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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Tuesday 14 April 2026

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

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

*The term “Independent” may denote—

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

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

House of Commons

Tuesday 14 April 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Hospital Trusts: Performance

1. **Jen Craft** (Thurrock) (Lab): What steps he is taking to improve underperforming hospital trusts. [908639]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): Under Labour, the NHS is on the road to recovery: with an extra £26 billion invested, 2,000 extra GPs and 100 community diagnostic centres now open weekdays and weekends, waiting lists are coming down and patient satisfaction is going up—lots done, but so much more to do to ensure that that improvement is felt everywhere. Where trusts underperform, we will send crack teams of top clinicians into those struggling trusts to cut waiting times faster. No more turning a blind eye to failure: this Government, unlike our predecessors, will do whatever it takes to improve the NHS in every part of the country—lots done; lots more to do.

Jen Craft: I welcome the Secretary of State's work in improving the NHS and turning fortunes around, but as he has said, that is unfortunately not the case in every area of the country, including my own. Mid and South Essex NHS foundation trust, which looks after constituents in my area including at Basildon university hospital, has been named as one of the challenged trusts in the intensive recovery programme, which I strongly welcome. The issues with the trust are not just recent but historical—they sometimes go back decades—and quite frankly, my constituents are not getting the healthcare they deserve. Will the Secretary of State set out what the recovery programme looks like and how my constituents can be assured that they will get the level of healthcare they deserve?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question and for the work that she has been doing on behalf of the people of Thurrock to speak up consistently for improving services and to expose failures at her local trust. As I told listeners to BBC Essex this morning, I will always report back on the things that this Government are doing well but I will also acknowledge where we are not seeing improvement fast enough. I am sorry to say that Mid and South Essex is one such trust, despite the best efforts of frontline staff. That is why we announced that Mid and South Essex is one of the first providers to be put in the new intensive recovery programme.

We are sending in teams of clinical experts to identify the root causes of failure and a new chief executive will take up post shortly and get a grip on the issues at the trust so that we deliver for patients.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): At the Queen Elizabeth hospital in King's Lynn, nearly half of patients are waiting more than 18 weeks from referral to treatment and the trust is now part of the national improvement programme. Last month's elective sprint delivered 2,000 additional elective activities, with evening and weekend working. Will the Health Secretary ensure that additional support is provided so that increased level of activity continues in the months to come?

Wes Streeting: I think that was a rare acknowledgment from the Conservative Benches that things are finally moving in the right direction, thanks to the work of this Labour Government. I am very grateful for the hon. Gentleman's support. He is absolutely right that we need to provide digital support. That is why we have the biggest capital allocation in the history of the NHS and we continue to press on with the technological improvements and data infrastructure that is needed to provide the improvements that staff are working so hard to deliver.

Maternity Care

2. **Mike Kane** (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve maternity care. [908640]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): I remain deeply concerned by the state of the maternity services that we inherited. Although the majority of births go well, I know through the courage of families and concerned staff of the devastating impact that comes from failures in care. That is why I asked Baroness Amos to chair an independent investigation into maternity and neonatal care. However, that has not stopped us from acting now, with an extra 2,000 midwives, over £149 million invested to address critical safety risks on the maternity and neonatal estate, and a £25 million boost for trusts to tackle causes of maternal death, enhance bereavement services and improve triage services. We are already making progress—lots done, but I would be the first to say on this issue: so much more to do.

Mike Kane: The nation should be grateful for this Secretary of State and for what he is doing for maternal services, yet at Wythenshawe hospital in my constituency, the most recent Care Quality Commission report rated maternity services inadequate for safety. What assurances can the Secretary of State give that the improvements that he has outlined will be felt by mums locally?

Wes Streeting: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to present those issues and to be honest about the challenges that have been raised in his local trust. I assure him that following an inspection by the CQC, NHS trusts take action to address the recommendations cited in the report. Already, £40 million in funding has been allocated to Wythenshawe hospital to ensure that safety issues are addressed, with work scheduled for completion by 2028.¹ In addition, through the new maternity and neonatal taskforce, the first meeting of which I have already chaired, we will act swiftly to translate the final

1.[Official Report, 27 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 4WC.] (Correction)

recommendations of the independent investigation into a new national action plan so that services improve in my hon. Friend's part of the country and across the whole of England.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): The Secretary of State and I are equally frustrated that more progress has not been made despite numerous inquiries dating right the way back to the Morecambe Bay inquiry in 2014, which I commissioned. Does he agree that one reform that could make an enormous difference would be full continuity of care for every pregnant mum, so that from the moment someone knows they are pregnant, a team of clinicians led by a named senior clinician would be responsible for that mother and child, from pre-birth to birth to post-birth, and no one would ever be in any doubt about where the buck stopped?

Wes Streeting: There is so much evidence to underpin the importance of continuity of care. I do not want to get ahead of the recommendations of the Amos investigation, but there is much to commend what the right hon. Gentleman says. Even with the best planning, the challenge for maternity units is that they are often both elective and emergency, with women arriving when they are not necessarily expected to, so we have to bear those considerations in mind, but the idea of women and partners knowing the team that will be responsible for their care in advance is a compelling one.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): A four-month-old baby in my constituency died after being placed in an unsafe sleeping position by someone who called themselves a maternity nurse despite having no medical qualifications. The coroner who worked on the case has called on the Secretary of State to regulate the infant sleep industry urgently. As it stands, anyone can call themselves a maternity nurse and create the illusion of expertise, all while providing life-threatening advice on sleep for babies. I know that the Secretary of State is aware of this case and is working on this issue, but can he provide an update on what he is doing to prevent a tragedy such as the one in my constituency from ever happening again?

