entering a study means. On the other hand, opponents of the petition—those who support the new trial—say that the only way to reach clear conclusions about safety and efficacy is through rigorous, carefully monitored research. We do not yet know about the potential harms of puberty blockers for treating gender dysphoria, but we do know that the effects of cross-sex hormones can be irreversible.

Following the Cass review, NHS England proposed a very different approach from the old Tavistock model, focusing on smaller numbers and much stricter controls. The new design would have national oversight, tight eligibility criteria and a multidisciplinary team around each young person, and only about 5% of participants might receive puberty blockers compared with around 27% who were prescribed them while at Tavistock.

Also important is that cancelling the NHS trial would not prevent young people from accessing puberty blockers. In some gender clinics, clinicians report that between 10% and 20% of clients are obtaining them privately or online, outside regulated healthcare systems. Those unmonitored routes carry greater risks because dosages, purity and outcomes are not tracked or supported. Proponents of the trial point out that without direct research we remain in a state of uncertainty, which carries its own risks. If puberty blockers help some young people to avoid serious distress, we need to understand that better.

If the evidence ultimately shows that the risks outweigh the benefits, that too must be established through high-quality data. Without such evidence, none of us—doctors, parents or policymakers—can make sound judgments. Of course, participation in any trial is voluntary. Families will continue to have the right to decline. The aim of the study is not to push young people towards any one outcome, but to understand what support is appropriate for different individuals.

I want to end my speech by returning to the people at the heart of this issue. I have spoken to individuals who feel deeply harmed by medical intervention, such as Keira Bell, whose story has been widely discussed. Her experience matters, as do the experiences of all those who regret the care they have received. I have also had the pleasure to speak with Maxine Heron, whose experience with puberty blockers was profoundly positive. Having the option to pause puberty spared her immense distress, and she has experienced no negative health outcomes. For her, being forced to undergo male puberty would have been the greater trauma. She is one of many who report that their lives have been significantly improved by timely support.

We must hold both kinds of stories with equal seriousness. Regret exists, but so does gratitude. The aim of research is not to erase one side of the story, but to understand why experiences differ, and crucially, how best to help every child who is struggling. Without doubt, this is one of the most challenging questions before us: how to protect young people, respect autonomy and uphold scientific integrity. I, for one, do not pretend that it is easy.

I hope today's debate will help to address some of the challenges, and reassure those who have signed the petition that their concerns are being taken seriously. I can see with my own eyes that many colleagues wish to contribute. I will therefore draw my remarks to a close. I look forward to the contributions to this debate, especially the reply from the Government, which I believe will be instructive.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called. As the debate is heavily subscribed, I am afraid that I will have to impose a two-minute speech limit from the start, and even that will not guarantee that everyone will be called.

4.42 pm

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. Any debate in which we are talking about the health and wellbeing of children and young people requires us all to be measured in our remarks, not least in the context of a debate that has been so toxic at times.

Our focus in clinical studies and in any treatment that we offer anyone, let alone children, should be: "First, do no harm." It is that axiom that seems to be at the heart of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency intervention that has paused the puberty blocker trial. To summarise where we have got to with the PATHWAYS trial, parents are being asked to consent to a potentially life-altering intervention to their children in the absence of a life-threatening condition, based on an unreliable diagnosis with an unknown trajectory.

I urge the Government to go one step further and cancel the trial altogether, not least because there are alternative approaches for us to establish the facts regarding the use of puberty blockers, and to do so with an approach that is compassionate, understanding and holistic. The only question we should be asking in relation to gender dysphoria is: what is the best approach to support those who experience it?

Dr Cass said in her review:

"The rationale for early puberty suppression remains unclear, with weak evidence regarding the impact on gender dysphoria, mental or psychosocial health. The effect on cognitive and psychosexual development remains unknown."

In the context of that really good review, the PATHWAYS trial was a mistake. I welcome the trial being paused, because there is so much else that we can do.

The MHRA has said that ultimately puberty blockers can be very dangerous for bone health and cognitive development, with other long-term effects. We must move from a pause of the trial to its cancellation. There are other types of studies that we can do; I suggest we focus on a data linkage study.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Thank you, Mr Smith, for keeping to time, which I am sure Rebecca Paul will do as well.

4.44 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): The use of puberty blockers on healthy children is deeply wrong. Children given those drugs are being locked into their discomfort and put on a one-way pathway to cross-sex hormones and surgeries. All of that leads to a lifetime of sexual impairment, fertility issues, bone density loss and other catastrophic psychological and emotional impacts. No child put on puberty blockers at the earliest stage of puberty and whose natural puberty is blocked will ever have an orgasm or be fertile. That is what anyone in this room cheerleading this trial is supporting.

In December, the Health Secretary said at the Dispatch Box:

“Am I comfortable that this clinical trial has undergone the proper process and ethical approval to ensure the highest standards and supervision? Yes, I am comfortable about that.”—[*Official Report*, 17 December 2025; Vol. 777, c. 929.]

However, on 20 February, we found out that the MHRA had U-turned and was expressing serious concerns about the current trial. The issues it raised were not new, though, having been raised from the outset by many in this room. Making children infertile and harming bone structure are not minor points of detail, but fundamental safety flaws. That last-minute intervention raises questions about the rigour and diligence of the overall approval process. How did a trial with such potentially catastrophic health impacts make it through the research ethics committee approval process?

Having looked through the minutes of the meetings, I can see that the committee members met three times over Zoom; nine out of 12 attended the first, only five attended the second and only three attended the third. What stands out most to me is the REC’s delegation to a sub-committee of approval responsibilities for such a profoundly dangerous trial. Section 4.2.24 of the REC governance policy document indicates that sub-committees can be used when

“research proposals...present no material ethical issues”.

I am therefore staggered that it took the decision to delegate approval responsibilities in this case.

4.46 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. At the outset, I want to acknowledge the strength of feeling on all sides of this debate, and our responsibility in this House to provide clarity that is grounded in evidence and centred on the wellbeing of the young people we are talking about.

The petition calls for the cancellation of the planned clinical trial of puberty-suppressing hormones, describing them as unsafe and inconsistent with safeguarding. However, the reality is that Dr Cass was clear in her review that we are lacking evidence, and that one of the scenarios where she believed that puberty blockers should be prescribed for gender incongruence is a clinical trial. A trial is a response to uncertainty, focused on ensuring that clinical decisions are made on a foundation of robust evidence.

I find it a little more than ironic that, when the Cass review was published, many of the voices now telling us that a trial should not go ahead were saying that the Cass review should be accepted and implemented in full. They have gone from saying, “We need the evidence,” to, “This trial should be stopped.” If someone can show me another way of properly gathering clinical evidence other than a full clinical trial, then I am all ears, but, in reality, we are talking about shutting down options for trans people. With waiting times for a first appointment for a gender identity service currently standing, in many cases, at more than five years, it is not as if there are copious alternatives out there for this group of young people. Many are waiting the entirety of their adolescence just to start treatment. Would we tolerate that for any other group of patients? I doubt it.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Josh Newbury: In the interest of time, I will not.

Although I respect the concerns that have led many to sign the petition, I urge colleagues to reflect on the consequences of the course of action it proposes. Cancelling research does not resolve uncertainty, but entrenches it. In doing so, it risks leaving vulnerable young people without the evidence base needed to support safe, informed and compassionate care. As someone who is proud to be an ally of the trans community, I believe that we have a duty to ensure that trans young people hear a clear message from this House: they are supported, respected, cared for and never alone.

4.48 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. First, I should acknowledge that, having been steeped in this issue for many years, I know James Esses, the therapist who organised this petition. He, the formidable Keira Bell and the Bayswater Support Group have managed to halt this trial, so no children are to be recruited until the High Court makes its decision, until at least July.

It is clear that we are talking about an extremely vulnerable cohort of children. Recently, James told MPs and peers that, first and foremost, most of his patients—almost all of them, in fact—are autistic. As recognised by the Cass review, children or adolescents on the autism spectrum experience difficulties with social belonging and can be particularly sensitive to seeking affirmation from others. James explained to us that many of his patients rely on rigid and regressive stereotypes, including the trope that a preference for activities or even friendships associated with the opposite sex must mean that they actually are that sex. That is the basic foundation for the so-called gender critical movement: a rejection of labelling, and the pigeonholing or aggressive stereotyping of what constitutes boy or girl behaviours, clothes preferences or activities.

For over 20 years, medical professionals voicing their sound judgment and concern about ethics and child safeguarding at the Tavistock were ignored, their concerns buried and they themselves punished, sidelined and vilified for challenging an entirely ideological project. It is thanks to medical professionals such as Sue and Marcus Evans, Dr David Taylor, Dr David Bell and Sonia Appleby, to name just a few brave medics, and the

[Rosie Duffield]

committed reporting of journalists such as Hannah Barnes and Julie Bindel that we are having this debate today. In all the years I have been actively campaigning against the impossible notion that anyone is born in the wrong body, I have been labelled far-right, bigoted, transphobic and all kinds of other ridiculous slurs that would be unparliamentary to repeat here. We must stop this trial because of the incredibly vulnerable cohort of children as young as 12 who cannot possibly give consent.

4.50 pm

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. The proposed puberty blockers trial on children is not just badly designed; it is profoundly unethical. It proposes that vulnerable children who are struggling with their identity, but medically healthy, be given drugs that risk permanent damage. We know that this group of children is deeply vulnerable. They deserve proper care and treatment. The medicalising of gender identity risks underlying conditions being overlooked, meaning that children will not get the support they really need.

Children in this trial would be at what is called Tanner stage 2 of puberty. For children at Tanner stage 2 who proceed to cross-sex hormones—basically, all of them—infertility is not a risk, but an expected outcome. I repeat: once they are locked into this medicalised pathway, infertility is expected. Let us be absolutely clear that this trial would mean the British state sterilising healthy little children in plain sight—not by accident, but consciously and deliberately. How could we do that to children? It would be the most appalling state scandal imaginable. These medically healthy children need love, compassion and support. They should not be given powerful drugs to stop their body from developing as normal.

The truth is that puberty can be very distressing for any child, not least those who do not conform to aggressive gender stereotypes or who will grow up to be same-sex attracted. Puberty is a natural and essential part of becoming a fully grown human being. I say to those children: you are perfect just the way you are and you do not need to be somehow corrected with these drugs.

Children of primary school age cannot possibly give consent to these life-changing decisions. When they become adults, many of them will look back on what was done to them and ask, “How did this happen to me? How did the Government do this to me?”

4.52 pm

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. As an MP, I hear far too often from young trans and gender-questioning people and their families who are unable to get the treatment they need. It is important in this debate to start by being clear what puberty blockers are and are not. They do not, on their own, make any permanent changes to a young person's gender. Some people who start puberty blockers will go on to further treatments, and some will not. Puberty blockers can give young people time to explore their gender without the added distress of unwanted physical changes. That gives them the time and space to decide if they want to take more permanent steps. Puberty blockers alone do not lock young people into any permanent decision.

New prescriptions for puberty blockers were banned indefinitely in November 2024, meaning that the PATHWAYS trial has been the only legal way to get a prescription. The Green party opposes the ban on puberty blockers and always has, because they are a safe and reversible way of reducing gender dysphoria that is recognised by international research and advisory bodies. The list is too long to give in the time we have, but it includes the European Society for Paediatric Endocrinology, the American Association of Clinical Endocrinologists, the European Society for Sexual Medicine, and so on.

My concern is that the PATHWAYS trial has not been paused because of genuine concern about young people's safety or because the Government have listened to the constructive concerns of the trans community about how the trial will be run. It now looks like a political decision. If further research on puberty blockers is needed—I understand that most medical treatments benefit from ongoing research—that research must be carried out in a way that does not exclude or disadvantage one patient cohort over others. It should centre the needs of the young people involved. There should not be a cap on participants or an unmedicated control group, and it should take account of all uses of puberty blockers, including on cis children experiencing premature puberty. We so often talk about trans people without including them in decisions made about them. I ask the Minister to reconsider the Government's path.

4.54 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I believe that a trial for puberty blockers is necessary, and I am hopeful that the issues raised between the MHRA and King's College can be resolved to allow the PATHWAYS trial to go ahead. If not, I hope an alternative trial can be proposed. I believe that if we accept that trans people exist and have rights, which I think—or at least hope—everyone here does, such trials are a natural consequence.

I understand the concerns the people here and outside this place have about the long-term medical impacts of puberty blockers. That is why we should act cautiously and it is why a trial is needed. We cannot possibly understand the short or long-term impacts without studying puberty blockers properly. The PATHWAYS trial came about because of a lack of conclusive evidence on the use of those drugs. The answer is not to allow their legal use again, but to undertake a trial into their benefits and consequences.

Not long ago in my constituency, I met the parents of a trans woman. Their daughter struggled significantly with her mental health during her teenage years. At one point, she was hospitalised due to complications from a severe eating disorder, which was driven by her decision to reduce her calorie intake because she thought that would delay puberty. Her parents have told me that they believe a big cause of her issues was her inability to express her true gender identity. They have no doubt that puberty blockers would have saved her from some of the anguish that she has experienced. While I know life is not always easy for her, my constituent's daughter has since medically and socially transitioned; she lives openly as a woman and is happier as a result.

That story shows the profound impact that a struggle with gender identity can have on a young person. It is offensive to talk about young people simply needing love,

to talk about trials being experiments, or to suggest that taking part would be an impulsive decision by anyone. People talk about trying to moderate language; we have a duty to bring people together on this topic, not create division.

4.57 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. We should start off by recognising that the life choices that adults make, in whatever way they make them, are to be respected and not criticised. This matter is not in any way a criticism of anybody who chooses a trans identity or who identifies as trans, or who chooses any other identify or identifies in any other way. It is simply about the experimentation on children.

Let us be clear: we would not tolerate any form of medical experimentation on children in such an uncertain category with any other treatment. We would, quite rightly, put forward the Hippocratic oath to do no harm. To change that, particularly for a group of children who are often already suffering from some other element of potential harm, including autism, as the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) mentioned, would be to re-victimise children who are already vulnerable. This issue must be treated delicately and carefully, but the truth is that it is getting wrapped up in identity politics and being played with politically by those who wish to advertise their progressive credentials but who are forgetting that it is fundamentally about one thing: the protection of children.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Tom Tugendhat: I will not. Whatever the views of people in this room, there is a second element that this Government must consider. We are already seeing honourable individuals like Keira Bell who have raised the problem of detransitioning, and we are seeing the legal costs of their actions against the state. What money has the Government set aside for legal action for those who are too young to consent because they are not 18 years old and who will therefore be able to bring legal action against the state for any experimentation that was done on them, as would have happened in this circumstance?

4.59 pm

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I want to start with the expression, “Do no harm.” To be clear for the people who have come to speak to me—parents and young people themselves—we are doing them harm by not giving them the treatment they need, with the wait times of six years, and potentially in respect of puberty blockers, where that is agreed with their healthcare professionals.

My overarching concern is that the clinical trial was suggested in the Cass review. It was proposed and designed in conjunction with the MHRA, but then the MHRA changed its mind. Why was that? Dr Hilary Cass said:

“There are no new research findings and the MHRA hasn’t presented any new evidence. It feels to me like they are responding to political pressure rather than to science.”

That is what she said; I was quoting her verbatim. It was her review that the people around this Chamber wanted us to listen to and to make changes in response to, so we have to listen to her in this instance as well.

The MHRA should operate without any political interference or fear of legal action, yet the MHRA itself referenced potential legal action in relation to the trial as one of the reasons why it changed its mind. That is a problem. The MHRA is there to make sure that anything from clinical trials to medical technologies and new drugs are dealt with on the basis of science and science alone.

Tonia Antoniazzi: The problem is that the MHRA lead, Professor George, is being hounded and scapegoated after recusing himself. It is really sad to see a professional in such a situation. I urge my hon. Friend to use words with caution, because he recused himself. He is a great man who is being hounded.

Emily Darlington: I am not for hounding any particular individual. The only person I have referred to by name is Hilary Cass and she has been on the public record. I have been hounded for my views as well—

Tonia Antoniazzi: We all have.

Emily Darlington: Exactly, and that is completely inappropriate. A leader of a political party shouted “Traitor” at me when I said we should watch our language around this issue. I do not know who they think I am a traitor to, but I am certainly not one to the human race. The hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) has said she has received death threats; I get death threats too. This is not unique to the hon. Member.