Wes Streeting: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that absolutely horrific case; my sincere condolences go to the family for the loss of this poor baby. No patient should ever believe that someone is a trained professional, only to discover that they have no formal qualifications. This Government are protecting the professional title of nurse, so that no other families have to endure the suffering of his constituents. We will shortly be seeking widespread input to get that right, and we will be making changes in this Parliament. We will absolutely be addressing the issues that have been raised as a direct result of this tragedy.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): Does the Secretary of State understand that the remarks that he made on Sky television prior to the recess about the maternity unit at the Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother hospital in Margate were ill informed, anachronistic, deeply offensive and damaging to morale? I was heavily involved, and have been since, in the events following the death of baby Harry Richford at the hospital, and also in Bill Kirkup's report. Massive improvements

have been made since then, but the thing that is missing is the funding that was promised by the previous Government for the improvement of the real estate. When is that money going to be forthcoming?

Wes Streeting: We are investing in the maternity estate, and I am always ready to acknowledge improvements, but for the avoidance of doubt, I am not here to protect the professional blushes of NHS leaders and staff where services fall short. I am here to protect patients, and in this area, over and above any other, I will continue to put that principle first.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Baroness Amos's recent review found that England's maternity system was not working: poor quality care covered up, systemic issues around racism and even collapsing ceilings in maternity units. Poor maternity care has not only left many families devastated at a time that should have been joyful for them, as too many of my constituents know; it also costs the NHS £1.3 billion every year in medical negligence payments. Liberal Democrats are calling for a consultant to be present on every maternity unit 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and for guaranteed one-to-one midwifery care for every woman who is in labour as part of a £600 million-a-year maternity rescue package. Does the Secretary of State agree that that would be money very well spent, preventing families from experiencing the heartbreak of an injury or even worse to their new baby or mum, and saving the taxpayer billions every year?

Wes Streeting: I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for raising this issue. I do not want to pre-empt the Amos investigation. I think there is an issue with the presence of consultants and other staff who are meant to be on-call and available, and we need to address that. The purpose of the investigation is to produce a strong evidence base and then a clear set of actions to provide much-needed clarity in an area that has been drowning in recommendations and needs clear direction. I would be surprised if the issue of appropriate staffing were not mentioned by Baroness Amos.

NHS Management

3. **David Davis** (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve the effectiveness of NHS management. [908641]

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): Good managers are crucial to fixing our NHS, which is why the Government are backing managers and leaders with targeted investment. We will introduce professional standards for managers, establish a leadership college and implement mechanisms to prevent unsuitable individuals from holding senior NHS posts. Our workforce plan will set out how we will professionalise managers and leaders, equipping them with the skills, tools and operating frameworks to deliver lasting improvements across the NHS.

David Davis: Following on directly from the Secretary of State's comments to my right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale), last

month two national health service trusts in my constituency were found to be among the worst in England, one of them actually the worst. NHS England will now be brought in to turn those trusts around. However, the former chief executive of those trusts, who was responsible for overseeing their decline and was terminated in that job, has been promoted as the NHS turnaround manager for Yorkshire. Supposedly, he will be the man to correct the problem he created. That is by no means the first time that people have been found failing upwards in the national health service. What steps are the Secretary of State and the Minister taking to prevent NHS leaders who have failed in one role from being moved to a different post within the NHS?

Karin Smyth: I thank the right hon. Member for his question. I know he has raised it previously with the Leader of the House, and a similar issue has been raised with me by many hon. Members in his local geography. He knows that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on individual cases, but further to my comments about the importance of supporting good managers, we do not want people failing upwards as we have had in the past. I confirm that the planned disbarring system will prevent unsuitable NHS leaders who cover up poor performance or silence whistleblowers from taking up other leadership roles in the NHS and moving around the system.

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): Effective NHS management lives or dies on the ability of our integrated care boards to address population health needs. As the devolution Bill moves forward and at pace in areas such as mine in Sussex, it brings with it more opportunity for working strategically across sectors such as health and local government. What steps is the Minister taking to strengthen population health management in our integrated care boards?

Karin Smyth: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. She is absolutely right, and it is an area I worked on myself as a local NHS manager. It is crucial to have that link between health and local government. That will dictate most of the social determinants of health, as she well knows from her own expertise serving the population. That is why our 10-year plan commits to strengthening joint working, so that we will have better alignment across ICBs and strategic boundaries where possible, including in her area of Sussex, as well as that work with local governments to improve local population health as part of our neighbourhood health plans.

Mental Health Services

4. **Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD):** What assessment he has made of the potential impact of changes to the mental health investment standard on access to mental health services. [908642]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): Mental health funding will rise by £140 million in real terms this year, reaching a record £16.1 billion. That is on top of capital investment of £473 million over four years to deliver new models of care and digital transformation. However, improving mental health services is about more than money because, despite the money from the last Government, they

presided over a dramatic increase in mental health distress and waiting lists spiralling out of control. This Government will combine investment with reform to reduce waiting times, improve the quality of care, and strengthen prevention and early intervention.

Calum Miller: In my constituency, too many families face long and distressing waits for mental health support for children and young people. When I raised this with the Secretary of State some 15 months ago, he said that the Government were determined to ensure that mental health waits receive the same focus as the elective backlog. Yet a constituent recently wrote to me to explain that her son is waiting 10 months just for an assessment for his mental health needs. She asked me:

"How can we as parents and carers be expected to watch our young people suffer for a whole year before they get any help?"

I am worried that the revised mental health investment standard will not help this problem sufficiently. Can the Minister tell my constituents when child and adolescent mental health waiting lists will start to fall?

Dr Ahmed: The case that the hon. Gentleman highlights is indicative of the fact that much work has been done and much more needs to be done. We are providing early intervention for children's mental health and wellbeing by rolling out mental health support teams, which will happen in every school by 2029. We are investing £13 million to pilot enhanced training for staff, so that they can offer more support to young people with complex needs. We are ensuring that, as we are digitally transforming, children and adults can access talking therapies where required. A lot has been done and there is a lot more to do, and we will carry on doing it.

NHS Dental Services

5. **Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab):** What steps he is taking to improve access to NHS dental services. [908643]

6. **Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD):** How many urgent dental appointments have been provided since 1 April 2025. [908644]

11. **Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD):** How many urgent dental appointments have been provided since 1 April 2025. [908649]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): Since July 2024, we have been rebuilding a broken NHS dentistry system. We have delivered 1.8 million more treatments and reduced the underspend from £392 million to just £36 million, maximising the treatment provided for taxpayers' money. Last year, we asked integrated care boards to commission additional urgent appointments, and the data will be published in August. Following advice from the chief dental officer, we broadened the scope of those appointments so that more patients could benefit.