The MHRA should not be in an environment where it has any fear of any legal action; it should only look at the science. Many in the community feel that the trial has now become too political for anybody to touch and that we have forgotten about those children who, quite frankly, if we do not do anything for them, we are doing harm.

5.2 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Children deserve protection, not experimentation. In Upper Bann alone, 1,300 people signed the petition—more than twice the number of signatories in any other constituency. Their message is clear and I stand with them.

Animal testing on mice and monkeys shows that puberty blockers cause irreversible damage to brain development. If these hormones are unfit for animals, why on earth are we about to inject them into our children? Children are once again being used as lab rats for a dangerous medical experiment. It is wrong. We should not be experimenting on a fresh cohort. Instead, we should be prioritising a data-linkage study of the hundreds of children who were given puberty blockers at the now discredited and closed Tavistock clinic.

It is reckless to allow minors to take certain risks while they are still maturing. All trial participants will be under 16. We do not allow teenagers to drive, get married, buy alcohol or own a gun. We should not put them on a medical pathway with such life-altering consequences. In fact, for most children who are questioning their gender, going through puberty will naturally resolve

[Carla Lockhart]

their gender dysphoria. We should offer vulnerable young people support and stability, not give them life-altering drugs.

It should send a shiver down our spines when we look at the documentation relating to safeguarding. Participants are warned against getting pregnant while taking puberty blockers; there is no mention of the fact that the legal age of consent is 16. Even more concerning, girls will be advised to consider getting their eggs harvested, which is normally a procedure for in vitro fertilisation or cancer treatment. Complications include ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome, which can cause severe abdominal pain and even death. There is no mention of those risks in the document.

I have met Keira Bell. She is sounding the alarm for anyone who will listen. Doctors did not give her holistic care; instead, they affirmed her false belief that hasty medical intervention was the answer. My constituents and I need a total ban, not just a temporary pause to this dystopian medical trial.

5.4 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. Over the past year, the public debate has become often heated and personal and, at times, deeply harmful. The rhetoric has consequences, and we in this House must take responsibility for the climate that we help to create.

The Cass review's recommendations were so important, and among them was a clear call for carefully designed clinical trials to build the evidence base around puberty blockers. Those trials would allow clinicians, patients and families to make informed decisions grounded in robust data rather than speculation or ideology. Those who argued that puberty blockers should be restricted due to insufficient evidence are now opposing the very research that would provide that evidence. That does not suggest a commitment to scientific rigour; it suggests a shifting position driven by political ideology. I am not a clinician, and I do not pretend to be. On matters such as these, we must be guided by medical evidence.

Jonathan Hinder: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rachel Taylor: For the sake of time, I will not.

The need to be guided by evidence is precisely why the current situation is so troubling. It is concerning that the MHRA initially raised no objections to the trial when it was approved but has since changed that position. As Dr Cass made clear, no new evidence has been presented to justify that shift. That raises serious questions about the basis of the decision, and whether an independent regulator has buckled to pressure from a well-funded lobbying campaign. As a consequence, vital research is now at risk, and that matters. The trials are not an optional extra; they are the mechanism through which we build the evidence base that critics say is lacking.

Tonia Antoniazzi: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rachel Taylor: No, I am not giving way.

We cannot afford to sacrifice the future of vulnerable young people on the altar of ideology. The trials received ethical approval and were recommended by one of the country's foremost experts in child health. It is vital that they go ahead so that we can build the evidence we need to support safe, effective healthcare for young trans people.

5.6 pm

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I am concerned about the motivation behind the trials. I went to the initial meeting hosted by the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, where we met the panel of so-called experts, and came away with the impression that this was nothing more than a spine-chilling, state-sponsored experiment on our children, with no regard to safeguarding them.

In the main Chamber, I asked the Secretary of State to introduce statutory legislation to access the extensive data that is already available from Tavistock; yet again, I was not provided with an answer as to why he could not do that. I am concerned about the profile of the children being used. I asked at the initial meeting for a lower age limit, but I was refused. I asked whether the Government would consider not including vulnerable children, children in care, or children on drugs for anxiety or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, but I was refused.

We have all talked about the long-term damage that seems to be ignored, but one of the most important things that has not really been covered is parental consent. We have heard that consent would be needed from only one parent, if a parent was present in a child's life. This can cause irreversible damage to families. Last week, I hosted a roundtable about the indoctrination of our children in schools on this very subject, and I heard horrific stories from isolated parents whose children were lost to them because of brainwashing and the fantasy world they had been taught about at school.

Rachel Taylor: Will the hon. Member give way?

Sarah Pochin: No, I will not.

Overall, we are creating a generation of lost, anxious young people who are confused about their identity, socially insecure and physically scarred.

5.8 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): Many of my constituents have spoken or written to me because they are anxious about the pausing of the trial. In the words of one of my constituents,

"to be a true ally you must support all trans people and their needs, not just adults".

As a matter of principle, politicians should not meddle in medical decisions. If we accept that trans people exist, and if they are to be accepted, they need to have access to healthcare. We must listen to the experiences of trans young people and take action to protect their wellbeing by opposing restrictions on gender-affirming care for trans youth. All children need access to safe and timely healthcare in line with international best practice. The pausing of the trial is causing deep anxiety among many of my constituents.

International best practice, as laid out by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health, emphasises that decisions around hormones should be made on a case-by-case basis. Puberty-suppressing hormones have long been used by children who experience early-onset puberty, and significant international research and advisory bodies already support their use by trans adolescents as a safe, reversible means of alleviating gender dysphoria and improving psychological functioning and wellbeing. They are used in Canada, Belgium, the Netherlands and many other European countries.

I have four asks of the Minister. Will the Department engage legitimately with the widest range of advocacy groups, including groups such as TransActual, to understand the real human impact of the ban and ensure that future policy is informed by those who are directly affected? Will the Department reinstate the trial, while ensuring that those who do not wish to take part in research can continue to access appropriate healthcare? Will the Department revise its policy on the prescription of gender-affirming hormones to remove arbitrary age limits, in line with international best practice? Will the Department do more to bring down waiting lists, which are more than six years for a first appointment at a young person's gender service?

Like many, I am concerned about the erasure of the trans community. Today, we need to heed the many arguments they are making. In the words of the trans community, "Nothing about us without us."

5.11 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. The truth is that this clinical trial is flawed, and we should not be experimenting on children. We should be protecting children from many harms, such as alcohol and nicotine. We have things such as the age of consent for sexual intercourse and for marriage, to protect children. It is important to remember that a child's prefrontal cortex does not fully develop until their mid-20s, so even their ability to grasp the long-term effects of any decision is limited.

Although a diagnosis is necessary for participation in the trial, it is not sufficient in determining whether medical intervention should take place. Cass directly makes this point:

"Although a diagnosis of gender dysphoria has been seen as necessary for initiating medical treatment, it is not reliably predictive of whether that young person will have longstanding gender incongruence in the future, or whether medical intervention will be the best option for them."

The PATHWAYS trial uses the ICD-11—the 11th edition of the "International Classification of Diseases"—diagnosis of gender incongruence, which simply requires a desire to transition. The diagnosis is subjective, based on how the child feels. Can the long-term risk of medical intervention be justified by such a vague diagnosis? If the core diagnostic tool cannot predict outcomes with confidence, the trial would expose children to harm without a sound basis for believing that medical intervention is in their best interest.

The trial has been framed as a pathway to clarity, yet it is flawed before it has even begun. Proceeding is not neutrality but a decision with consequences. The trial would see harmful, long-term and irreversible damage to children, and should be cancelled.

5.12 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. This is a Government who have shown that they care for the safety and welfare of children. They supported the Online Safety Act 2023 to counteract harmful digital content and removed, albeit eventually, the punitive two-child benefit cap to reduce poverty. The Government have committed to halving violence against women and girls, and have banned the pre-watershed advertising of junk food on TV.

However, the trial flies in the face of the Government's explicit mission to protect children from harm. It would expose children to severe and irreversible harm when viable, less harmful alternatives are available. Despite that, the Government are happy to permit a clinical trial that would give puberty blockers to 226 children. Research has shown that over 95% of children who start out on puberty blockers continue on to cross-sex hormones, while other research has shown that between 60% and 98% of children with gender dysphoria will outgrow that feeling and go on to live a normal, natural, healthy life in their born body.

Rachel Taylor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Iqbal Mohamed: I am going to continue, given the lack of time.

The numbers are important. They mean that the Government are choosing to prioritise the interests of between five and 90 of the 226 children involved in the clinical trial at the expense of deliberately harming between 135 and 203 children, who will eventually come to terms with their birth sex. I ask the Minister, will the Government now confirm that the current pause—which I welcome and am grateful to the Government for—will remain in place unless and until all safety, ethical and scientific concerns are fully and transparently resolved?

5.15 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): As politicians, we all profess to be interested in protecting the vulnerable. If we are, surely one of the most vulnerable in our society are those going through adolescence. If anyone needs protecting, it is the adolescents.

Feelings and behaviours fluctuate during adolescence. I am sure that is the experience of all of us who are parents. More often than not, gender dysphoria resolves naturally during puberty. That is the reality. Yet for too long in our society, we have had this laissez-faire attitude to puberty blockers. Until 2024, there was no restraint whatsoever. What damage was done to those children who were given puberty blockers before the pause was imposed? Does no one care about the damage that was done to those children? Whether one likes the word or not, it is experimentation on children, and without a due process of consent. The trial is incapable of having a due process of consent.

When we endorse puberty blockers, we are turning a blind eye to the fact that they might have medical consequences on children's bone density and on the development of their brains. Do we not care about that? If we care about that we need to cancel, not just pause, the programme.

5.17 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I have strong concerns about artificially delaying puberty, but at the same time, I also want high quality, holistic support for young people who question their gender. The Cass review recommended psychological care as the first port of call for managing gender distress, yet the NHS trial shows a worrying bias towards medicalisation.

As a former corporate parent, I am alarmed that looked-after children were over-represented in referrals to the NHS Gender Identity Development Service. At the time, they made up just under 0.6% of the general population, but 5.9% of referrals. For children in care, the transition to adulthood is already a challenging time. They are often more vulnerable to the suggestion that puberty blockers could solve their problems. Despite that, children in care will still be allowed to enrol in any trial. Who will consent to their treatment? The state itself, represented by a corporate parenting board. That blurs the line between child safeguarding and institutional interest. The state is wearing two hats: legal guardian and trial sponsor.

Another serious issue is that the trial risks treating young lesbians as if they were born in the wrong body. Shortly before GIDS closed, 74% of teenagers referred to the clinic were girls. Most identified as lesbian or bisexual. Almost 70% said that they were attracted only to other girls, and 20% that they were attracted to both sexes. Yet in recent years, some young women have been encouraged to identify as trans rather than lesbian, and my view is that the trial will only reinforce that belief.

Lastly, at least 64 patients from the Tavistock clinic returned to living as their birth sex between 2010 and 2020. Detransitioners face huge social pressure to stay silent about their experiences, so I conclude by quoting the brave detransitioner Keira Bell, who said:

“The state assisted me in destroying my body during a period of distress. I was a tomboy who came out of an abusive, neglectful environment with a lack of positive role models, and I struggled with my sexuality. Stopping children’s brains and bodies from developing is not a solution, nor is it healthcare. It’s like giving Ozempic to an anorexic or alcohol to an alcoholic.”

We need a permanent end to the trial, not just a pause. Otherwise, even more young people will be left asking the same question: why did no one stop me?

5.19 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. My constituents have a clear expectation that we proceed with caution when it comes to children’s healthcare, but there is a fundamental contradiction at the heart of this trial: the Government have already restricted these drugs due to what they described as an “unacceptable safety risk”, but those same drugs are now being made available through a clinical trial.

We must also look squarely at the evidence. There is no robust proof that puberty blockers deliver the benefits often claimed. In fact, the evidence suggests that, for many children, gender-related distress resolves naturally through puberty. The risks, however, are very real—to bone density, brain development and fertility. There are also serious ethical concerns. We are talking about administering powerful drugs to young children with no

reliable way to predict who will benefit. This is not a targeted intervention; it is a gamble with children’s futures.

The design of the trial only adds to those concerns. It compares immediate treatment with delayed treatment, rather than examining long-term outcomes, and relies heavily on subjective measures rather than clinical evidence. It risks answering the wrong questions while exposing children to the well-rehearsed risks. Even more concerning is the sequencing—clearly, we should understand past outcomes first, and yet the trial presses ahead before we do.

The process itself also gives us pause. The trial received ethical approval and £10.7 million of public funding, and yet within months it has been paused following intervention by the regulator over concerns about safety and design. If a trial collapses under scrutiny before it begins, that tells us it is not ready and raises a serious question about why it was pushed forward in the first place.

I urge the Minister to explain why, given the known risks, the trial should proceed at all. When the evidence is weak, the risks are real and the patients are children, pressing ahead is not leadership, but recklessness.

5.21 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for his opening speech, as well as the compassionate and balanced nature with which he introduced the debate.

Liberal Democrats have been arguing for many years that improved access to better specialist healthcare services for children and young people struggling with their gender identity is extremely important. These young people have been badly let down by low care standards, extremely long waiting lists and an unacceptably toxic public debate.

Up front, I want to be clear that my party’s position is that any treatment and the approval of a trial must always be led by clinical, expert evidence, and not by personal belief, however sincerely that belief is held. For these reasons, we welcomed and continue to welcome the call in the Cass review for a clinical trial.

Following the closure of the GIDS clinic, which was rated inadequate by the Care Quality Commission, it is clear that change is needed. Under the previous system, more than 5,000 young people were stuck on a waiting list for a single clinic, each waiting an average of three years for just their first appointment.

We have consistently campaigned for real action to tackle the shocking waiting times across the NHS, whether for cancer patients or mental health referrals, and the importance of cutting these wait times is equally pressing for gender identity services. We have been pressing for new services with more specialist clinicians who can provide children and young people with the appropriate and high-quality care that they need. Liberal Democrats welcome the NHS’s move to create new regional centres to offer this healthcare to the young people who need it. However, as far as I am aware, only two have opened so far—one in London and one in the north-west. We would like confirmation of when more centres will open.

Young people who are stuck on these waiting lists will still have to wait a very long time. At such a distressing point in their lives, the three-year average wait for someone to see a specialist must feel like an eternity—for them and their family. The Government must show true urgency in opening these services to prevent more children being further denied the care that they need.

It is right that treatment should first be based on talking therapies. That gives those receiving treatment and their families the time, space and clarity to make informed decisions about their future. However, young people must be able to start talking therapy when they need it as a matter of urgency, not after languishing for years on waiting lists.

Following the Cass review, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care announced the launch of an NHS clinical trial to investigate the impact of puberty blockers, alongside an indefinite ban on puberty blockers as treatment for gender dysphoria or gender incongruence. That trial has now been paused. It is crucial that decisions on treatment are made by expert clinicians and based on the best possible evidence, but we need the NHS to build up that evidence base effectively and safely.

In that vein, we are supportive of the Secretary of State's decision to pause the trial while the concerns raised by the MHRA are thoroughly assessed. I am calling on the Government to publish how the MHRA arrived at its decision to pause the trial, so there can be confidence that the decision was led by clinical evidence. As with any medical treatment, it is crucial that decisions are led by expert clinicians following the evidence on safety and effectiveness. Research should also take into account the personal experiences of those who have previously used these services.

This debate should not be an ideological one; it is a debate about the quality of healthcare we provide to people who are in desperate need. All trans and non-binary people should be able to access the high-quality healthcare they deserve. The Liberal Democrats call on the Government to make tackling the unacceptable waiting times a priority. To take the urgent action that is needed, the Government must commit to NHS trials and adult services for trans and non-binary people that will expand the timely provision of appropriate specialist healthcare.

The Government must ensure trans people can access high-quality healthcare in the manner we expect for all patients. Medical decisions should be made by patients and doctors together and informed by the best possible evidence. The Government must support research through effective and safe methods using international best practice to improve our evidence on the safety and efficacy of potential treatments.

One thing is certain: in a debate where the wellbeing of many young people is at risk, decisions should not be led by ideology. We cannot let a toxic public debate threaten the wellbeing of vulnerable individuals. The Government must prioritise clinical evidence and put the interests of patients at the heart of the decision-making process, as we do in all areas of healthcare.

5.26 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Mundell. I must first declare an interest as an NHS consultant paediatrician. I thank

James Esses for the petition and the thousands of people who have signed it, including many of my constituents, for enabling today's important debate. I also thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for leading the debate so well.