Anna Dixon: I recently asked Shipley residents about their access to NHS dental services over the past two years. Over 1,100 respondents said that they could not see an NHS dentist when they needed to. I have heard from constituents who have had to go private, travel for hours to access NHS dentistry or resort to DIY dentistry. What progress is the Minister making to fix the rotten dentistry that we inherited from the previous Government?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is a strong campaigner for her constituents. The situation that she sets out is unacceptable, but change is under way. I am encouraged by the latest data for her ICB area, which shows a 79% success rate for those who tried to get an NHS dentist appointment in the past two years, and that 10% more treatments were delivered between April and October 2025, compared with the same period before the election. Our reforms from this April will go further, focusing on those with the most urgent and complex needs, to ensure that people can access care when they need it most.

Tom Gordon: I have been contacted by dentists from across my constituency who want to expand access but are constrained by the current funding model. One NHS practice tells me that it has the physical space ready for a dentist to start working, but it cannot get them in because of the current funding model, forcing a reliance on short-term foundation dentists on rotations. Will the Minister outline what steps he is taking to reform NHS dental funding, and will he meet me to discuss the issues in my constituency?

Stephen Kinnock: I am encouraged by the fact that, in the hon. Gentleman's Humber and North Yorkshire ICB area, 52,795 more NHS dental treatments were delivered between April and October 2025 compared with the same period before the election, so some progress is being made, but more must be achieved. Long-term contract reform will enable the resolution of some of the funding issues that he mentions—that is ongoing work—and we will come forward in the summer with a public consultation on delivering fundamental reform to the dentistry contract.

Sarah Dyke: A constituent from Ilchester contacted me recently about their 14-year-old daughter, who is suffering from a painful dental abscess. Despite trying over several months to get treatment, she has been unable to access the treatment that she so desperately needs. Given that the Government have provided only 100,000 of the 700,000 extra urgent appointments that were promised, will the Minister provide a detailed breakdown of how many of the additional 1.8 million NHS dental appointments have been urgent appointments, as opposed to routine check-ups?

Stephen Kinnock: We will publish those data and statistics in August, in the usual way, but I can tell the hon. Lady that we have created a safety net for urgent dental care. Following the reforms that kicked in on 1 April this year, there is now a requirement for all NHS dentists to deliver 8.2% of their contract in urgent care. We absolutely recognise that more needs to be done in cases such as that of her constituent, and that is what we are focused on with fundamental dentistry contract reform.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): May I congratulate the ministerial team, the University of East Anglia and the Office for Students on finally getting the new dental school at the university over the line? It will admit 25 students from September next year and will go some way to dealing with the dental deserts that we inherited in Norfolk and Suffolk. In the meantime, what progress has been made with the General Dental Council to increase exam capacity for dentists coming from overseas to help with the present crisis?

Stephen Kinnock: I am equally pleased about what is happening with the University of East Anglia. When we came into office in July 2024, I was shocked to discover that there had been no sustained increase in the number of dental places in our country since 2007, and I am very proud of the fact that this Government have turned that around.

With regard to the overseas registration examination, I had the General Dental Council in my office shortly after the general election to ask why the contract has been failing, and it is mainly due to the neglect and incompetence of the Conservative party. We have sorted that out. There is a new contractor in place, and we will be delivering thousands more out of the backlog of international dentists starting from 1 April this year.

Access to GPs: Bracknell Forest

7. **Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab):** What steps his Department is taking to improve levels of access to GPs in Bracknell Forest. [908645]

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): We promised to improve GP access, and we are delivering. There are 2,000 more GPs than in July 2024—double our manifesto commitment of 1,000. The previous Government planned to increase GP numbers. Between 2019 and 2024, the number of fully qualified full-time equivalent GPs actually fell by 900. We have delivered 8 million more appointments, and we have seen satisfaction go up from 61%, where it was languishing in July 2024, to 74% today.

Peter Swallow: I declare an interest: my brother is a GP. Many residents in Bracknell Forest find the best way to contact their GP is online or by phone, but others have told me that they want to be able to visit their local surgery and book an appointment in person. Can my hon. Friend confirm that the new GP contract guarantees that patients have the right to choose to contact their GP in the way that works best for them, whether by phone, online or in person?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituents. I can absolutely give him that assurance. The GP contract is clear that patients must have the option of telephoning or visiting their practice in person, and online tools must be an addition to, rather than a replacement for, other contact methods. However, we have found that by expanding online access, we have significantly reduced pressure on phone lines, and we are ending the 8 am scramble.

Mr Speaker: As the Question refers to a named area, I call the MP who represents the nearest constituency: Joshua Reynolds.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): The Bracknell Forest wards of Maidenhead constituency have seen massive amounts of house building in recent years, many without the GP facilities to join them. In a recent health survey of mine, 70% of respondents said they found it difficult or very difficult to get access to a GP appointment. Will the Minister back the Lib Dem plan for all new house building developments to come with new or expanded GP facilities in time for those first residents moving in?

Stephen Kinnock: I am very pleased that we have our £102 million primary care utilisation and modernisation fund, the precise purpose of which is to develop more estate capacity in general practice, and of course we have our substantial commitment to neighbourhood health centres, with 120 to be delivered by the end of this Parliament and 250 by 2035. The hon. Member should certainly be talking to his ICB about its estate strategy. Now is the right time to intervene and ensure that the issue he raised is being addressed.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Under the Labour Government's new GP contract, Bracknell GPs and all GPs will have to refer through a single point of access. Can the Minister confirm that every referral deemed clinically necessary by a GP will be reviewed explicitly by a specialist consultant before being rejected or redirected?

Stephen Kinnock: I am astonished that the Conservatives seem to be teaming up with the British Medical Association in opposition to our reforms. They ought to listen to their voters and their members, who are crying out for change. We are getting the NHS to do things differently because that is the only way we are going to turn it around. Advice and Guidance is seeing more investment in GPs and getting patients cared for in the right place at the right time.

Dr Evans: The House will have heard that there was not an answer—that was a no. It is plain for all to see that this means patients will be blocked from seeing a specialist. They could potentially be assessed by a non-doctor, under Government pressure, with a target of one in four referrals being bounced. The Government's own answers show that patients never appear on a waiting list. This is not about improving healthcare; it is about massaging the waiting lists, isn't it, Minister?

Stephen Kinnock: I have honestly never heard so much nonsense in my entire life. We invested £80 million in Advice and Guidance. Some 1.1 million Advice and Guidance requests were diverted from the waiting list, so that care is being delivered in the right place. We have embedded A&G into the core contract, recognising it as routine practice, removing annual sign-ups and providing more predictable funding. The shadow Minister seems to be saying that patients who do not need to be treated in hospital should be treated in hospital. That runs completely counter to the entire strategy, which is about moving care from hospital into the community. The Conservative party needs to get with the programme.

Muslims: NHS

8. **Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab):** What discussions he has had with regulators on tackling anti-Muslim hostility in the NHS. [908646]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): It is vital that all forms of discrimination in the NHS are tackled, including Islamophobia and anti-Muslim hatred. As a former chair of the all-party parliamentary group on British Muslims, I am delighted that the Government have adopted a definition of anti-Muslim hostility that we will use to tackle this prejudice across the NHS, including in training for the NHS's 1.5 million staff. My hon. Friend will know that I have

serious concerns about the effectiveness of regulators in tackling racism, and we will be taking further action to ensure high standards, conduct and behaviour are upheld, so that the NHS is safe for all staff and patients.

Afzal Khan: The Health Secretary has long campaigned on tackling anti-Muslim hostility, and I know that we are both proud that this Government have adopted a working definition of it. According to the Muslim Doctors Association, almost 40% of Muslim healthcare professionals have been verbally abused by colleagues about their faith, and the British Islamic Medical Association has repeatedly found that Islamophobia is a persistent and under-recognised issue in healthcare. Will he commit to a rapid review specifically to look into anti-Muslim hostility experienced by patients and staff in the NHS?

Wes Streeting: Those statistics are shocking and a stark reminder that the NHS is not immune from the prejudices at large in wider society. All Muslim staff and patients—indeed, people of all faiths—should feel safe and confident as patients and staff in the NHS. As my hon. Friend knows, I am awaiting the review being conducted by Lord Mann. As well as looking at antisemitism, it will include recommendations that I have no doubt will apply in tackling Islamophobia and racism more generally. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend and I do meet, and would be very happy to meet again, the BIMA to discuss how we tackle this pernicious hatred in our national health service and what more may need to be done, in addition to any recommendations Lord Mann makes.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State's commitments about hostility to those of the Muslim faith, but I want to make a point about those of the Jewish faith. The Secretary of State referred in his reply to people of all faiths, and that includes those of the Jewish faith. However, we are well aware of recent newspaper headlines, including about a person who supports Palestine Action and one person who has made slurs against those of Jewish faith and Israeli nationality. Is it not time to ensure that everyone in the NHS, irrespective of their religious beliefs, is respected? I respect everybody's beliefs. I am sure that the Secretary of State will tell me that that is the case in the NHS—I hope that it is.

Wes Streeting: The hon. Gentleman is right. I only wish that I could tell him that it was the case that Jewish patients and staff are always being treated in the way that they deserve to be, but unfortunately I have heard first-hand accounts of Jewish people being afraid to disclose their race and faith when completing forms. That is not just a question of indignity; it is a question of safety because risk factors, particularly those related to genetics, need to be taken into account by the NHS, and it is about the provision of things that lead to people having a dignified and high-quality experience, such as the provision of food. I am afraid to say that I have also heard about shocking racism experienced by Jewish staff in the NHS from patients and from other NHS staff. That has got to stop.

Finally, all staff in the NHS have a right to speak and express opinions in a democracy, but all of them must always ask themselves, especially when writing on social media, "Will a particular comment or a particular

action make my patients feel more safe or less safe in my hands? Will they question my commitment to treating all people fairly and equally or not?" That is the standard on which too many doctors have fallen short, and that is before I get to the explicit, vile racists whom we are taking on.

Healthy Babies Funding

9. **John Whitby** (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to increase the roll-out of Healthy Babies funding to local authorities. [908647]

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister—welcome.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mrs Sharon Hodgson): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Embedding Healthy Babies services in a system that prioritises prevention is central to this Government's ambition to raise the healthiest generation of children ever. We are starting by investing £200 million to maintain Healthy Babies services in 75 local authorities with high levels of deprivation, and we will deliver the 10-year health plan ambition to roll out Healthy Babies nationally over the next 10 years.

John Whitby: Sure Start delivered long-term health benefits, with the Institute for Fiscal Studies finding that it reduced the number of hospitalisations of young people with mental health-related causes by 50%. It is therefore appropriate for the Department of Health and Social Care to support our Best Start family hubs. Healthy Babies funding enables that and ensures that family hubs can deliver sessions on topics such as parent and infant relationships. Will the Minister confirm when Derbyshire will be able to benefit from Healthy Babies funding?

Mrs Hodgson: Despite the huge success of Sure Start, which my hon. Friend details, the Tory-Lib Dem Government disastrously cut Sure Start centres, leaving parents and babies without any support. That is why this Government are investing £200 million as part of an almost £1 billion package for Best Start family hubs and Healthy Babies. This funding will help all areas to integrate neighbourhood-based health services in hubs, and it will roll out to his area during the next decade.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): May I welcome the Minister to her new post? The Government's support for Healthy Babies is very welcome, but the best way to keep babies who have type 1 spinal muscular atrophy healthy and help them to lead normal lives is by screening them at birth, because they can then access transformative gene therapy. My constituent little Charlie, who will soon be two, would be walking now instead of learning to use a wheelchair if he had been diagnosed at birth through screening, rather than when he was a few months old. Will the Minister consider adding SMA type 1 screening to the newborn screening schedule?