The petition asks the Government to cancel the puberty blockers trial and to safeguard vulnerable children. Perhaps it is worth considering whether clinical trials in children are a good idea in principle. The answer, of course, is yes. Children are not just small adults; they have different illnesses from adults, they present with different symptoms and respond differently to medication, and they require different doses at different ages. Properly designed clinical trials ensure that children's medicines are safe and effective for them.

However, today we are discussing one particular trial: a proposal to give puberty blockers—gonadotrophin-releasing hormone analogues—to children, specifically for gender incongruence. Perhaps at this point it is worth considering why doctors and others prescribe medication; we do it to treat or cure disease, to treat or lessen symptoms and to aid in diagnosis.

What does this trial seek to do? On the face of it, it seeks to establish whether puberty blockers are a safe and effective treatment for gender incongruence. ICD-11 defines gender incongruence as:

"A marked and persistent incongruence between an individual's experienced gender and the assigned sex".

To suggest persistent incongruence with gender stereotypes is wrong could undo years or decades of rolling back gender norms. If it is not causing the person any distress, why would we want to treat it, especially when we know that most children, even those with gender dysphoria who do have distress, will get better without any puberty blockers?

Currently, there is no way to identify which children will persist with a trans identity as adults and which will not. The much-delayed data linkage study could help with that. It could enable more targeted interventions and may also provide information on the long-term outcomes for people who have taken puberty blockers in the past. However, the Government insist on pushing on with the puberty blockers trial anyway, before the data linkage study is complete. Why? In written parliamentary questions, Ministers have said that they expect the data linkage study to be finished by April 2027, so what is the rush?

What is the point of the treatment? It has been suggested that it helps transgender adults pass more easily as the opposite sex and potentially avoids surgical operations in adulthood, but how on earth can it be ethically, morally or medically right to treat a large group of children with risky medication to give cosmetic benefits to a much smaller number of adults?

There are also cosmetic risks to the treatment. The penis grows very little between the ages of three and 10 years. The use of puberty blockers restricts growth, meaning those with a persistent trans identity may struggle with having enough tissue for a vaginoplasty surgery, and those who do not have a persistent trans identity may struggle with normal intimate relationships.

As mentioned earlier, the Secretary of State has said that he has confidence in this trial. Now it has been paused, we can presume that he is not quite so sure. But can we, patients and the general public have confidence

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

in this trial? There are certainly causes for concern. In fact, there are so many that I cannot speak of them all today, but I would like to speak of a few in the time I have available.

First, on the selection of patients, we have had a dramatic change in the demographic. There has always been a small number of children uncomfortable in their own bodies, but there has been a rapid increase, which is not fully understood, particularly among girls. Many of them are in care, some have autism spectrum disorders and many are same-sex attracted. We need to understand this before prescribing irreversible treatments.

We do prescribe—and I have prescribed—drugs that are high risk or potentially harmful to children. An easy example would be chemotherapy, but that is being given to save a child's life; it is not used to pause a perfectly normal physiological process in a physically healthy child. The risks of these treatments have been listed today, but I will list just a few: fertility problems; idiopathic intracranial hypertension; demineralisation of bone density, leading to fractures; in some studies, an increase in depression and anxiety; and the long-term loss of sexual function in some patients. We have discussed consent. How do you get consent from a parent of a child—a boy or a girl at Tanner stage 2—about long-term sexual function and fertility?

On the design of the trial, it is said to be a randomised controlled trial. Well, it is, but that is a bit of a fudge, because instead of an actual randomised controlled trial where some patients receive puberty blockers and some do not, it has given some now and some slightly later, with a very short difference in the timing. The comparison group that does not have any puberty blockers at all is taken from a slightly different population, which introduces an unnecessary bias. The trial's organisers have said that they are doing that because they think the children would get the drugs from elsewhere or from abroad, but that is not how we do medical trials. When I have raised this issue, Ministers have responded that it cannot be blinded, but blinding and randomisation are not the same thing. The trial is also far too short to provide data on long-term outcomes.

On the process of the trial, the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) raised questions about what children are being asked as part of this trial. Why is the trial proposing to ask children about their sexual experiences? Why is this helpful to the trial?

Iqbal Mohamed: Will the hon. Member give way?

Dr Johnson: I will not because I am aware of the time.

The Commission on Human Medicines' report heard that, because trials of puberty blockers have been blocked, some clinicians are trying to use other drugs to limit puberty, such as spironolactone and cyproterone acetate. There have been reports that the number of prescriptions for spironolactone in 10 to 17-year-olds is going up. Could the Minister confirm whether that is the case and what the Government are doing to look into it?

The MHRA was happy with the process; now it is not. What has changed? None of the issues raised seem to have not been raised before. The Government are being secretive about it: in February, Ministers brought

forward a written statement referencing an MHRA letter in November, but the Minister is refusing to publish it. I have asked Ministers whether they talked to MHRA officials about the trial before February 2026, and they will not answer the question. There was a letter between the MHRA and KCL; I asked when it was received, when the Department became aware of it and when Ministers became aware of its contents. They will not tell me.

What about the people controlling the trial? As has also been mentioned during this debate, Professor Jacob George has been recused from further involvement. According to the MHRA's statement, this is "a precaution", because of social media posts made before his involvement. Why have those who have made the opposite type of comment not been recused too? This will inevitably make members of the public think there is bias involved.

There is an oversight board. What has the Minister done to ensure that the clinicians and scientists on that board are impartial, and that it is balanced between both perspectives? The Tavistock trial was supposed to report to the MHRA, but it did not, seemingly with no consequence. There will be lay members on the board with lived experience; will one of those be a detransitioner, or will they all be people on one side? That would increase the perception of bias in this trial.

In summary, this is a trial of risky medication on healthy children, most of whose features of gender incongruence will resolve in time, given normal puberty. What is particularly worrying is that, at the end of this treatment, the trial has so many flaws that it is bound to be disputed, whatever the result.

To give this treatment, the lead clinician will need to think that there is a reasonable prospect of a patient benefiting from puberty blockers. Given all that has been said, how can any clinician believe that that is the case? I hope we can all agree that we do not need a clinical trial to know that helping a child to be at peace with themselves and their body is infinitely preferable to a lifetime of harmful medical intervention.

5.34 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) of the Petitions Committee for the way in which he introduced the debate. In his usual style, he made sure that he had talked to a range of people and experts to inform this debate.

I want to start by recognising that the thousands of signatures on the petition show the real strength of feeling on this issue. I thank everyone for taking part. I am acutely conscious of the young people, their families and people in the Public Gallery today and outside who are paying close attention to this debate and what is being said. I hope to address all the issues that have been raised—I have kept notes and listened carefully—as I know people want to get this on the record. I will say now that I will not take any interventions; I will just set out where I think we are. If I do not answer particular questions, I will get back to people.

I want to assure colleagues and the signatories to the petition, particularly young people and their families, and those who are waiting for, have had or have been concerned about gender services, that this Government will always be led by science and not ideology. We are

proceeding carefully in line with clinical advice and we will always put the interests of vulnerable children first, because their health and wellbeing are not negotiable. That is our position.

Let me start, briefly, with some of the context. In 2020, NHS England commissioned Dr Hilary Cass to undertake a review of NHS children and young people's gender services. Like others, I am sure, I have taken time over the weekend to re-read her interim report and her full report; I commend both to people with an interest in the subject.

Dr Cass is one of the most pre-eminent clinicians in her field, and her review is the most definitive assessment of its kind. It laid bare the inadequacy of the now decommissioned Tavistock Gender Identity Development Service. The interim review and final report made it clear that we needed better data and a stronger evidence base to design the right services for children and young people presenting with questions around gender dysphoria or gender incongruence, given the poor evidence base for services and treatment against rapidly increasing and, as we have heard, changing demand.

Dr Cass recommended a new model of care based on holistic assessment and psychosocial support, with further research into puberty blockers, specifically where they are not provided in isolation. The Labour party in opposition welcomed her report and accepted her findings, and we continue to do so in government. Many of the recommendations in her report are being implemented, including opening new NHS children and young people's gender services while building the evidence base in parallel through a national research programme.

As the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross outlined, the rationale for the clinical trial is part of the recommendations to gather robust, contemporary and comparative evidence on the relative benefits and harms of puberty-suppressing treatments in children. That is how we can decide whether puberty suppression can be an option in NHS gender care in future.

The PATHWAYS trial has undergone thorough scientific, clinical, ethical and regulatory safeguards. Following academic peer review, it was supported by the independent National Institute for Health and Care Research funding committee. It was endorsed by a multidisciplinary and multi-agency national research oversight board, and was then subject to formal regulatory approvals via the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency; the Health Research Authority, including a review by an independent research ethics committee; and finally, the Commission on Human Medicines, which made considered recommendations to the study team that were adopted in full.

As with all complex clinical trials, the top priority of each of those organisations is the safety of the trial participants. The MHRA in particular is maintaining a high level of scrutiny and taking a cautious and measured approach. Where appropriate, after initial approvals have been granted, there can be ongoing dialogue between the sponsors of clinical trials and the MHRA. That is part of the process—I want to stress that point.

The MHRA has raised concerns relating to some elements of the trial design, and those questions obviously need answering. Rigorous and constructive discussions are accordingly under way between the MHRA and the trial sponsor.

Gregory Stafford: Will the Minister give way?

Karin Smyth: I am not going to give way; I am going to get through these points.

The safety and wellbeing of children and young people have always been the driving consideration in every decision we have made regarding this trial, and always will be. That is why the trial sponsor has paused recruiting until these issues can be resolved. There have been calls today to cancel the pause, to continue with the pause and to cancel the trial, but the position is that the trial is paused until the issues are resolved, because we will not compromise an inch on safety. The trial will proceed only if the regulatory approval is reconfirmed. We will provide an update on the outcome of those discussions as soon as we can.

Iqbal Mohamed: Will the Minister give way?

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. I think the Minister has made it clear that she is not taking interventions.

Karin Smyth: Thank you, Mr Mundell.

Dr Cass also recommended that we take forward the data linkage study as part of the wider national research programme. The linkage study is not a clinical trial, and as such it will not in and of itself provide the type of evidence that can demonstrate cause and effect for any particular treatment. It is observational in nature, linking and analysing existing routinely collected data for adults who were referred as children to the Tavistock before it was decommissioned. The study requires no active patient participation; instead, it relies on an analysis of digital information held within health records and other databases.

Data linkage studies have faced difficulties that are a matter of public record, but since then there have been great efforts to improve the collaboration of the adult clinics and other organisations. Important final steps are currently being taken to enable the study to begin. We expect the study analysis to then take around one year to complete. On 26 February, we laid an order before the House to make it lawful for people and organisations to share or process data that could be subject to protections under the Gender Recognition Act 2004 where it is for the purpose of the study. That order came into force last week.

The PATHWAYS clinical trial is a key step that we are taking to build an evidence base to prove whether puberty blockers are safe and effective in treating gender incongruence and gender dysphoria. As we speak, the new clinical model is collecting a consistent and comprehensive core clinical dataset while we develop a supporting national registry.

In the meantime, hormone medications are not being prescribed. NHS England now prevents the routine use of puberty-suppressing hormones in the NHS children and young people's gender services, and the Government have indefinitely extended restrictions that prevent them being supplied privately. Last year, NHS England issued guidance to GPs that strongly advised against supporting prescribing agreements with unregulated providers, who do not always have children's best interests at heart. That includes online overseas providers who are known to have supplied puberty suppressants and cross-sex hormones to children in the past without any proper safeguarding. NHS England issued that warning because

[Karin Smyth]

of the serious safety risks that unregulated providers continue to pose to children in this country. In some cases, we are talking about puberty blockers being prescribed following a questionnaire or a brief Zoom call.

I will come on to other issues around future services, although I think I have answered most questions. All clinical trials have appropriate insurance to cope with the issues outlined by the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat). The trial sponsor is King's College, so my understanding is that the issue raised by the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) with regard to the state having conflicts does not arise. The hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer) cited regulations that were mainly from overseas, but the UK has its own regulatory independent network: the MHRA, which we work with. The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), who I respect in her role as a paediatrician, asked a number of questions about timing and process. She will be aware that there is a judicial review, but I will make sure that she gets an answer on some of those issues.

I want to update the House that since April 2024, NHS England has opened three new services in the north-west, London and the south-west. I can confirm that a fourth service will become operational at Cambridge University hospitals NHS foundation trust very shortly. Those are important services for young people and their families who are awaiting treatment and who want to understand when and how they will receive care.

Rachel Taylor: Will the Minister give way?

Karin Smyth: I am not going to give way.

Those services operate under a fundamentally different clinical model from the Tavistock clinic. Children and young people will get comprehensive, tailored assessment and support from multidisciplinary teams made up of experts in paediatrics, neurodiversity and mental health.

Under this Government, mental health spending has gone up in real terms, and we are putting specialist mental health teams in every school to support those young people. However, I know there are still families who are desperately worried by some of the debate and are concerned about the future, often to the detriment of their own mental health. They want clarity on the options open to them. I want to end by assuring hon. Members that we will update the House on all these issues as soon as possible. I urge all hon. Members to continue to engage with the evidence that best supports our young people. That is what we, as a Government, continue to be focused on.

5.45 pm

Jamie Stone: I trust that this evening's debate has given a flavour of what life on the Petitions Committee is like—it brings its challenges and informative debate. I want to thank all those who have spoken; they have done so with sincerity. Opinions differ, but there is no doubt that hon. Members feel very strongly about the issue. I also thank those in the Public Gallery. At the end of the day, the work of the Petitions Committee is about ensuring that an issue is properly aired in this place and that petitioners are heard. I believe that has been done tonight, and I thank everyone.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 751839 relating to the clinical trial into puberty blockers.

5.46 pm

Sitting suspended.

Court and Tribunal Transcripts

[MARK PRITCHARD *in the Chair*]

6 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 756036 relating to access to court and tribunal transcripts.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and a privilege to introduce this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I put on record my thanks to Daniel ShenSmith for creating the petition, and to Dr Natalie Byrom, Adam Wren and Fiona Goddard, whose insights on this issue have proved invaluable to me in preparation for the debate.

The petition seeks to make it a legal obligation for all courts and tribunals to make transcripts available free of charge. Currently, in both civil and criminal cases an application for transcripts may be made for all or part of a hearing, with such an application generally requiring the payment of a fee. However, there are circumstances where parties can appeal for the cost of the fee for transcripts to be paid at public expense. For that to happen, the court must be satisfied that the requesting party qualifies for free remission, or is otherwise in such poor financial circumstance that the cost of obtaining a transcript would be an excessive burden, and satisfied that it is necessary in the interests of justice for such a transcript to be obtained.

That brings me to the key question that the petition seeks to address: does Parliament think that access to records of court proceedings should be treated as a public good? The petition has over 200,000 signatures from members of the public, so this is clearly an issue that has struck a chord with many of our constituents. The problem is that the current system is not fit for purpose. It undermines transparency and disproportionately affects the aspiration of a court to protect victims, bereaved families, and those who are wrongly accused or seeking to challenge injustice.

Let us concentrate on how unfit for purpose the system is. His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service commissions transcription services through a procurement framework: a pre-approved panel of private suppliers established via a competitive tender. The current framework was awarded in June 2023 and runs until June 2027. Under that model, HMCTS pays suppliers for the transcripts that it requires for court purposes. The transcription company is responsible for any anonymisation that may be required and for applying any reporting restrictions that are in place.

When a member of the public requests a transcript, however, they must make a request to the court in which the hearing took place and pay the transcription company directly at commercial rates. If the hearing has already been transcribed for HMCTS or another member of the public, a lower copy rate will apply. If a member of the public wants a transcript of court or tribunal proceedings, they must complete a lengthy form and pay the court the cost of the transcript. The cost will be determined by the length of the transcript, with transcription companies charging per block of 72 words. More complex cases will have longer transcripts and therefore costs will be much higher.

Only a handful of transcription companies are part of the tender process and each is attached to a particular court on a geographical basis, creating a monopoly with no competition. That only drives up prices. There are accounts of people being quoted up to £50,000 for the release of these important documents. The Government's website promises that those who apply for a free transcript will hear back within 20 days of submitting a request. If they are not eligible, they will be invited to apply for all or part of the transcript and to pay for it at a commercial rate. The judge assigned to the court case must give approval for the transcripts to be released in the first place. That approval alone can add weeks, if not months, to the process.