Mrs Hodgson: I thank the hon. Lady for her good wishes. She may be aware that on 19 January, the Secretary of State met Jesy Nelson and Giles Lomax, the CEO of the charity SMA UK, to discuss the very issue of newborn screening for SMA. The NHS is planning an in-service evaluation offering SMA screening to newborn babies in England. The ISE is being brought

forward to October 2026—it was originally planned for January 2027—so there will be more information to follow in October.

NHS Waiting Lists

10. **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the number of people waiting for NHS treatment. [908648]

19. **Samantha Niblett** (South Derbyshire) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the number of people waiting for NHS treatment. [908657]

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): We inherited from the Conservatives an NHS facing the worst crisis in its history, with waiting lists at a record 7.6 million and public satisfaction at record lows. This Labour Government are getting the NHS back on its feet and making it fit for the future. We have delivered record numbers of appointments, tests and surgeries. Since we took office, waiting lists have been down to the lowest level in nearly three and a half years, and we are driving modernisation through our 10-year plan. Lots has been done, but there is so much more to do with a Labour Government.

Tom Rutland: Waiting lists at my local acute trust are down by more than 20,000 since the general election, which I welcome, but musculoskeletal waits remain a challenge in Sussex, with the Sussex MSK service holding about 10% of NHS England's overall MSK waiting list. What more can be done to improve the performance of the service and get my constituents off the waiting list, back to health and back to work?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all the work he is doing, including with our Labour team in Worthing, to improve the health of people across his constituency. I congratulate staff at University Hospitals Sussex on the progress that they have made in bringing waiting lists down. To help them to go further, I am delighted to announce that my hon. Friend's local community diagnostic centre in Southlands hospital will benefit from a new multimillion-pound MRI scanner to drive down waiting times, including for MSK patients. We are combining investment with modernisation to send crack teams of top clinicians to MSK community services, drive down waiting times and improve outcomes. That is the difference that a Labour Government make.

Samantha Niblett: Recently, University Hospitals of Derby and Burton NHS foundation trust took part in the Q4 sprint, which involved out-patient appointments and surgical procedures. The work focused mainly on areas such as gynaecology, trauma and orthopaedics, general surgery, and ear, nose and throat, reflecting where that trust's waiting lists are longest. We have seen a significant drop in the 18-week position, which apparently is a key marker of overall access to care. At the start of the sprint, around 56% of patients were being treated within 18 weeks; as of last week, that figure had increased to 60.2%. A lot of work has been done, so will the Secretary of State join me and the chief executive officer, Stephen Posey, in thanking the teams involved in helping to deliver that sprint? More importantly, what assurances can he give that this is not just a one-off? We have people in South Derbyshire and across the country who need consistently good and quick care.

Wes Streeting: I thank my hon. Friend, and join her in congratulating Stephen and the whole team at University Hospitals of Derby and Burton trust on their hard work to drive down waiting lists and waiting times. We are not complacent; we have set ambitious targets and invested in modernisation to simplify pathways, increase clinical capacity and improve patients' experience. We have managed to cut waiting lists despite resident doctors' strike action—I fear we may have to continue doing that. Through our investment and modernisation, waiting lists and waiting times are coming down, and we have shown that the NHS is on the road to recovery. Our foot is on the accelerator, with lots done, but lots more to do.

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

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): Making sure that our GP surgeries are revving on all cylinders is key to ensuring that people get the access to NHS treatment that they need. The Secretary of State will know of my campaign to get a new site for Summertown health centre—in fact, we have been trying to meet to talk about it for over 14 months—but we are now at a key moment. The council and the local practices are at a point where, if we do not get a decision in the next few weeks, we risk losing the opportunity. However, there is a block, which is the district valuer. It often asks for rents far below market value, so what is the Secretary of State doing across Government to make sure that the role of district valuers in ICBs is reassessed?

Wes Streeting: The Chair of the Health Committee raises a very important point, and—not least given the timeliness of the issue—I would be very happy to meet her very soon.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): Among the things that can help reduce waiting lists and waiting times is increased use of existing community hospital facilities, such as Melton Mowbray hospital in my constituency. Will the Secretary of State join me in calling on the local ICB and University Hospitals of Leicester NHS trust to invest in moving more services out of inner-city acute settings and into Melton hospital, so that more of my constituents can get the treatments they need nearer to home?

Wes Streeting: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that we need to see more services moving out of hospital and into the community. That is why I am proud that we are announcing a new wave of community diagnostic centres and expanding lots of existing provision, as well as improving same-day emergency care and urgent treatment centres in hospitals. He has raised the issue of the Melton Mowbray site; I am sure the local commissioners responsible for that will want to look at it, but I also know that I owe him a meeting, so I will follow up with him directly.

Eating Disorders

12. **Mrs Elsie Blundell** (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve support for people with eating disorders. [908650]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): We all recognise the devastating impact that eating disorders have on people's lives, so this Government are committed to going further. Increases in mental health spending, which reaches a record £16.1 billion this year, include funding for eating disorder care. We have also commissioned an independent review to better understand rising prevalence, and the interim report of that review highlights the worrying rise in the prevalence of eating disorders. We look forward to the final report, which will set out recommendations on improving support.

Mrs Blundell: Too many people affected by eating disorders are not receiving the help they need—help often comes too late, with serious physical symptoms overlooked or misattributed. It is clear that those on the frontline must have the training they need to identify early warning signs. What further steps are being taken to ensure that people are supported before they reach crisis point, especially in areas such as mine, which were on the receiving end of significant cuts to public services under the Conservative party?

Dr Ahmed: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for highlighting those cuts and the devastating impact they had, particularly on mental health and eating disorder services. She is absolutely right that we have to do a lot more on the pathways, including harmonising some of the data and clinical coding to make sure that we are catching people early in the process. As I said, the prevalence review will now focus on eating disorders as well—that is a welcome intervention—and of course, children become adults, so we must end the cliff edge at the age of 18 and make sure that care continues in a holistic fashion. We are getting on with that.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): Young girls are particularly vulnerable to eating disorders, which are a parent's worst nightmare. We are seeing social media companies push content on to young girls that encourages eating disorders. What is the Minister doing with Cabinet colleagues to take on this problem?

Dr Ahmed: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The Government are conducting a consultation to examine the most effective ways that we can go further to ensure that children have healthy online experiences. The three-month consultation, which is evidence-led and has input from independent experts, will include determining the right minimum age for children to access social media, and it will report in the summer.

Cancer Treatment

13. **Dan Aldridge** (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support the treatment of cancer patients. [908651]

14. **Ms Polly Billington** (East Thanet) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support the treatment of cancer patients. [908652]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mrs Sharon Hodgson): We are backing cancer patients with a plan to end the postcode lottery that was baked in by the previous Tory Government due to chronic underfunding. We have already announced that more cancer specialists will be allocated to rural

and coastal areas, increasing capacity where it is most needed. Over the past year, around 39,000 more people started their cancer treatment within 62 days, compared with the 12 months prior to the 2024 election.

Dan Aldridge: Weston-super-Mare is a growing, thriving town with a population comparable to the city of Bath, yet cancer patients regularly make a round trip of 90 minutes by car or more than three hours by public transport to Bristol to get their treatment. After his own difficult battle with cancer, my constituent John Kiely is leading an inspiring campaign to finally bring a radiotherapy machine to Weston general hospital. A feasibility study is under way, so can Ministers outline how we can secure the support that we need to make his campaign a reality and improve the treatment experience for my constituents?

Mrs Hodgson: Too many patients experience issues in accessing radiotherapy treatment, and I am sorry to hear about the experience of my hon. Friend's constituent, John Kiely. We are determined to change that. After the previous Government's chronic underfunding, this Government have invested £70 million of central funding on 28 new radiotherapy machines across the country to replace the older, less efficient machines. Providers have been allocated £15 billion in operational capital for local priorities and £5 billion to support a return to constitutional standards on waiting times. We expect local systems to use that capital to deliver further investment, and I encourage my hon. Friend to meet his local ICB to discuss this issue.

Ms Billington: I welcome my hon. Friend to her place and congratulate her on her appointment. I noticed in the cancer plan the commitment to fill NHS workforce gaps in coastal towns such as mine—Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate—and to end the postcode lottery that means many patients in coastal communities are missing out on the best possible cancer care. Can my hon. Friend update the House on progress in closing workforce gaps in coastal areas?

Mrs Hodgson: I commend my hon. Friend on her great work campaigning for her coastal community in East Thanet. The national cancer plan sets out how we will make sure that everyone has timely access to high-quality diagnostic and treatment services by increasing medical training places in rural and coastal areas. The national cancer plan will save 320,000 lives over the next decade and deliver the fastest improvement in cancer survival in UK history.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Cancer patients, like so many other patients, are worried and concerned about the resident doctors strike in England, which is reportedly costing around £50 million a day, not to mention its impact on waiting lists. Meanwhile, in Scotland, we have a Health Secretary and a Government who are competent in negotiations and have none of this industrial action. The final bill for this industrial relations shambles could be as high as £3 billion. What can the Secretary of State reveal to the House about the special skills he has in dealing with the BMA?

Mrs Hodgson: Patients are 30 times more likely to wait two years for care in Scotland than in England. Labour has ended austerity and provided Scotland with

the biggest funding increase since devolution. The question is: where has the money gone?

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): May I pursue the point about coastal communities and cancer care? A young dad in Withernsea, a coastal town in my east Yorkshire constituency, went to the doctor repeatedly saying that there was something wrong with him and was repeatedly told that he was fine, before being diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. He survived, but only just. What, in real terms, will happen to ensure that communities such as those in Withernsea can see decent cancer care and proper diagnosis, especially given that, as was pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis), Hull university teaching hospitals NHS trust is one of the worst-performing trusts in the country?

Mrs Hodgson: The national cancer plan is a key part of our work to build an NHS fit for the future, and it explains how we will make England a world leader in cancer outcomes. The right hon. Gentleman's constituents will now be able to see a GP much sooner than they could before the 2024 election, which will ensure that they can get that earlier diagnosis, which is the only thing that will help them to survive and live longer.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I welcome the Minister to her post.

To provide cancer care of the best quality, we need the right workforce. Before the election, the Secretary of State said that he would double the number of medical school places, but he now appears to be quietly dropping that plan. He said that he would provide thousands more medical training jobs, but now he is rowing back on that promise. He said in 2024 that he would publish a comprehensive NHS workforce plan, which was promised for summer 2025 and then for autumn 2025. We are now in spring 2026. When will the workforce plan be published, and does the Secretary of State still intend to double the number of medical school places?

Mrs Hodgson: We are well aware that there are issues with the workforce across the NHS, which is why we are working on a new workforce plan that will be published in the spring—very soon.

Dr Johnson: I hope that it will be published very soon, because for people with cancer, being seen quickly is key.

Let me return to what the Minister for Care said to my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans). The Government appear to have decided that referrals will no longer be triaged by a consultant, and that a set proportion will be rejected. What evidence do the Government have that it will be safe for others to provide this triage? If a set proportion are to be rejected, does that mean that the Government will ask doctors to change their clinical thresholds, and if so, what evidence do they have that that is safe? Surely the Minister would not compromise patient safety for a short-term improvement in figures.

Mr Speaker: I presume that that question was about cancer.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): No, it wasn't—not at all.

Mrs Hodgson: Unlike the Conservative party, we trust our GPs. This will be consultant-led advice and guidance, on which GPs will then decide.

Topical Questions

T1. [908664] **Matt Bishop** (Forest of Dean) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Wes Streeting): I am delighted to announce that we are investing in 36 new and better community diagnostic centres in shopping centres and high streets across England. This is what a Labour Government deliver: the biggest expansion in diagnostics in a generation, shorter waits for tests, checks and scans, and an NHS on the road to recovery. It is a record that the Tories could not touch, the Scottish National party cannot match, Plaid Cymru cannot sustain, and Reform would destroy. On 7 May, people can only trust Labour with the NHS.