That is a significant problem for the groups who need to receive the most protection—victims or, in cases in which the victim has died, their families. That is because the court judge might rule otherwise and rule against a request that has been put in place, quite rightly, by victims or survivors, who want to understand the true, underlying reasons behind a jury making a decision or that were part of the court process writ large.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): In the spirit of cross-party consensus, I commend both the hon. Member on securing this debate and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) on her campaigning work in this area. Does he agree that for victims it is vital that they have agency within the court process as a complainant, and that following a court or tribunal case there is transparency for them, regardless of the verdict in their case, so that they can understand the decision and seek closure after the process has concluded?

Robbie Moore: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member. For a witness or a victim or survivor of a crime who has gone through a lengthy court process to then have to pay what is sometimes a huge cost for the transcript of those proceedings to be made available to them is deeply unfair. A victim or a witness participates in only part of the court proceeding and is therefore unable to fully understand the complexities of the case or the contributions to it that other witnesses may have made. They are able to gain a full understanding of it only once the full transcript has been made available to them.

That brings me to a key point, which is that the unduly lenient licensing scheme means that victims and victims' families have just 28 days to appeal the sentences of their abusers. Having court transcripts is a vital part of the appeal process, so the current system creates another huge barrier to justice for victims and their families, because it might only be once they have looked at the transcript that they decide to appeal to the Attorney General against an unduly lenient sentence.

Another significant reason for delays is the technology being used to record and produce these transcripts, because some courtrooms are still using tape recorders to produce transcripts. The need to create a justice system fit for the digital age is not a new one. A 2022 report by the Justice Committee described the situation on court transcripts as unsatisfactory and recommended that HMCTS should explore whether greater use of technology, such as AI-powered transcription, could be piloted to establish whether it can be used to reduce the cost of producing court transcripts.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I almost wanted to have a bet on who would mention AI first in this debate. AI is always said to be the solution, but for once it might be. Everything that the hon. Member is saying about the system of transcripts—that it is anachronistic, lacking in transparency, costly and baroque—is absolutely right. We must move towards greater transparency. Magistrates courts currently do not have recording at all, although they will have to after the Courts and Tribunals Bill is passed. The solution has to be to do this work stage by stage, and AI will be very important in that process.

Robbie Moore: My response to the hon. Gentleman's points is that AI is a technology that exists. It is rolling out and therefore, as recommended by the Justice Committee, it should absolutely be looked at by the Government, in order to make sure that court transcripts can be made available, ultimately—ideally—free of charge to the public. I will go on to build the case that that is actually in the interests of the public good, from a transparency point of view.

I now turn to victims. I have been lucky enough to meet many victims as part of the outreach process to prepare for this debate. Ultimately, they are at the heart of this issue. It is a sad situation, but in this country we have a judicial system that fundamentally disempowers victims instead of empowering them.

Fiona Goddard is a woman I have worked with for several years. She is a champion of victims, who has tirelessly campaigned for the victims of grooming gangs. Fiona spent years being abused by a grooming gang in Bradford. When her case was finally brought to court, there were over 100 witness statements that she was not aware of. Therefore, she went on to say that her contribution was literally only part of her own story, despite the fact that she was the victim and witness in her own case. That is a common theme in experiences throughout the judicial system; witnesses will see and contribute to only part of their case and will not be aware of the full extent of all the contributions.

Another case reported by the BBC involved a woman from Berkshire who, as a victim, endured a seven-week trial. The accused was cleared of rape and the victim was told that securing transcripts for the whole trial would cost more than £30,000. She said:

“The entirety of my sexual violence trial hinged around me. There are five weeks of material that debate me”.

She said the material dealt with the details of her case, including her words and experience, and her levels of anxiety increased. She said:

“I waited five years for justice and I leave the system mystified as to what happened”.

Another case was previously brought to this House by the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney)—I commend her for all her work in this space and for bringing many cases to the House. She spoke of her constituent who was drugged and raped in her sleep by her former partner, and was then forced to wait two years for her case to be heard in court. Her attacker was finally convicted, but due to trauma and emotional distress she can understandably barely remember what was said in the courtroom. She was left so traumatised by the trial that her therapist advised her to apply for

transcripts of the proceedings to aid her healing. The application for a free copy was denied and she was quoted a fee of £7,500 by a tender company for them.

Charlotte Nichols: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman's points, and those of the victims whose voices he is bringing to the fore. Does he agree that both the proposals by the Government and the amendment to the Victims and Courts Bill that was agreed to in the other place, which says that victims will have the right to access a transcript of the judge's route to verdict, are inadequate? That is not a transcript of the full case and, as the hon. Gentleman said, it is important for victims of crime to be able to work through—with therapists or other support—the full details of what happened when they were not present in the courtroom, during what was, as he also rightly said, their case. Access to full transcripts would re-empower victims to get closure after the event.

Robbie Moore: I absolutely agree. The amendments in the other place and the aspirations of the Government do not go anywhere near achieving the transparency associated with the full transcripts being made available, free of charge, to any victim, survivor or witness, should they wish to get clarity around the court cases that they have been involved in.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. I fully support the case that he is making for full transparency, but in the spirit of “I'll start by starting”, he touched on witness statements that would have been prepared beforehand but were still not available. If the Minister accepts the principle around greater transparency, does my hon. Friend agree that certain aspects could immediately be made much more available, while some of the other technical discussions are taken in parallel?

Robbie Moore: I agree with my right hon. Friend. If a victim has gone through a challenging court case, having immediate access to some of the witness statements and contributions that were made during the court proceedings—which can happen without difficulty, following a judge's ruling—will potentially enable that victim to properly seek closure regarding the sentence that has been given. Probably more importantly, if they wish to challenge that sentence—and currently, under the unduly lenient sentence scheme, they must do so within a 28-day period—being able to look at the transcripts, albeit only what can be released in the short term, could provide them with the opportunity to do so.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Clearly, we are talking about having access to accurate court transcripts. I have been contacted by a couple of constituents who work as registered public service interpreters. They feel that the current system is very patchy and that the quality of interpretation services is not good enough. Indeed, someone can still act as an interpreter in the system without professional or vocational training. Does the hon. Member agree that we must raise standards and ensure that there is a strong supply of level 6 qualified interpreters to support people in getting access to the transcripts we are discussing?

Robbie Moore: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member's points. They were some of the key ones picked up in the Justice Committee's report, because they not only advocated

for better use of technology but argued that there was a skill challenge among the various courts. That feeds back into the issue's narrative: when the tender was given back in June 2023, it was geographically based, and once that tender was locked in, it was very difficult to alter it, despite challenge, our raising it in the House of Commons, and a petition coming down the line with more than 200,000 signatures. So I would like put the hon. Member's points directly to the Minister.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Member give way?

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman can give way, but the hon. Member for Strangford knows, because he has been here a very long time, that it is courtesy and a convention of the House to be in the Chamber at the start of somebody's speech before trying to intervene—I think he came in some minutes after the beginning of the speech. It is entirely up to the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley, but that is the usual courtesy.

Robbie Moore: That is very kind, Mr Pritchard, but I will give way.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for introducing the debate; he is absolutely right to underline these issues. He has given a number of examples of where the process has fallen down because evidence could not get to the victim—I always focus on victims, as I know he does. Is he aware of any cases or examples where, because of not being able to get the evidence, and the victim not being able to ascertain all the necessary information, cases have fallen and justice has not been delivered?

Robbie Moore: The hon. Member makes an excellent point. Those points were not put to me in the outreach I have done, but based on the narrative and level of concern about transparency and reassurance, there could be examples of that out there. I suspect that is why more than 200,000 people have signed the petition and feel so strongly that this should be brought directly to the Minister's attention, so that we can give better clarity and reassurance to many victims and survivors who have been through horrendous court cases.

Victims should, and must, be at the heart of the justice system, yet time and again they are made to feel completely disregarded—like an inconvenience, as some victims have put it to me. The feeling among victims I have spoken to is that trust needs to be rebuilt, and that is partly done through increasing transparency.

This is a timely debate: the Courts and Tribunals Bill, which represents the most significant reform to the criminal procedure in decades, is making its way through Parliament. It will abolish jury trials for crimes likely to carry a sentence of fewer than three years, but the Institute for Government has warned that judge-only trials risk damage to public confidence in a criminal justice system. The Bar Council chair has cautioned directly that the reforms

“compromise public trust and confidence.”

In addition, local media is facing unprecedented pressure—gone are the days when each paper had a local court reporter to sit in on court proceedings. Despite the

Government's recently announced local media action plan, investing in local news while maintaining cost barriers to court transcripts is directly contradictory. Without affordable access to clear records of what is said in court, local journalists cannot hold the justice system to account or ensure that accurate information is shared with the public.

What can be done to increase transparency and trust in the justice system? Increased access to court and tribunal transcripts will absolutely be part of that, hence the nature of this debate. I acknowledge that some progress is being made towards greater availability of court transcripts. The previous Conservative Government launched a pilot scheme that enabled victims of serious sexual assault to request a free copy of the sentencing remarks, and that pilot was extended by the previous Government last year. More recently, following pressure from the Conservative Opposition, who tabled amendments during proceedings on the Sentencing Act 2026 and the Victims and Courts Bill, the Government agreed to expand free access to Crown court sentencing remarks to all victims, but disappointingly, they confirmed that they had no plans to do so in magistrates courts.

There are several legitimate options for increasing transparency through access to court and tribunal transcripts. To start with, HMCTS could absorb the cost by paying suppliers for public request transcripts rather than passing the costs on to individuals. A central transcript repository could also be created, which would require transcripts already produced to be held in a central system, such as the National Archives. The current tender process is locked in until 2027, but it is essential that a public access requirement is built into the next framework tender from the outset. The Government could also dedicate parliamentary time to producing legislation that would place a statutory duty on courts to provide transcripts, with funding flowing down into procurement requirements.

Having spoken to others in preparing for this debate, I also encourage the Government to relaunch the senior data governance panel, which was set up by the previous Conservative Government to provide independent expert advice on the use of justice data across courts and tribunals. I understand, however, that that has not been taken forward, much to the annoyance of many involved in the process.

I remind Members that this petition has more than 200,000 signatures from across the country. The issue clearly demands time and good debate, which I am sure we will have. Whatever views the public and Members have on this petition, we clearly have a justice system that is stuck in the past and becoming less transparent, and which makes the victims that it exists to serve feel the least important of all.

I come back to the overarching question put forward by the petition: does Parliament think that court and tribunal transcripts should be treated as a public good? When I think of the cases I have outlined, and particularly of a quote from Fiona Goddard, who described the current system as just another

“way in which the victim is treated like the least important person”

in the judicial system, I think the answer is most definitely yes. It is in the interest of the public to make sure that these transcripts are free to access for all.

6.22 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Pritchard, and I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for his opening remarks.

I want to touch on the experience of my constituent, Terry Louch, who was in contact with my predecessor prior to my election in 2024 and has been in contact with me since then. He has been trying to access the court records relating to his nephew, Mr Jay Sewell, who was murdered in December 2018. He applied to the Old Bailey for the transcripts and was told that the fee would be £22,000—£500 per day. He said that he was left with a number of questions at the trial, and that

“at times it was difficult to hear and understand a lot of what was being communicated.”

After several years, he would still like the transcripts to better understand the case proceedings and, ultimately, the judge’s decisions. The perpetrator was found guilty and given a minimum term of 21 years, but Mr Louch still wants to understand the full proceedings of the case.

I have twice raised Mr Louch’s case with HMCTS. Initially, it said that external transcription companies set their own fees, that that is not the responsibility of the Ministry of Justice, and that bereaved families can access a free copy of the sentencing remarks. As I said, it is not just the sentencing remarks that Mr Louch wants, but the details of what was a very lengthy case. With further correspondence, Mr Louch was advised that he could apply for a limited section of the transcripts to lower the costs, but his position is that he is unable to pick out any certain parts of a given day, and would therefore have to pay for the full day to be transcribed to access any aspect. There are several days that he wishes to have the transcripts of, and he says that it would be difficult to pinpoint the specific days that he would like.

That is the position after much to-ing and fro-ing from both my predecessor in Bexleyheath and Crayford and myself. It remains the case that Mr Louch has not been able to access the transcripts due to the prohibitive costs involved. He continues trying to pursue the matter, and the aims of this petition. I welcome this debate and ask the Government to look again at some of these aspects, and particularly the issues that Mr Louch has raised. For him to fully understand what actually happened in what was, for him, a very traumatic case involving the murder of his nephew, the cost of £22,000 is extremely prohibitive.

6.25 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for opening the debate so well, and for acknowledging my campaign on this issue. I also thank the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), who is no longer in her place. I know that she has particular experience of this issue, which she talked about so bravely in the Chamber the other day. It is a reminder to all of us that there are victims at the heart of this, and that it is their rights that we seek to protect and uphold when we call for free transcripts.

Three years ago, my constituent Juliana Terlizzi contacted my office to request a meeting. She had been quoted £7,500 for a copy of her court transcript. Juliana was a victim of rape. The perpetrator was convicted for the

offence. Juliana did not attend the trial due to the emotional toll that it would have taken on her, as is so common for victims who are still battling with the harm left from their traumatising experience.

As someone with no personal experience of ever attending a trial or being involved in a trial, I was really surprised to learn from Juliana that it is not routine in criminal trials for the victim to attend. I guess my impression was from television cop shows and court shows, and I assumed that victims were always there, but it is not routine. Indeed, it is often discouraged.

While still dealing with the scars that the assault left behind, Juliana consulted a psychiatrist, who told her that reading over the transcript of the trial might help to provide some closure, but Juliana was subsequently informed that a copy of the transcript would cost £7,500. How can the UK claim to support victims of rape and sexual assault when such barriers to their recovery still exist?

Although I was frustrated at the length of time that it took me to make the case to the last Conservative Government, I am pleased that Members across the House are now more supportive of this campaign. I am also grateful that this Government seem to have understood the importance of the issue and have backed it with their commitment to making sentencing remarks free for all victims.

This issue unifies the House. As I have done for a number of years, I again call for all transcripts of court proceedings to be free of charge. Every single Member of the House will have the chance to make this call a reality by supporting Liberal Democrat peer Baroness Brinton’s amendment to the Victims and Courts Bill when it returns to the Commons. So I ask the Minister: will the Government support this amendment?

More than 200,000 people have signed this petition. Access to court transcripts is not a minor issue that will impact only a small minority of people. The change will impact all victims and their loved ones and be a significant step towards enhancing the rights of victims while making our courts more transparent. I have been proud to lead this campaign in Parliament to amplify the voices of victims who have been met with this injustice.

Victims of sexual assault and rape already face significant barriers when attempting to achieve justice. They are effectively a statistical anomaly when it comes to conviction rates. According to the charity Rape Crisis England & Wales, only 2.1% of reported rape results in a conviction. That effectively means that 98% of people accused of rape will not face punishment. The current system is weighted against victims. Making court transcripts free and accessible is a step that can be taken to enhance the rights of victims, and I urge every Member in this House to support Baroness Brinton’s amendment.

6.29 pm

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for opening this debate in his characteristic way—highly detailed and bringing the voices of victims to the fore, something that is so important here.

The petition before us speaks to the simple but fundamental principle that access to justice should never be denied according to a person’s ability to pay. If our

role in this place is anything, surely it is to break down the barriers that our constituents face when trying to access that to which they are entitled. This is clearly one of those barriers. Given that it involves access to justice—that most fundamental of rights—I cannot think of a more significant barrier that needs to be knocked down.

I thank the 479 constituents in Hartlepool who signed the petition. Their voices reflect a real and growing concern that what should be a basic feature of open justice cannot be placed behind a paywall. At present, courtroom tribunal transcripts can run into the hundreds and even the thousands of pounds. For many of my constituents, that is simply unaffordable. The result is that people are denied access to a full record of proceedings that may directly affect their lives. That has serious implications for victims, for those seeking to appeal decisions, and for public confidence in a justice system that is already under strain.

I raised this issue of costs with Ministers just last week during Justice questions. I welcomed the response from the Minister for Courts and Legal Services, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman)—as an aside, my thoughts are with her and her constituents today. The commitment to making sentencing remarks available to victims free of charge is a positive and important step, showing that the Government recognise the need to reduce these barriers and improve transparency. However, there is a clear case to go further.