Matt Bishop: A constituent of mine, Emma, has been left with significant injuries following poor maternity care during childbirth. For more than 20 years she has been fighting for, but has been denied, corrective treatment on the NHS because it has been deemed cosmetic, despite the clear impact on her mental health and relationships. What steps can the Secretary of State take to ensure that women in such circumstances have access to the treatment that they need?

Wes Streeting: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that case. It is shocking but sadly not surprising, because the injuries sustained by women during childbirth are often completely ignored as well as going unaddressed. We have to learn from the case raised by my hon. Friend to ensure that constituents such as his are not fighting for the care that they deserve, and we will act on those lessons.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): The latest industrial action by the British Medical Association has now ended, yet many will be appalled by reports of individuals boasting online that

“the ability to have 10 days off will make turnout quite high.”

Does the Secretary of State agree that this behaviour is indefensible and represents a slap in the face to patients whose treatments have been cancelled, as well as to the NHS staff who have been left to pick up the pieces?

Wes Streeting: Yes. It reflects very poorly on the BMA and the cavalier way in which it has inflicted disruption and a £300 million bill on the country in straitened times. It was also unnecessary. Although the resident doctors committee chose to reject a generous offer, that did not mean that it needed to rush out and announce six days of strike action the very same day. With the BMA, strike action is a first resort, not a last resort. It needs to change its tune, because the country cannot afford to fund its reckless behaviour.

Stuart Andrew: This is a rare occasion, as I agree with the Secretary of State. The increasingly militant stance adopted by the BMA is plainly out of step with some resident doctors, who continue to report for duty. The Government's handling of this dispute has been marked by inconsistency. First, they attempted to buy their way out of trouble, then they withdrew the training places that this House voted for. Instead of persisting with a failed strategy, is it not time for the Government to heed our calls and bring forward legislation to ban doctors from striking?

Wes Streeting: The Government's approach has been consistent. We recognise that resident doctors suffered years of pay erosion and worsening conditions under the Conservatives. We came in and sought to address that substantially with a 28.9% pay rise and an offer on the table that would have gone further on pay, gone further on training places and cancelled exam fees, which is the best deal that anyone will have got in the entire public sector. Resident doctors have rejected that approach, but the shadow Secretary of State reminds the BMA that however much it might disagree with this Labour Government, the alternatives are far worse. It is far better to work with us than against us, but we will not cave.

T2. [908665] **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): The much-loved Pembridge hospice in north Kensington has been closed to in-patients for several years, meaning that an area with acute health inequality has very limited palliative care options, despite a promise from the new West London integrated care board to provide enhanced care beds in all its boroughs. Will the Minister join me in urging the ICB to set up a meaningful engagement process with residents to secure these urgent care beds as soon as possible, potentially at Pembridge, and to bring proper palliative and end-of-life options back to our community?

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I thank my hon. Friend for his question; he is a strong voice for palliative care and for Pembridge hospice in his constituency. Palliative care is vital in our communities, and I completely agree that ICBs, like West London, should engage with their local communities to ensure that they can meet their palliative care needs.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Wherever I go in North Shropshire, constituents tell me that access to a GP only gets worse when new homes are built, and they are right. Across the country, there are billions of pounds in unspent community infrastructure levies for new surgeries, and the average number of families that a GP serves has gone up by 917 since 2015. Will the Minister support Liberal Democrat calls for CIL to be used to support the early running costs of new GP practices, or to expand existing ones, as soon as people move into new housing, so that GP access really does come first when housing developments happen?

Stephen Kinnock: There is absolutely an issue with developers not delivering what they say they are going to deliver either through section 106 or through CIL. We are working closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to address this

issue. I would be more than happy to hear more about the hon. Lady's specific proposal. We want to work pragmatically and constructively to resolve this issue.

T3. [908666] **Kirith Entwistle** (Bolton North East) (Lab): Short waiting lists for cataract surgery are a success story, thanks in part to the partnership between the NHS and providers such as SpaMedica, headquartered in my constituency. However, ICB indicative activity plans could see waiting lists increase from weeks to over four months. How will cataract patients be protected while we maintain those all-important short waiting lists?

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): Ophthalmology waiting lists have fallen since we have taken office. Average waiting times have reduced, and 18-week performance has improved. ICBs have the flexibility to commission services across specialties within a fixed financial envelope, and may use contract levers to manage that activity. That is good management of public money to achieve the outcomes we want to see.

T4. [908667] **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): Last week, the Secretary of State announced £10 million for the Royal Berkshire hospital to fund a new site, which is very welcome news. After years of Conservative neglect, £400 million is needed to maintain the existing Royal Berks until rebuilding starts in 2039. What is the Minister doing to support the hospital and its excellent staff to help fix its many maintenance issues?

Wes Streeting: I am delighted that, as well as announcing the £10 million needed to purchase the new site for the Royal Berkshire, we are investing in the existing estate; that is what local residents deserve. I was delighted to make that announcement last week with our brilliant Labour Reading council team. It once again underlines that Labour councils work much better with a Labour Government, and people should remember that on 7 May.

T8. [908671] **Gurinder Singh Josan** (Smethwick) (Lab): Can I first take this opportunity to wish a very happy Vaisakhi to the Sikhs around the world who are celebrating it? Vaisakhi is a cultural celebration, but it is also the time of the Amrit Sanchar, the baptism ceremony.

Residents in my Smethwick constituency are benefiting from the investment in and changes to the NHS introduced by this Labour Government; the benefits include shorter waiting times and shorter ambulance waiting times. Can the Secretary of State tell us what progress has been made in implementing the Government's 10-year plan for the NHS?

Wes Streeting: I wish a happy Vaisakhi to all who are celebrating today.

Let me reassure my hon. Friend that he is absolutely right. As I reported only this morning on BBC West Midlands, we are bringing down waiting lists in his area and across the west midlands, and we will make further and faster progress; that is what a Labour Government do. We are much more able to improve the health of our nation by working with Labour councils across the country.