The Government's response to the petition suggests that expanding free access would place additional pressure on the system. As Members have already said, in an age of AI and technology, I wonder whether the basic credibility of that excuse stands up. This is not an optional extra. It goes to the heart of whether our justice system is truly accessible and accountable. It is encouraging that the other place has already taken steps in this direction: Lords amendment 1 to the Victims and Courts Bill would create a statutory entitlement for victims of criminal offences to receive key transcripts free of charge, including the route to verdict and bail decisions, with a clear expectation that they are provided promptly. That development is significant and welcome, but still does not go far enough.

The principle behind that change should not stop there. If access to transcripts is essential for fairness and transparency, it must apply more widely across our courts and tribunals. Open justice cannot be selective; it cannot apply in some cases but not others, or to some people but not others. The law belongs to us all. The records of our courts are part of the public record and they should be accessible as such. Of course there will be practical challenges, but those challenges should be addressed, not used as a reason to delay progress. With the right approach, including better use of technology, we can improve access while managing costs. Only where there are clear safety or national security concerns should access ever be restricted.

Ultimately, this issue is about fairness and trust. It is about ensuring that no one is denied access to justice because of their financial circumstances. I urge the Government and the Minister to build on the progress already being made, to support the direction set out in the Lords amendment and to move towards a system where access to court and tribunal transcripts is guaranteed, not priced out of reach.

6.33 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Over the years, I have often found that when the Members on each Front Bench agree on an issue, there are dangers for Parliament, not least because legislation is often insufficiently scrutinised. Conversely, when the Back-Bench Members of each of the parties agree, it is often—it certainly was when I was a Minister—a warning sign that the Government of the day need to move.

What has been uplifting about the debate we have heard so far, with evidence from those on the Government Benches—the hon. Member for Warrington North (Charlotte Nichols), who spoke very powerfully, and the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash)—as well as from my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), has been the consensus that this is a burning issue of concern to our constituents.

It clearly is a burning concern, given the volume of respondents to the petition—has more than 200,000 signatories, which signals how much this matters. I do not want to divert away from today's debate but, given the restriction of access to jury trials and that direction of travel from the Government—a direction that I regret and indeed many on the Government Benches appear to regret—the opportunity for the Government to move more quickly on transparency and transcripts is even more pertinent that it would otherwise be.

I am speaking in this debate because I am keen to hear from the Minister about where he sees the sticking point. My sense from the Government's comments today has been that they are broadly sympathetic to the direction of travel—I think the Minister is nodding his head to indicate that, and I have no reason to believe otherwise. It would be helpful, given that he and the Government are sympathetic, to understand how the House can support them in moving more quickly, and in particular whether the constraint is one of legislation.

As we know from past debates in this place, this House can move very quickly on legislation when it so desires, particularly if there is cross-party agreement. Indeed, the hon. Member for Richmond Park indicated there was agreement in the House of Lords as well. If, then, the constraint is legislative, there are ample opportunities for us to address that at pace. If it is contractual, I suspect that the sums are relatively modest, given the prize on offer. It would be helpful to understand what the contractual costs would be if one were to try to terminate or to vary the agreement. Indeed, where there is significant cross-party political pressure, it is surprising how suppliers, perhaps with a view to other contracts in future, may be willing to amend a contract.

If the restrictions and difficulties for Ministers are technological, we saw in the covid period that, with a clear enough demand signal from Government, it is surprising how quickly technology improvements can be put in place when there is the will to do so. But I fear that what is at fault here is not this Minister, but the slow pace at which Whitehall is in the habit of operating. That is why it is important that in this debate we support the Minister and the direction of travel that I think he wants to go in, while understanding where the blockages are.

[*Steve Barclay*]

I have a few quick questions. First, given the Government's support, as I understand it, for the recording of proceedings in court, to what extent could audio clips, either in whole or in part, be made more quickly available? If there is some concern with the accuracy of the AI, for example, are there other ways of solving that? Where can we start, rather than waiting for the whole thing to be resolved?

Secondly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley touched on, witness statements and huge numbers of documents are produced as part of the discovery process in court. Court bundles—a huge number of documents—are prepared in advance of court hearings. It strikes me that much more could be done to make those available, particularly to the victims of crime, than is the case now. What assessment has been made of which parts of those court bundles could be made available?

Thirdly, what exactly are the technology constraints? Again, looking at the progress in other areas of Government and commitments made by the Prime Minister about AI in No. 10 summits recently, why can we not move more quickly than the slow pace at which the Ministry of Justice appears to be operating? That is particularly pertinent because of the point my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley made about the 28-day time limit for appeal. That is a hard deadline, and yet, as he sets out, decisions often take a while to come. The cost is prohibitive, and people are not able to get the information they seek in a timely fashion ahead of the deadline. My sense is that the Government want to move in that direction, so I hope the debate today has signalled the cross-party consensus to do so.

When the Minister sums up, I encourage him to clarify exactly where the blockages are. If he reads the Institute for Government reports, he will see that Ministers have a habit of moving very frequently. Those on the Government Benches who are seen as talented often move very frequently indeed. He has an opportunity during his tenure in the Ministry of Justice to move quickly, to take advantage of the cross-party support and—at a time when his own Government are restricting access to jury trials—to do something that will be hugely helpful to victims, and something that the public have signalled they want very much.

6.40 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken so thoughtfully on this important topic. I especially thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for representing the Petitions Committee; he has certainly done his homework, and I thank him for highlighting how mystified people often feel when they go through a lengthy court process only to find out that their trial has been monetised—or privatised—and that they have to spend thousands of pounds to gain access to their case.

I pay tribute to all 200,000 people across the country who signed the petition; I believe the general public got behind it so strongly because they are surprised that people are not entitled to transcripts of their own case. Justice must be accessible and visible. Trust in our justice

system is built upon transparency—upon seeing the work and the reasoning behind decisions that affect so many lives. That is vital for defendants and crucial for victims and bereaved families, a point the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) spoke passionately about. As the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) says, we have achieved a consensus: this is one way that we can break down barriers for our constituents—as the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) mentioned, that is surely the most important role that we can play in this place—and make a genuine difference to people across the country who are engaging with the justice system.

The Liberal Democrats have long campaigned on this issue, particularly through the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). Her campaigning for her constituent Juliana—a victim of rape who was told she would be charged £7,500 for her transcript—has been inspiring and has truly shifted the dial. I thank my hon. Friend for her advocacy in this area. She also highlighted an important fact: her constituent was still battling with the harms of her trauma and did not hear the case that she was the victim of; in order to be able to move on, she needed to have that document.

What is clear—reflected in much of the testimony today as well as in the national support for the petition—is that, for many victims, court transcripts are a vital part of their recovery, either personally or via therapy. However, for too long and for too many those transcripts have been out of reach, reserved for those who can afford what can be incredibly large sums.

Providing free court transcripts for victims is about giving them the support and protection that they deserve. Many trials are lengthy, take place years after the event and can be retraumatising experiences, even when victims do not attend in person. Everyone will handle such situations differently but, given that victims are among the most vulnerable in our society, they should be afforded as much support as possible to overcome those challenges. That is why consistent free access to transcripts is vital. They must be available beyond the 28 days after a trial concludes to access the unduly lenient scheme. Such measures would markedly improve the experiences of both victims and survivors.

That is why we welcomed the cross-party work in the Sentencing Bill to introduce the provision of free sentencing remarks for all victims. I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park, as well as Baroness Brinton in the other place and the various Ministers in the MOJ, including the Minister who is answering today, worked to achieve this vital first step, which we believe is a stepping stone towards providing all transcripts free of charge.

The timing of this debate could not be more pertinent, with the return this week of the Victims and Courts Bill from the Lords, now with the Liberal Democrat amendment tabled by my noble Friend, Baroness Brinton. That amendment would give victims access, free of charge, to transcripts relating to the route to verdict, extending current provisions encompassing bail decisions and judicial summaries, voiding many of the extortionate costs that we have heard about and providing victims with clarity regarding their cases. I thank the Conservatives in the other place for their support on that amendment, and I urge the Government to get behind it on Wednesday.

Without those provisions, we will continue to fail victims. As is the case with much of the Government's rhetoric around improving technology and the use of AI on the court estate, there is little excuse not to put them in place as quickly as possible.

6.45 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. He is proving himself to be a consistent and doughty champion of victims and the issues that they raise with him. I also acknowledge the long-standing campaigning of the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney) in this area.

I welcome today's opportunity to discuss this issue as part of our wider debate about transparency in the justice system. Sadly, I think that I can predict to some extent what the Minister will say: the phrase "14 years" will make an appearance; there will be lots of rhetoric about how terrible the previous Government were; and there will be a complete absence of any idea of how the current Government would have managed differently the challenges that the previous Government faced.

I can also be pretty confident about what the Minister will not say. There will be no real engagement with what the challenges of covid presented to our justice system, even though they truly were unprecedented. However, that is the standard that Ministers and Labour have set, not just for justice, but across the Government on issues such as inflation and energy bills. There is no acceptance of the challenges that the previous Government faced and no exceptions made for things outside their control. It therefore should not be any surprise when the present Government are held to exactly the same standard.

In reality, this issue is a good example of what more fair-minded commentators accept as a multi-decade failure to give the justice system and those involved in it the priority and resources they deserve. I am sure that if the Minister and I were to design the justice system from scratch together, we would agree that free access to transcripts was important and, indeed, should just be the default. However, we are where we are.

Sadly, I am realistic about what success we will achieve on the issue of transcripts today, even when a petition has been signed by an impressive 200,000 people. After all, this is the Government who tried to delete the Courtsdesk archive, which has been one of the biggest steps forward for transparency in our justice system in recent years. I raised that issue in the main Chamber because I was deeply concerned about the decision to delete a unique archive of corrected and correlated court listings. In the absence of retrospective access to court transcripts, the work of journalists is absolutely vital, and Courtsdesk had become a valuable tool for journalists, campaigners and others seeking to identify patterns in offending and to expose failings in our justice system.

Rather than seeking to preserve that transparency while dealing constructively with any data protection concerns, the Government moved towards deleting the archive altogether. Of course, the Government's defence of that decision did not hold up to scrutiny. When the Minister for Courts and Legal Services came to the

House and said that there were serious data protection concerns with Courtsdesk, she did not tell us that the Government's internal processes had found the incident she cited to be low-risk, not even warranting referral to the Information Commissioner's Office.

At a time when confidence in the justice system depends on greater openness, the Minister for Courts and Legal Services was going to deliver the exact opposite, and that is part of the context for today's debate. It relates to the broader question of whether the Government are approaching transparency in the justice system with sufficient urgency and seriousness.

The petition speaks to the basic principle that access to justice should not depend on the ability to pay, and open justice is not an optional extra to be considered only once the administrative convenience of the system has been satisfied. The petitioners are right to identify transcript fees as a paywall. For too many people, they are exactly that: a barrier to understanding what happened in court; a barrier to considering making an appeal; a barrier to holding the system to account; and, in some cases, a barrier to justice itself.

That matters not just for journalists and campaigners, but for victims, bereaved families and ordinary members of the public who are trying to make sense of a justice system that is supposed to work for them. There is clearly public demand for greater transparency in the system, which was why the previous Conservative Government started moving in that direction, including through the pilot of making sentencing remarks available free of charge to victims of rape and other sexual offences. That was a start, although I now think that we should have moved faster and further while we were in government.

I find it hard to think of any other walk of life in which we would expect a member of the public who is part of such an important process—it is important for them, for their friends and family, and for the wider justice system—to be asked to remember key things that may or may not have been said in court, and to be asked to be in court every single day if they want to understand the full process, although that might not necessarily be appropriate. What disappoints me in particular is the Government's resistance not just to making full transcripts available, but on the much narrower and more readily resolvable issue of making transcripts of sentencing remarks available. The Government have refused to accept our proposal—it has been voted on in the Lords—to have such transcripts produced within 14 days and free of charge. They will accept doing that only from spring of next year and not necessarily within 14 days. As we have heard, given the unduly lenient sentence scheme, people need those transcripts quickly if they are to be able to make good use of them.

It is particularly clear that there is public interest in sentencing remarks. I look forward to the Labour Members who spoke today backing amendments that the Conservatives, with cross-party support, are attempting to pass so that transcripts of sentencing remarks are made available. As the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), pointed out, similar amendments have been proposed to allow victims to have even more made available to them, including the route to verdict and bail decisions. Those amendments have cross-party support, so I hope that Labour Members and others will support them when the House considers them this week.

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) showed his ministerial experience through the well-articulated questions that he put to the Minister. I will add my own questions to his. It is all well and good for the Minister to talk in warm words about access to sentencing remarks and court transcripts, but do we have an actual date for when the Government will deliver that? What cases will it apply to at first, and what barriers are preventing us from implementing this much more quickly than the Government have committed to?

I pay tribute to everyone who signed the petition, particularly those campaigners such as Fiona Goddard, who my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley mentioned and focused on grooming gangs. That has been a key driver of the demands for greater transparency in our justice system. The Government resisted an inquiry on that matter in a similar vein to how they are resisting transparency in our justice system. I look forward to the Minister giving us concrete answers about how we will make progress, rather than just warm words.

6.51 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I welcome today's debate. There is general cross-party consensus about the need to ensure more open justice and to do everything that we can to ensure that victims in criminal proceedings have access to the information that they need to recover from the crimes that they have suffered.

The tone struck by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), was unfortunate. I genuinely was not going to mention the 14 years of underinvestment in our courts, the fact that rape convictions were at record lows under the last Conservative Government, or the fact that progress on victims' rights, and indeed many of the issues we have discussed today, was moving at a snail's pace, if at all, under the last Government. While I was not going to make any of those comments, I felt obliged to do so having been prompted by the hon. Member.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) for raising this important issue, as he has done before in the House of Commons and elsewhere. I acknowledge his contribution and all who engaged with the petition. Although the Government knew about this before this petition, the representations underscore a real public interest in transparency across the justice system. That is particularly important to the rights of victims, who were specifically spoken about by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) and the hon. Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney). As I have said on the Floor of the House, the hon. Lady's work in this area has really led the way. Indeed, that is also true of many others as well, including the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley, who raised really powerful cases.

I have met victims—in my role, I have the privilege and humble duty to meet victims regularly—and there is no doubt that our criminal justice system still too often fails them. There is an issue of transparency regarding court transcripts and sentencing remarks,

and I hope to deal with some of the specifics raised of why we cannot go as far as many would want us to at the moment. However, from this debate, and more generally, we can see that there are problems of how victims are dealt with within our criminal justice system. We have heard about information as to their trial and advice around their attendance. We are seized upon their advice regarding the unduly lenient sentences scheme in relation to a piece of legislation before Parliament. There are lots of ways, culturally and systemically, in which the criminal justice system fails victims, and there is an acceptance that there is more to do.

I want to set out the Government's approach, what we have done and what we want to do. In doing so, I hope to deal with some of the detailed questions and challenges that have been posed in this debate. I start by reaffirming that open justice is a foundational tenet of our system. Open justice is the long-established principle that justice should not only be done, but be seen to be done, and that is fundamental to the rule of law. Transparency also helps to build confidence in the justice system, supporting scrutiny and enhancing public understanding of how the law is applied.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the justice system is open and transparent, and we share that priority with the judiciary. Both the Deputy Prime Minister and the Lady Chief Justice have spoken at length about the importance of transparency. As the Chair of the Justice Committee, who is no longer in the Chamber, said, new technologies no doubt offer opportunities to meet rising public expectations of access to information, but the principle of open justice is not unfettered; we have a duty to ensure that it is delivered responsibly and in a way that safeguards the administration of justice. It is vital that we protect the rights of victims, witnesses and parties, and that sensitive information is handled with care.

We must ensure that any measures to increase transparency do not undermine the effective operation of the justice system. That is why achieving the right balance is central to our approach to transcript provision. The petition calls for all court and tribunal transcripts to be made available for free in order to increase transparency, enable appeals and support victims. Those are important aims, and ones that I hope every Member of the House would support. However, it is important to recognise some of the practical realities of producing transcripts, as well as the considerable progress already under way to improve access to such information across the justice system. I will expand on that, but practical realities are not just infrastructure within courts and the contractual systems that the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley set out, but legal considerations and the context in which all court transcripts are dealt with.

Producing a transcript of court proceedings can be resource-intensive. It is detailed, skilled work requiring rigorous quality assurance. Full hearing transcripts, especially those involving lengthy trials or hearings, multiple parties, interpreters—my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish), who has just left the Chamber, touched on that—or sensitive evidence can run to hundreds or even, in my experience, thousands of pages. Ensuring accuracy is paramount because transcripts may be used in appeals or covered by the media. Errors can seriously undermine confidence in the justice system.

Transcripts must also comply with relevant reporting restrictions and data protection requirements. In practice, that means that detailed, manual anonymisation is required to prevent both direct and indirect jigsaw identification of victims, witnesses or other court users, a process that current technology cannot safely automate and requires careful review to ensure that no combination of details could reveal the identity of individuals protected by reporting restrictions. That is a time-consuming, skilled task that requires precision, and often legal advice, to safeguard vulnerable people.

However, the Government have made significant and meaningful progress on transcript provision and wider transparency in the justice system in recent years. In the Crown court, victims of rape and serious sexual offences, and bereaved families in homicide cases—that is, murder, manslaughter and offences of causing death on the road—can request a free transcript of relevant sentencing remarks. That ensures that victims can revisit the judge's explanation in their own time and use it to inform any decisions they may need to make, including whether to submit representations under the ULS scheme.

Steve Barclay: It is not surprising that the Minister is setting out the concerns that MOJ officials have no doubt raised with him about reporting restrictions and accuracy in the text, which are all valid. However, there is a danger that the perfect becomes the enemy of the good. I have two specific points. First, to what extent could the judge, as the trial proceeds, earmark packages of documents, audio recordings or other information that could be made more readily available, rather than the perfect being the enemy of the good? Secondly, the Government have made a lot of passing a duty of candour. Is the duty of candour complied with if the cost of obtaining a transcript is so high that the victim simply cannot afford it, or if it arrives after the 28 days that my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) spoke about?

Jake Richards: The right hon. Member says that we cannot let perfection be the enemy of the good, but he no doubt understands that it is paramount that court transcripts are perfect. I will come on to his other points, but I know he accepts that this not quite as straightforward as transcribing other public meetings with the technology we have today and turning them into written documents. Perhaps more can be done with regard to witness statements that appear in the trial as evidence in chief and are not challenged. I am happy to look into that and speak with the Minister for Courts and Legal Services, but it may be an issue for the judiciary, the Crown Prosecution Service or the victim care service.

As I said at the outset, one of my concerns when I deal with the criminal justice system and victims from all those angles—from court transcripts, which have been raised, to the unduly lenient sentence scheme, through which I meet victims all the time—is that there is a problem, culturally and systemically, with how victims are not at the heart of the system and the process. I have fears when it comes to the issue of whether more can be done as a trial is developing, or after it, to ensure that the victim understands what is happening and gets the information that they need. Where it is possible, safe and legal, I have no doubt that more can be done; it may not be as easy as flicking a switch at 102 Petty France, but I am sure that more can be done.

I am somewhat wary of the suggestion from the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) about recordings. We need to be very careful about how we use recordings of criminal proceedings, whether audio or visual. He will no doubt be aware of the sensitivity, but perhaps more can be done. I can take away his suggestion, which is a more manual mechanism for ensuring that victims know and understand what has happened at the criminal trial.

From spring next year, the Government will go further: as has been said, victims will be entitled to be provided with free transcripts of Crown Court sentencing remarks relevant to their case. That is an important extension that will make a meaningful difference to victims' understanding of the outcomes of their case. As was raised by the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley and by almost every contributor to the debate, the interplay with the ULS scheme is clear. That scheme is being considered as part of legislation going through Parliament at the moment. The interplay between the provision of the transcript and ensuring that the ULS scheme works for victims is at the forefront of my mind and that of the Minister for Victims.

Robbie Moore: In the Government's response to the petition, they said quite rightly that by spring 2027 they would expand free access to Crown Court sentencing remarks and that transcripts would be made available to anyone who wishes to utilise the ULS scheme within the timeframe that the scheme provides. As that is 28 days at the moment, can the Minister provide some reassurance as to how the Government will ensure that that level of information is provided within the timeframe? Are the Government looking, as I would wish, at expanding the period for appeal beyond 28 days, which is far too short?

Jake Richards: As I say, and as the hon. Member will appreciate, the interplay between the ULS scheme and the provision of transcripts of sentencing remarks is at the heart of our consideration during the passage through Parliament of the Victim and Courts Bill. Parliament is seized of the issue of the ULS scheme. I completely understand the desire to expand the time limit. We have spoken to victims' groups and victims who have suggested alternatives, or who are potentially not even in favour. We have to get it right. Watch this space, if I can say that at this stage.

In the magistrates courts, we are making meaningful progress on the recording of hearings. As part of wider reform of the criminal courts' trial and sentencing proceedings, magistrates courts will now be recorded. That will strengthen transparency and support the accurate production of transcripts when required.

In civil proceedings, parties often do not need to pay for written judgments or orders in their own cases. Those are provided as a matter of course so that litigants can understand the basis of the court's decision and can consider any next steps, including appeal. While a fee is generally payable for the full transcript of the case, a party can apply to the court to obtain it at public expense. The court can order this when satisfied that it is justified by the financial circumstances of the party and is in the interests of justice.

In the family courts, most proceedings are heard in private. This is to protect the children's welfare and families' privacy. Even so, progress is being made to

[*Jake Richards*]

increase transparency, while remaining committed to keeping children and vulnerable individuals safe. Family courts are not usually at the forefront of our mind when we talk about the issue, because they often sit in private, but for many families, particularly in public family law proceedings, the transcript of any fact finding or any final hearing regarding the future of a child can be pivotal to the future care of that child, and indeed to the parents in any appeals or routes to having children returned to their care.

The Government have worked closely with the judiciary to support an increase in the publication of anonymised judgments for family proceedings, which enable the public better to understand the decision making, while ensuring that privacy is protected. Even where family proceedings are heard in private, journalists and legal bloggers can attend most types of hearing. Now, following procedural changes, family courts are encouraged to make orders setting out what information from the hearings can be disclosed publicly. That marks a substantial development in transparency in family proceedings, balancing clarity about what can be reported with the need to protect those involved. We are working with Baroness Levitt and the Family Procedure Rule Committee to review the current rules of court relating to the sharing of information from family cases, to ensure that the rules are justified and proportionate.

Tribunals, which are also covered in the petition, play a vital role in resolving disputes across many areas of daily life. Across many chambers of the first tier and upper tribunals, parties can request fuller written reasons at no additional cost. Tribunals therefore already provide substantial written explanation without a fee.

In the immigration and asylum chamber, the upper tribunal already publishes its decisions, and the Government are working with the judiciary and HMCTS to understand the arrangements required to deliver this in the first-tier tribunal. That involves careful consideration of operational capacity, safeguarding and the significant volume of personal data involved. This work is ongoing and reflects our commitment to increasing transparency and delivering open justice.

To go significantly further at this stage, by extending free provision to every transcript across every jurisdiction, would place substantial operational and financial pressures on the Department at a time when we are rightly focused on implementing the extension of free sentencing remarks and a once-in-a-generation reform in our criminal courts.

Looking to the future, however, the Government are embracing the possibilities that new technology brings. Advances in AI transcription could allow for faster and more cost-effective production of court and tribunal transcripts, while maintaining accuracy and safeguarding.

Working with the judiciary, the Government will continue to look at how we can go further and faster in this area. It is essential, however, that any such system meet stringent standards and ensure that reporting restrictions are adhered to and personal data is protected.

In conclusion, I reiterate the Government's firm commitment to open justice. We have already taken significant steps to strengthen transparency across the system, and we will continue to build on that progress, but in doing so it is imperative that we protect individuals, recognise practical and financial constraints and ensure that the justice system can run smoothly and effectively. I thank the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley again for opening this debate and all hon. Members who have contributed. I look forward to continuing to work together to ensure that our justice system remains open, fair and trusted by all who rely on it.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): The mover of the motion has a couple of minutes to wind up.

7.7 pm

Robbie Moore: On behalf of the Petitions Committee and the more than 200,000 signatories to the petition, may I thank all hon. Members for their engagement? We have demonstrated clearly to the Minister that there is consensus in all parts of the House: we all wish to see transcripts provided free of charge for victims, for witnesses and, indeed, for anyone who wishes to apply, to build better trust and better transparency in the process. All hon. Members have a vote on the issue, potentially this Wednesday, so it will be interesting to see how the Government instruct their Members to vote.

I turn briefly to the Minister's response. He was articulate in his delivery, but it feels as if there is an issue with the system stalling. Dare I say it, while I give the Minister the benefit of the doubt in his aspirations to unblock the system, I would like to understand more clearly the point he made about the judiciary being responsible and the engagement the Government have to have with it. Who in the judiciary are the Government having that level of correspondence and communication with? Perhaps the Minister could write to the Petitions Committee with his understanding of who the individual is, so that petitioners and Members of Parliament know who they need to engage with to unlock the situation, for the good of all those who signed the petition and all Members across the House who have brought their concerns to the Minister today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 756036 relating to access to court and tribunal transcripts.

7.8 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 23 March 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Trade Envoy Programme: Appointment

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): The Secretary of State has today made the following appointment to the United Kingdom's trade envoy programme.

The United Kingdom's trade envoys are important to this Government's growth agenda. They support Ministers to deliver trade and investment outcomes within the industrial and trade strategies and attract foreign direct investment across UK regions.

Working in close partnership with our ambassadors, high commissioners, and His Majesty's trade commissioners, trade envoys support deeper bilateral trade relationships, lead trade missions, welcome inward delegations, and address market access challenges to ensure British firms can compete and succeed.

The role as a United Kingdom trade envoy is unpaid and voluntary with cross-party membership from both Houses.

The Secretary of State is pleased to appoint:

My hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) as the United Kingdom's trade envoy to Japan.

Today's appointment means there are now 31 trade envoys focusing on 72 markets.

[HCWS1427]

EDUCATION

School-based Nursery Capital Grant Outcomes

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey): Early education is one of the most powerful drivers of a child's future life chances. The earliest years shape children's development, confidence and wellbeing, and we know that those who start school already behind their peers face a much harder journey to catch up. That is why I am proud this Government are putting their focus firmly where it belongs: on the early years.

Through our "Giving every child the best start in life" strategy, we committed to expanding access to high-quality early education across the country. We are ensuring a record proportion of children reach a good level of development by the end of reception year and we are building on Labour's legacy of Sure Start with our Best Start family hubs. We have already raised early years pupil premium to its highest level ever and are transforming SEND support for under-fives. We have also significantly expanded access to early education, with savings of up to £8,000 on average for eligible parents accessing their full childcare entitlement and, importantly, helping every child get ready for school.

Today we are further delivering on that promise—supporting families, strengthening local provision, and ensuring every child has the best possible start in life.

Since we launched the school-based nursery programme last year, 214 nurseries have already opened, creating more than 5,000 new childcare places. I want to recognise the headteachers, early years professionals, and wider school staff who have worked with such determination to bring these projects to life in under a year. Their work is already making a difference to families whose children now have access to high-quality early learning in their local communities and they represent a vital part of our early education sector. Providers already give parents the flexibility to choose what best suits their family needs and this programme builds on this by increasing provision and choice, seeking to draw on the rich expertise found across maintained nursery schools, childminders, private and voluntary providers, and primary schools.

Today, I am pleased to confirm the next step in this mission. We are investing £45 million to support 331 additional schools to establish or grow their nurseries, creating more than 6,000 further places. More than a third of these new places will be in the most disadvantaged areas, ensuring support reaches the children who stand to benefit the most. Children from low-income families gain particularly strongly from high-quality early education, which has been shown to improve outcomes throughout their school years.

I am especially pleased that 20 maintained nursery schools are included in this second phase. Maintained nursery schools have an exceptional track record in supporting disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs, and this investment will enable them to expand that vital work.

Looking ahead, phase 3 of the programme will go even further. Local authorities will lead multi-year proposals backed by up to £325 million of additional investment. They know their local communities best, and this long-term approach will give them the tools they need to plan strategically for sufficiency, inclusion, and quality.

For the first time, Best Start family hubs will be able to receive funding to create or expand a nursery. This presents fresh opportunities to bring early education together with wider family support, health services and SEND provision in a single, joined-up offer for families. It will also support new partnerships with early years providers across the private, voluntary, and maintained sectors.

We know that school-based nurseries play a central role in inclusion. They care for proportionally more young children with special educational needs, and the funding confirmed today will help strengthen that role—ensuring children with SEND receive timely, high-quality support from the outset.

Across every part of this work—whether expanding school-based nurseries, investing in maintained nursery schools, or linking childcare with Best Start family hubs—our mission is the same: to build a system that delivers the right support, in the right place, at the right time.

We are making sustained, significant investment in the early years so that all provider types can work together to deliver for families—strengthening local sufficiency, driving up quality, and ensuring parents can access provision that truly meets their needs.

Taken together, these actions form a single, coherent ambition: to give every child the very best possible start in life.

[HCWS1429]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Waste Crime Action Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): The Government have published our waste crime action plan for England. The plan sets out our zero-tolerance approach to prevent waste crime, pursue the criminals responsible and accelerate the clean-up effort.

People take pride in the places they call home: the streets outside their front door, the parks where children play, and the fields and riversides where they walk. But fly-tippers and waste criminals blight our communities and exploit the waste sector for profit. These people damage the environment, threaten public safety and undercut decent businesses doing the right thing.

The Environmental Services Association estimates that 20% of all waste in England is illegally managed, and that waste crime is costing our economy £1 billion each year. In 2023-24, we lost at least £150 million in revenue due to landfill tax evasion.

Since coming into office, this Labour Government have taken significant strides to tackle the waste criminals. We have boosted the Environment Agency's enforcement budget by 50%, pursued major regulatory reforms and boosted the joint unit for waste crime. In the first 18 months of this Parliament, the Environment Agency stopped illegal waste activity at 1,205 sites, achieved 122 prosecutions and put 10 criminals behind bars.

The waste crime action plan shows how we are increasing our response to waste crime in three ways:

Prevention. We are strengthening the regulatory regime to make it harder for waste criminals. We are tightening the rules around waste carriers, brokers and dealers to close the loopholes that criminals exploit. We are introducing digital waste tracking to improve accountability and traceability. We are expanding tax-check rules to the waste sector, making waste permit renewals conditional on operators passing checks on their tax records. We are equipping councils and regulators with the tools they need to deter, disrupt and stop illegal waste activity before it emerges or escalates.

Enforcement. Offenders must face the consequences of their actions. We are committing a further £45 million over the next three years for the Environment Agency to spend on waste crime enforcement, up from £10 million in 2023-24. We are going to give new police-style powers to Environment Agency officers to intervene earlier, disrupt criminal networks and bring more criminals to justice. We are investing in satellite technology and drones to improve early detection of waste crime and build stronger evidence for prosecution. We will make fly-tippers join "clean-up squads" and put penalty points on their driving licences. Waste criminals will face penalties that reflect the full severity of the harm that they cause.

Remediation. We are directly cleaning up a small number of the worst sites, starting immediately with site-specific assessments to determine the feasibility of clearing sites at: Alan Ramsbottom Way, Hyndburn; Worthing Road, Sheffield; and Bolton House Road, Wigan.

We are also supporting the remediation of other illegal waste sites, developing a landfill tax rebate scheme with local authorities. We are working with the insurance industry to explore new models to protect farmers, businesses and landowners from bearing the cost of waste dumped illegally on their land.

Waste crime has grown more organised and more damaging. The Government's response are stepping up to match it.

Through this action plan, we are taking a zero-tolerance approach. We will build a thriving waste sector—safe from exploitation, fair for business and fit for the future—we will catch and prosecute the criminals responsible, and we will restore pride in our communities.

[HCWS1430]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Meningococcal Disease Outbreak

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): I am updating the House on the ongoing outbreak of invasive meningococcal disease in Kent. My heartfelt condolences go to the families of the two young people who have sadly died, and my sympathies are with all those who remain in hospital. This is a distressing time for many.

I would like to pay tribute to frontline staff in Kent, across the NHS and in the UK Health Security Agency for their rapid and professional response to this unprecedented outbreak. While individual cases of meningococcal group B disease are not uncommon, an outbreak of this scale is highly unusual, which is why additional measures are being taken.

As of 5 pm on 22 March, a total of 29 cases of invasive meningococcal disease have been identified, comprising 20 confirmed and nine probable cases. Of the confirmed cases, 19 have been confirmed as being meningococcal group B—or MenB—and one is awaiting serogrouping. Some cases might be confirmed or downgraded in the coming days. UKHSA is reviewing the relevant results with hospital clinicians and is communicating with patients.

The outbreak remains geographically localised and the risk to the wider population continues to be low. All cases to date have links to Canterbury. Sixteen cases—confirmed and probable—are higher education students, including 13 from the University of Kent and two from Canterbury Christchurch University. Three confirmed cases are associated with three secondary schools in Kent. Twenty-two cases are known to have attended Club Chemistry in Canterbury, which remains closed. UKHSA continues active contact tracing to identify individuals at increased risk.

From the outset, local NHS teams and national public health experts have been working closely with businesses, universities, schools and colleges to protect students, families and the wider community. Clear advice on symptoms and when to seek medical attention has been provided, and frontline clinicians have been alerted to ensure early recognition of cases.

A single course of antibiotics is highly effective at reducing transmission. Immediately after the outbreak was identified, UKHSA deployed 50,000 doses of stockpiled antibiotics to the local area to ensure rapid access for those at highest risk. As of 5 pm on 22 March, 12,837 doses of antibiotics had been administered.

Although preventive antibiotics remain the primary tool to control the outbreak, targeted meningitis B vaccination has also been introduced to provide longer-term protection for students and young people in the area. Vaccination is being offered to all those who have received preventive antibiotics, and to years 12 and 13 students in schools and colleges in Kent where confirmed or probable cases have been identified. Further use in other age groups or settings may be recommended following individualised risk assessments with affected settings.

Anyone who visited Club Chemistry in Canterbury between 5 and 15 March has been offered a vaccine and antibiotics as a precaution, after a suspected case revisited the venue shortly before it closed voluntarily. This extension ensures that those most likely to have been exposed are provided with protection as early as possible. Details of vaccination sites are available on the NHS Kent and Medway integrated care system website.

As of 5 pm on 22 March, 9,611 vaccinations had been administered to those at highest risk. I strongly encourage all eligible individuals to take up this offer.

Recognising the anxiety felt by many parents and young people, 20,000 doses of the vaccine have been released to the private market by GSK to ease the pressure on local pharmacy supplies.

Routine vaccination programmes, including the UK's infant meningitis B programme, are determined by the Joint Committee on Vaccines and Immunisations, which assesses evidence on clinical effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, safety and population impact. As I told the House on 17 March, in the context of the current meningococcal disease outbreak, I have asked the JCVI to re-examine eligibility for meningitis vaccines to assess, for example, an expanded offer to older children and/or young adults. The JCVI will provide updated advice to the Department on whether, and to what extent, a vaccine programme for older children and/or young adults would be clinically effective as well as an assessment of the cost-effectiveness of such a vaccination programme.

UKHSA continues to support education settings, working closely with the Department for Education. All affected education settings remain open. Children and young people should attend their education setting normally, unless specifically told otherwise by a health professional. Attendance supports the education, health and wellbeing of children and young people.

As part of the investigation, UKHSA laboratories have completed initial genetic analysis of a meningococcal strain isolated during this outbreak. Results confirm that the Bexsero vaccine currently being offered should provide protection. The strain belongs to a group of bacteria known as group B meningococci, sequence type 485 belonging to the larger clonal complex ST-41-44. Similar strains have been circulating in the UK for around five years, but further detailed analysis on this strain is occurring with academic experts. UKHSA has published the genome data to support wider national and international research.

Meningococcal disease is a serious illness that can cause meningitis, which is an inflammation of the protective membranes surrounding the brain, and sepsis—blood poisoning.

Symptoms include a rash that does not fade when pressed with a glass, sudden high fever, severe or worsening headache, stiff neck, vomiting or diarrhoea, joint or muscle pain, dislike of bright lights, cold hands and feet, seizures, confusion or delirium, and sleepiness or difficulty waking. The onset can be extremely rapid. Anyone experiencing symptoms should urgently seek medical attention. Early treatment saves lives.

I want to thank everyone who has worked tirelessly to care for those affected and keep people safe. To the UKHSA and other public health officials working to contain the outbreak. The NHS team who stood up a vaccination programme within one day of it being announced, distributed antibiotics, and those caring for young patients in hospital. The school, college and university staff keeping students and parents informed, helping young people through the distress of this outbreak, and keeping their education going. And the thousands of students, pupils, and other members of the public who have so readily and responsibly come forward for antibiotics and vaccination.

[HCWS1434]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Delivering for Communities

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Miatta Fahnbulleh):

Today I can confirm a major package of support for communities to take control of their future. This includes £301 million to reimagine and revive struggling high streets through our high street innovation partnerships, £18 million to improve children's playgrounds in deprived areas, a major expansion of the Pride in Place programme, and pilots to drive place-based public service reform. Through these measures, the Government are boosting the sense of pride that people feel in their area and making sure that they see change for the better.

In February, the Prime Minister announced that a further 40 places will join the Pride in Place programme. That means that 284 communities will benefit from this transformational fund, with each receiving up to £20 million over the next decade to invest in the things that matter to local people. Today I am confirming the 40 places selected.

We have also approved plans for the first phase of Pride in Place places, setting out what the communities included in the programme will be spending the money on and how they plan to transform their areas.

In Ramsgate, the community has decided to invest £500,000 to save the town's last youth centre from closure, securing the building's future and ensuring that vital services for young people can continue. In Bilston, Wolverhampton, the local neighbourhood board has chosen to bring back the Bilston carnival for the first time since 2008, reviving a well-loved tradition and giving a new generation something to celebrate together.

Backed by £301 million of funding, our high streets innovation partnerships will help struggling high streets to shift to a new model: one that is based on an exciting new future, not a return to an imagined past. In a select number of areas, local authorities will be encouraged to work alongside communities and businesses to develop transformative plans such as to bring public services, green spaces and homes into the centres of these towns, working with anchor institutions and businesses to secure co-investment.

The partnerships will also deliver a summer of activity on high streets this year, with innovative measures to boost footfall in a season of major cultural and sporting events, such as the world cup. Later this year we will also publish a high streets strategy to support all high streets nationally and equip local authorities with the tools they need to drive long-term regeneration.

In too many neighbourhoods, local playgrounds are sliding into disrepair or have disappeared entirely. Our investment in playgrounds will reverse this decline, building and restoring play equipment in the places with the highest levels of child poverty and the lowest quality of playgrounds. The £18 million investment that we are confirming today will ensure that children in some of the most deprived communities have the quality of space they need to play. The funding is to be spent by 66 local authorities on up to 200 new or refurbished playgrounds and has been allocated across England, from Tyneside to Torquay.

We are using place-based budgets to pool public service budgets in local areas to enable services to be delivered better, joined up around the people who need them most, by breaking down silos, unlocking more funding for prevention and improving better outcomes for taxpayers. These will ensure that users are helped based on their need.

We have launched five projects with mayoral strategic authorities initially, focusing on special educational needs and disabilities across the Liverpool city region; young people at risk of offending in Gateshead and South Tyneside; adolescent mental health across four local authorities in the Black Country—Dudley, Sandwell, Wolverhampton and Walsall—adults facing multiple disadvantage in Doncaster; and preventing youth unemployment across West Yorkshire.

Taken together, this package demonstrates a genuine shift in power and investment into our communities. We are not starting at square one. In every community, thousands of community leaders, volunteers and grassroots organisations are already working hard to make their areas a better place to live. This package provides the investment they need to deliver the change that people want to see.

[HCWS1428]

Housebuilding and Infrastructure Delivery

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Over the past 20 months, this Government have taken a series of bold and decisive steps to lay the grounds for high and sustainable rates of house building and improved infrastructure delivery in the years ahead.

Today, I am announcing a series of further targeted measures to help stimulate housing supply and infrastructure provision.

To facilitate the more effective delivery of critical infrastructure, we are publishing an implementation plan, which can be found on gov.uk at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/streamlining-infrastructure-planning-implementation-plan>

It sets out in detail the steps we will take over the coming months to bring into force the beneficial reforms to the nationally significant infrastructure projects system contained in our landmark Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025.

This implementation plan will give applicants, investors, practitioners, local planning authorities and other statutory bodies and affected communities the clarity they need to realise the full potential of our reforms. Its publication supplements the efforts already under way to test more efficient and streamlined approaches to determining development consent order applications, including smoother and faster planning inspectorate examinations where appropriate, and pilots for key projects like East West Rail to make use of new flexibilities.

To provide further support for house building, a new consultation direction will be made this month specifying that where a local planning authority intends to refuse planning permission for a housing scheme of 150 dwellings or more, they must consult the Secretary of State to enable Ministers to decide whether to use their existing powers to call in that planning application.

I am also confirming today that we will consult on further proposed changes to the consultation direction covering commercial development of 15,000 square metres or more and approvals within detailed emergency planning zones. The relevant consultation can be found on gov.uk at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/consulting-the-secretary-of-state-on-planning-decisions>

The Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 introduced new powers for local fee setting, which will enable LPAs to set their own planning application fees through a local variation model. Under this approach, a national default fee will remain in place and apply to all LPAs, unless an LPA chooses to vary from the default fee for any or all application fee categories to reflect their own cost recovery needs.

We are today launching a consultation on the national default fee schedule designed to better reflect the costs LPAs incur. This is a vital step towards better resourcing LPAs and driving better outcomes including faster determination times, improved service standards and stronger performance across the planning system. The relevant consultation can be found on gov.uk at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/fees-for-planning-applications>

We have also published regulations to fully implement the power for compulsory purchase orders to be conditionally confirmed. This will give councils greater confidence to use CPOs earlier to deliver public benefits, help progress stalled sites and provide certainty in respect of land assembly. The regulations can be found on gov.uk at: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2026/308/contents/made>

I can also confirm today the allocation of £234 million of devolved land and infrastructure grant funding from our new national housing delivery fund for mayoral strategic authorities in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, the East Midlands, Greater Lincolnshire, Hull and East Yorkshire, Tees Valley, West of England and York and North Yorkshire. This will be delivered as a continuation of the existing brownfield housing fund to enable mayors to collectively enable the delivery of up to 8,000 new homes.

Finally, I am announcing today that we intend to award an £8.2 million contract to Google and Faculty to develop an artificial intelligence-powered planning tool designed to halve the time it takes for planners to process minor household applications, so that LPAs can provide a more efficient, high-quality planning service.

[HCWS1431]

Large-scale New Communities

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The New Towns Act 1946 was a response to the urgent need to alleviate housing shortages and urban overcrowding in a war-ravaged Britain. The acute and entrenched housing crisis that afflicts England today has far different causes, but the need for equally bold solutions is no less pressing.

As the final report of the New Towns Taskforce laid bare, a chronic shortage of housing is not only blighting countless lives but also hampering economic growth and productivity. The creation of a series of large-scale new communities provides a golden opportunity to make a significant contribution to meeting housing need across England, and to support economic growth by releasing the productive potential of our constrained towns and cities.

The original New Towns Committee established by the then Minister of Town and Country Planning, Lewis Silkin, rightly recognised that building well-planned new communities is a means of achieving national renewal as well as ensuring more families have access to decent, safe, secure and affordable homes. Inspired by the proud legacy of the past, we are now taking the first formal step to honouring our manifesto commitment to build a new generation of new towns.

Building on the diligent work of the New Towns Taskforce under the expert leadership of its chair, Sir Michael Lyons, and deputy chair, Dame Kate Barker, the Government are today launching a public consultation, which can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/new-towns-draft-programme/new-towns-draft-programme> on their new towns programme and the environmental implications of it.

Through this consultation, we are seeking views on our proposals with a view to informing final decisions on how the new programme will operate; which locations will be taken forward; how the next generation of new towns will be planned and delivered; and how design, place-making and planning policy should be approached. The consultation also seeks views on the Government's offer to locations and feedback on a strategic environmental assessment report that addresses local environmental

constraints, the cumulative effects of new towns development, and practical methods of mitigation and monitoring.

The proposals set out in the consultation are the product of the Government's assessment of whether each of the 12 locations recommended by the New Towns Taskforce, as well as an assessment of alternatives including sites submitted as part of the taskforce's call for evidence in December 2024, other sites that MHCLG and Homes England were already aware of, and sites that were identified during the SEA process, were capable of meeting the programme's objectives.

Each location was assessed against three objectives, namely scale, economic growth potential and deliverability. After reviewing over 100 potential sites, the Government determined that 13 locations appeared capable of supporting the programme to achieve its objectives. Of those 13, seven have been assessed as most capable of achieving those objectives and are therefore proposed for inclusion in the new towns programme.

The seven proposals are at different stages of maturity and require different types of intervention and support—including blends of public and private capital—to achieve their potential. The Government therefore intend to tailor their approach to each new town, with a view to making as much progress as possible as fast as possible.

Our seven proposed new town locations include three priority interventions:

A large-scale new settlement in Tempsford at the heart of the Oxford to Cambridge growth corridor and at the intersection of East West Rail and the east coast main line that could deliver over 40,000 homes.

An expanded landscape-led development of up to 21,000 new homes bringing together Crews Hill and Chase Park in Enfield that could help address London's acute housing need.

Urban development to create a well-connected, high-density, city-centre neighbourhood in the heart of Leeds South Bank that could deliver circa 20,000 new homes and support an agglomeration of HMG investment and growth in the city.

As set out in our initial response to the New Towns Taskforce final report, these are particularly promising sites that could make significant contributions to unlocking economic growth and accelerating housing delivery. Subject to the SEA, each will receive significant Government focus and support to deliver.

The remaining four locations also have great potential and will be provided with targeted support to ensure they can progress. Two mature schemes are exciting opportunities already in train where the Government will provide assistance to maximise development opportunities:

The creation of a riverside settlement in Thamesmead, Greenwich that could deliver up to 15,000 new homes, unlocking inaccessible land in the capital and improving connectivity via the planned docklands light railway extension.

Inner-city development and densification of the Manchester Victoria North urban quarter that could deliver at least 15,000 new homes, supporting agglomeration benefits and access to jobs in the growing city centre and other employment hubs across Greater Manchester.

Two scalable schemes are of considerable potential where the Government will provide support for initial phases while exploring opportunities to further scale up development:

A corridor of connected development in south Gloucestershire, across Brabazon and the West Innovation Arc, that could deliver up to 40,000 new homes in one of the highest productivity areas in the country.

A “renewed town” of circa 40,000 new homes in Milton Keynes, reinvigorating the city centre and delivering much needed housing growth to its north and east whilst reshaping the way people travel through a locally appropriate transport solution.

Collectively, schemes in these locations have the potential to provide hundreds of thousands of new homes in the decades ahead and to make a vital contribution to a stronger and more secure economic future for our country. We are determined to get spades in the ground on at least three new towns in this Parliament and will strive to accelerate work on all of the sites that are eventually selected for inclusion in the programme.

As the accompanying SEA report demonstrates, development at the scale we are proposing will need to be mitigated. Good planning, up-front investment, and high-quality design is the best way to achieve this. That is why we are so determined that the next generation of new towns will be built in a way that is consistent with our ambitious place-making principles. As we have always promised, we intend to create well-connected, well-designed, sustainable and attractive places where people want to live with all the infrastructure, amenities and services necessary to sustain thriving communities.

The fact that over 100 sites were submitted in response to the New Towns Taskforce’s call for evidence tells its own story about the significant opportunities that exist across the country when it comes to large-scale new communities. We were impressed by the strength of propositions across the board, including the six locations that we have identified as reasonable alternatives to the programme.

That is particularly true of Plymouth, which is a unique opportunity to bolster the UK’s defence and security and, if not ultimately taken forward as part of the programme, will require special consideration and its own bespoke financial support package to unlock its potential as a centre of excellence in naval technology, and to ensure that housing does not act as a barrier to further growth.

Our new towns programme forms an integral part of our plans to boost innovation, quality and competition in house building. Through land supply certainty, integrated planning, infrastructure co-ordination, the expansion of supply chains, and increased investment in skills and new construction methods, building the next generation of new towns will help transform the way that future large settlements in every part of the country are delivered.

Following the consultation and completion of the SEA and habitats regulations assessments, the Government intend to publish their final proposals later this year. This will confirm the final locations to be taken forward as part of the programme, alongside a full Government response to the recommendations of the New Towns Taskforce, and further detail on precisely how the next generation of new towns will be delivered.

The Government will continue to engage extensively with local leaders, mayors, investors and communities throughout this process to ensure new towns are planned and delivered to the highest standards of design, sustainability and long-term stewardship.

[HCWS1432]

TRANSPORT

Rail Infrastructure

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):

Today I am publishing this Government’s latest report to Parliament on High Speed 2.

When I was appointed Secretary of State, I was clear that significant change was needed to bring HS2 under control. The history of the programme has been characterised by spiralling costs and ever-shifting timelines, in significant part due to past mismanagement.

As I set out in my statement to Parliament in June last year, I gave the new CEO of HS2 Ltd, Mark Wild, a clear task: to reset HS2, bring an end to constant cost increases and delays, and deliver the remainder of the programme safely and at the lowest reasonable cost.

Since then, the scale of the challenge in resetting this programme has become even clearer. Mark Wild’s work on the reset has shown that HS2 Ltd did not have an accurate assessment of how much work had been delivered, or of how much was left to do. It is now clear that previous plans significantly underestimated the work required.

Mark Wild and HS2 Ltd have been working closely with my Department and other partners in Government over the past year to assess the remaining scope of work, and to estimate thoroughly how long it will take and how much it will cost to complete the project.

I am determined to explore every opportunity to remove the over-specification and complexity from this project, in order to bring down costs and delivery timelines. This will ensure that the updated cost and schedule estimates are robust, rather than rush the process and risk publishing figures that we do not trust. As such, today I am publishing an interim report, with a more detailed update on the progress of the HS2 reset to follow shortly.

I have commissioned Mark Wild to assess how much money and time could be saved by adopting a specification for HS2 that is more in line with the high-speed railways successfully delivered by the rest of the world. This could involve relying on proven technology and reducing the top operating speed of the railway in line with HS1 and other European counterparts.

On current specification, HS2 trains will run at 360 kilometres per hour, which would make them the fastest conventional high-speed trains anywhere in the world.

The definition of high-speed covers trains running at least 250 kph. China and Spain have the highest design speeds of 350 kph. The maximum commercial passenger speed on the UK conventional rail network is 200 kph, and HS1 runs at 300 kph.

However, no railway in the UK, or globally, is currently engineered for 360 kph. This means that the project would have to wait for HS2 tracks to be built before testing any trains—an approach that could increase costs and delay the completion of the project. The alternative would have been to send trains abroad to test on an existing track running at that speed.

Mark Wild's initial and provisional estimate is that a specification at reduced speeds could save in the low billions and bring the railway into service sooner, by reducing risk in the delivery of the programme and its testing. However, in learning the lessons of the past, I am eager not to make this decision prematurely; I have asked Mark Wild to report back to me before the summer recess, and I will be considering his advice carefully.

The Government will reflect on the early outcomes of this work, alongside progress on engagement with HS2 Ltd's main suppliers, ahead of publishing the new cost and schedule estimates once they have been fully assured and approved. It is clear that this review of specification and the wider reset are not going to undo the failures that have led to this point, but they will set a realistic and controlled path to completing the remaining work.

At the same time, I am pleased to report early signs of improvement following a productive year of delivery. Civils works are now at maximum effort and collective action is helping to drive up productivity and safety. The excavation of the HS2 tunnel to Euston has now started following the launch of the final two tunnel boring machines on the programme. Following his appointment as the new chair of HS2 Ltd last summer, Mike Brown has made rapid progress in reshaping the organisation's board, bringing in new skills, expertise and capability.

Looking ahead, our focus remains on finalising the updated cost and schedule estimates and progressing the reset to address the difficult position that we inherited. This includes reshaping HS2 Ltd and continuing to engage with suppliers to review contracts, implement the recommendations of James Stewart's independent review and deliver the railway safely and at the lowest reasonable cost.

Delivery control and expenditure

While the reset progresses, the Department will continue to manage HS2 Ltd through strengthened in-year controls and a yearly performance management plan that includes challenging construction targets and performance metrics to deliver within annual budgets. This plan has worked well, with productivity up in almost all sectors of construction.

These strengthened controls will remain as long as needed, determined by the improved performance and capability of HS2 Ltd and the adoption of a new cost and schedule baseline. When HS2 Ltd achieves sufficient capability to consistently deliver to the new baseline, the Department will be able to transition to a more permissive and flexible sponsorship model.

This year, HS2 Ltd has rescheduled some work with the aim of focusing construction efforts on delivering the opening stage of the railway, between Old Oak Common and Birmingham Curzon Street.

To the end of February 2026, £43.6 billion—nominal prices—had been spent on the HS2 programme. This is provided in more detail in the financial annex, based on data provided by HS2 Ltd.

Spend to date information covers the period up to the end of February 2026. Unless stated otherwise, all figures are presented in nominal prices.

Delivery progress

Delivery progress has historically been poor on some key areas of civils construction. Performance has started improving and the past six months have seen good progress in the delivery of HS2's civil engineering works. Notably, the Align joint venture, responsible for delivering civil infrastructure on one of the central sections of the HS2 route, is nearing the completion of their major assets. HS2 Ltd will continue working with the main works civils contractors to improve delivery so that the programme can progress to the next stage.

August 2025 saw the completion of construction on the Chiltern tunnel. Boring of the tunnel was completed in 2024, and since then work had been under way on the porous portals, cross passages, emergency walkways, and finishing works. As well as being complex, at 10 miles, it is the longest tunnel on HS2's route.

All major deep-bore tunnelling between Old Oak Common in London and Birmingham Curzon Street was completed in October 2025, when the breakthrough of tunnel boring machine Elizabeth concluded the excavation of the Bromford tunnel. This marks a significant milestone in the construction of the railway.

In January and March, the final two tunnel boring machines of the programme, Madeleine and Karen, were launched to excavate the twin-bore tunnel between Old Oak Common and Euston in London. Progress on this section of the route makes good on the Government commitment to bringing HS2 into central London.

Six major milestones on tunnels and roads have been completed ahead of in-year schedule, including the sliding of a road bridge for the A46 over the HS2 route in April 2025, the installation of precast beams and overbridges over Station Road near Calvert in August 2025, and the second breakthrough on the Bromford tunnel in Birmingham in October 2025. The north portal structure at the Chiltern tunnel was completed in 12 months, several months faster than the south portal, thanks to lessons learned and innovative construction methods. The excavation of the 8.4-mile Northolt tunnel, the second longest on HS2, was completed on schedule in June 2025 despite complex ground conditions.

Since July 2025, major progress has been made on earthworks. As at February 2026, over 108 million cubic metres of earthworks has been completed across HS2's civils construction, representing around 70% of the total planned quantities. In August, more than 1.7 million cubic metres of spoil was excavated, filled and processed in our Greatworth to Southam sites alone.

In August 2025, a 112-metre bridge was moved over Lawley Middleway in Birmingham. To minimise disruption to road users, the 1,631-tonne bridge was constructed on land over the span of two years, before being rotated 90 degrees and carefully lifted over the road.

In September 2025, a key construction milestone was achieved as the Colne Valley viaduct, the longest rail bridge in the UK, became structurally complete following the placement of the final deck segment.

Safety remains our top priority in the construction of HS2. In October 2025, following an incident on site, all works across the London tunnels section of the route were brought to a safe stop to allow for a comprehensive

safety review to be conducted. While no one was harmed in the incident, HS2 Ltd remains committed to the health and safety of everyone working on its sites. By mid-November all sites were able to reopen, with enhanced procedures and protocols implemented to ensure that all works resumed safely.

Ground investigation works at Interchange station are complete, in advance of detailed design commencing early this year. In order to formulate and advance plans for commercial development at Arden Cross, the area around the new station, engagement with local stakeholders and landowners continues.

Initial utility diversions are continuing for the automated people mover along the route with the first completed in October 2025. Once complete, the Mover will enable passengers to travel seamlessly from Interchange station to Birmingham airport.

At Birmingham Curzon Street station, the last of the 2,011 concrete piles, which form a key part of the foundation for the station, were completed in March. Work on the infrastructure required for the Midland Metro Alliance to deliver the Birmingham Eastside tram extension is progressing well, ahead of the first phased handover of the site to Transport for West Midlands in September 2026. HS2 Ltd and the Midland Metro Alliance are leading workshops over the future operation of the live tram through the Curzon Street site to maintain a collaborative approach and ensure lessons continue to be learnt as delivery progresses.

Work progresses on the six high-speed platforms at Old Oak Common, alongside work on six of the eight surface-level platforms that will serve the Great Western main line, the Elizabeth line, and Heathrow Express. Meanwhile, work continues on a complex sequence of critical utility works to the west of the station site. Key utility diversions are expected to complete this year.

Rail systems contracts for track, signalling, communications and power supplies commenced in February 2025. We have amended the schedule of work to support the wider reset, which has slowed initial mobilisation. However, this will then be followed by a period of design, and development of an integrated schedule for the deployment of railway systems. Work will not start on site until civil works have been completed. This is learning from the premature start of main civil works on HS2 as well as from previous projects such as Crossrail, where systems installation started before civils had finished.

Procurement of the Washwood Heath Depot continues.

As HS2 Ltd has further developed the operational design of the railway, it has become clear that platform-edge doors, which are screens along platform edges to safely separate passengers and trains, are no longer technically viable. Therefore, the procurement was abandoned via a contract notice in July 2025. The tender for the train dispatch system, which is the system to ensure the safe departure of trains from stations, has also been amended to remove the interface with the platform-edge doors.

Fraud investigation

In my previous report, I referred to allegations of fraud made in relation to an HS2 labour supplier. Upon completion of an investigation by the main contractor

Balfour Beatty Vinci, the contract of this labour supplier was terminated in July 2025. HS2 Ltd formally referred the matter to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and has since concluded its own wider investigation of all labour-only subcontractors. I have been clear that such allegations need to be investigated rapidly and rigorously, and I am glad to see that swift action was taken.

Community impacts, land and property

HS2 Ltd continues to inform and involve communities who are impacted by construction. Between April and December 2025, over 15,000 residents were engaged at over 1,700 meetings and events. A further 22,000 enquiries were received via the HS2 Ltd help desk, which operates 24 hours a day.

During the same period, HS2 Ltd received 1,067 complaints, the vast majority of which continue to relate to the impacts of construction, including concerns about traffic and transport disruption, and noise and vibration impacts. HS2 Ltd is committed to resolving complaints promptly. Of the 1,067 complaints received, HS2 Ltd resolved 100% of urgent complaints within two working days and resolved 98% of all other complaints within 20 working days or less.

Successful deployment of the £40 million community and environment fund and the business and local economy fund has now passed the halfway point. This is a significant milestone and means that, as at February 2026, over £21.1 million had been invested in communities and businesses that have been demonstrably disrupted by the construction of HS2, delivering over 379 projects that will leave an enduring legacy.

We understand the continuing impact that HS2 is having on those who live or have businesses on or near the route. In previous reports we have recognised the need for HS2 Ltd to make faster progress in settling claims and resolving other issues affecting people whose land has been acquired or possessed for the project. While HS2 Ltd has increased the rate at which claims on phase 1 are being settled, we have made it clear to the company that further improvement is needed. On the former phase 2a route, we recognise the concerns that have been expressed regarding the quality of communication from HS2 Ltd and a lack of progress in resolving land issues. We have made it clear to HS2 Ltd's leadership that performance in this respect needs to improve, and we will be scrutinising the measures taken by the company to address these concerns.

Financial annex

Historic and forecast expenditure

The information on HS2's overall spend to date and budget is now being provided in nominal—cash—terms following a commitment made by the Department to the Public Accounts Committee to express the costs of the programme in a more up-to-date price base and better capture the inflation incurred since 2019. The Government provided further details of the 2025 to 2026 position in cash terms as part of the standard supplementary estimates report to Parliament.

This is expressed in nominal prices, including land and property.

	Overall spend to date (£ billion)	2025 to 2026 budget (£ billion)	2025 to 2026 forecast (£ billion)	2025 to 2026 variance (£ billion)
HS2 Programme Total	43.6	7.1	7.0	0.2
Civils	30.7	5.5	5.4	0.0
Stations	2.9	0.6	0.6	0.0
Systems	2.1	0.3	0.2	0.1
Indirects	4.1	0.4	0.3	0.0
Land and Property	3.7	0.2	0.2	0.0
Former Phase 2	2.6	0.1	0.1	0.1
Overall Total	46.2	7.3	7.1	0.2

[1] The figures set out in the table have been rounded to the nearest £100 million to aid legibility. Due to this, they do not always tally.

[HCWS1433]

[2] Spend to date includes a £0.5 billion liability (provision) representing the Department's obligation to purchase land and property.

Petition

Monday 23 March 2026

OBSERVATIONS

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Coastal erosion in Start Bay

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that accelerated coastal erosion in the villages of Torcross, Beesands and Hallsands has had a devastating impact on residents and businesses including significant damage to properties; and further declares that the partial destruction of the A379 Slapton Line will have a significant economic and social impact on the wider area, due to increased travel times including for the emergency services.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support coastal communities affected by coastal erosion in Start Bay, including the villages of Torcross, Beesands and Hallsands, in the short and long term.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Caroline Voaden, *Official Report*, 23 February 2026; Vol. 781, c. 153.]

[P003163]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): The Government sympathise with those impacted by coastal erosion in Start bay and thank the petitioners for raising this important issue.

The Government are committed to supporting coastal communities and ensuring coastal risk management is fit for the challenges we face now and in the future. That is why, between April 2024 and March 2026, around £609 million is being invested into protection from sea flooding, tidal flooding and coastal erosion.

Alongside this, on 28 January, we announced £30 million for coastal adaptation pilots to support adaptation actions such as relocating or adapting community buildings, early warning systems, and improving beach access in areas facing coastal erosion across the country.

Locally, the Environment Agency continues to support South Hams district council and affected communities through its role in the Slapton line partnership. The SLP co-ordinates policy for managing coastal change in the area and ensures that local communities and businesses participate in the planning and delivery of coastal adaptation.

Following the recent storms, we understand that the EA sea defences in front of properties in Torcross have shown signs of movement, but preliminary investigations have identified the defences as being sound. In addition, the EA flood defences in front of properties at south Beesands performed well with no reports of significant flooding or damage.

The Government continue to invest significantly in improving local highway infrastructure, and Devon and Torbay combined authority will benefit from substantial highways funding for both maintenance and enhancement over the coming years. We will ensure the council is kept informed as further details on access to the structures fund are confirmed.

The Government will continue to work closely with local authorities to support coastal areas to improve their resilience to flooding and coastal erosion.

Written Corrections

Monday 23 March 2026

Ministerial Corrections

EDUCATION

Student Loans

The following extract is from the Opposition day debate on Student Loans on 18 March 2026.

David Reed: We have heard the argument repeatedly that it was the Conservatives and the coalition Government that brought in these changes. I am someone with a plan 2 loan. I was in the generation that Blair told to go to university, and at no point did anyone in that Blair Government talk about how the jobs market would take on so many graduates or, most importantly, who would pay for those people to go to university. Does the Minister agree that the 50% of school leavers who went to university should be paid for by the 50% that did not?

Georgia Gould: I think it is really relevant to make sure that the public know who created this system—and not only created it, but froze those loans 10 times over the last 12 years—[*Interruption.*] I know that it is inconvenient for the Conservatives to be reminded of these truths, but we have lived through them.
[*Official Report*, 18 March 2026; Vol. 782, c. 929.]

Written correction submitted by the Minister for School Standards, the hon. Member for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould):

Georgia Gould: I think it is really relevant to make sure that the public know who created this system—and not only created it, but froze those loans **for 10 of** the last 12 years—[*Interruption.*] I know that it is inconvenient for the Conservatives to be reminded of these truths, but we have lived through them.

WORK AND PENSIONS

The following extract is from the Opposition day debate on Student Loans on 18 March 2026.

Andrew Western: Turning to the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), we have had some serious chutzpah from the Tories today, opening with the fact that this Labour Government have increased fees—fees increased for sustainability purposes but certainly not trebled, as the Conservative party did. She spoke of the threshold freeze being unfair. April's increase is our second in two years—as many as they managed in 12 years post introducing the plan 2 scheme.
[*Official Report*, 18 March 2026; Vol. 782, c. 970.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western):

Andrew Western: She spoke of the threshold freeze being unfair. April's increase is our second in two years—they managed **four** in 12 years post introducing the plan 2 scheme.

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Monday 23 March 2026

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Monday 23 March 2026

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**not later than
Monday 30 March 2026**

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