Mr Speaker: Order. At this rate, you will stop MPs getting in.

T5. [908668] **Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): In Epsom and Ewell, many residents face a daily battle to get a GP appointment. There are numerous potential housing developments on the horizon, and the rising population is set to put even more pressure on already stretched GP services. The Liberal Democrats would require developers to build new GP surgeries, ready for when residents move in. Can the Government explain what they are doing to support GPs in my constituency, so that they can manage the surge in patient demand from day one of a development being completed, rather than leaving communities to pay the price later?

Stephen Kinnock: As I said to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), we are looking at the way that section 106 and CIL are used. I certainly look forward to working with councils across the country, but as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has said, when people go to the ballot box on 7 May, they should think very carefully about how much more effective it is when councils work in partnership with this Labour Government.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. I say gently to those on the Front Bench—and I am talking to you, Minister—that these Members want to get in, and I am trying to help them, so you should not be dragging out answers by reminding us about the elections. If nobody is aware of the elections, I am quite shocked.

T10. [908673] **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): What more can the Government do to ensure that social enterprises delivering NHS services get the same support as internal NHS trusts, and play a bigger role in NHS reform?

Karin Smyth: These organisations play an important role. We are making sure that they are treated fairly, and are supported to play a bigger role. They will be supported by the forthcoming plan for voluntary, community and social enterprise spending targets to 2028, and a combined action plan for small and medium-sized enterprises and VCSEs. That will include measures to ensure clearer visibility of opportunities, earlier market engagement, proportional financial and evaluation requirements, and a strong performance on prompt payment across the health system.

T6. [908669] **Adrian Ramsay** (Waveney Valley) (Green): The British Dental Association has highlighted that current budgets allow just 39% of adults to access NHS treatment within a two-year period. Is that really the height of the Government's ambition, and if not, what access percentage are the Government aiming for?

Stephen Kinnock: We are working closely with the BDA on long-term contract reform. It has to be about getting the balance right, so that dentists are incentivised to do NHS dentistry and we maximise access. A public consultation on fundamental contract reform is coming before the summer, and I am sure the hon. Member will want to take part in it.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Increasing the uptake of bowel cancer screening improves rates of early diagnosis and saves lives, but about a third of people eligible for a FIT test—a faecal immunochemical test—do not complete one. That figure rises in the most deprived areas of Scotland, where up to half of people are not completing the test. What collaborative work are the Government undertaking to improve participation rates and reduce such health inequalities across the United Kingdom?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): My hon. Friend may know that in Scotland there is no NHS app. In England, where there is one, we can facilitate bowel cancer screening through the app, increase uptake, and save more lives. In Scotland, all the SNP has managed to provide in 20 years is, possibly, some dermatology services in Lanarkshire. When we came into power—

Mr Speaker: I think we have got the message; don't worry.

T7. [908670] **Sir John Whittingdale** (Maldon) (Con): My constituents in Maldon have, for more than 30 years, been promised a new health hub in the town to replace St Peter's hospital, a building that is over 150 years old. In the first round of new neighbourhood health centres, the integrated care board put forward the case for Maldon, but it was unsuccessful. May I press the Government to include Maldon in the second round? Will the Secretary of State meet me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) to discuss this matter?

Wes Streeting: I know the Minister for Secondary Care has met the right hon. Gentleman. I know that the ICB will have been disappointed. There will be further ways to do this, and it should keep trying.

Lauren Edwards (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): The James Williams healthy living centre recently opened in Chatham town centre in my constituency. It means that more of my constituents can receive care closer to home, rather than travelling to the other end of Medway to visit the hospital. May I invite the Secretary of State to attend its official opening in the summer, so he can see at first hand the fantastic new facilities?

Wes Streeting: I would be delighted to. Let us arrange a date.

T9. [908672] **Katie Lam** (Weald of Kent) (Con): The changes that the Government made in January to prioritise British graduates for NHS training places were very welcome indeed, but the current system of random allocation demoralises and disincentivises our brightest graduates, and it causes profound uncertainty for people at the start of their career. Will the Secretary of State consider changing the process, so that those places are instead allocated on merit?

Wes Streeting: The Medical Training (Prioritisation) Act 2026 is making a difference. It has reduced competition from four to one to less than two to one, a fact that the British Medical Association might wish to acknowledge. We are absolutely up for looking at that issue as part of

the workforce plan. I suspect that we will have to do that without the BMA, rather than with it, since it will be out on strike while we are getting on with governing.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): At 2 pm today, many Members of this House will be attending the funeral of our dear friend Phil Woolas, the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth from 1997 to 2010, who passed away from a glioblastoma brain tumour on 14 March. I am sure that everybody would wish to send their condolences to his widow Tracey, sons Josh and Jed, and his mother and brother, but does the Secretary of State agree with me that condolences are no longer enough, given that there has been no improvement in treatment for the condition in 40 years?

Wes Streeting: Absolutely. I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Phil Woolas, who was an outstanding Member of this House and is dearly missed. I know the whole House will join her in sending condolences to Tracey, Josh and Jed, and their thoughts will be with them today. I am pleased to report that the National Institute for Health and Care Research brain tumour research consortium, backed by over £25 million-worth of investment, aims to unlock new treatments and transform outcomes. Earlier this year, we announced £3 million, with Cancer Research UK, for the brain tumour centre of excellence, including the glioma centre of excellence. Only recently, I was at Edinburgh University looking at progress there. It feels like we could be close to major breakthroughs, but she is absolutely right to hold NIHR and NHS England's feet to the fire on this issue, and I will continue to join her in that.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Cerys was just 22 when she took her life while an in-patient at Park House in Greater Manchester. The coroner described the unit as "a shambles". Cerys's was just one of a number of deaths at the unit. There is a national pattern of mental health trusts failing to learn and act when tragedy occurs. Although reports on preventing future deaths are issued, there is no mechanism to ensure that their recommendations are acted on. How can accountability be strengthened?

Dr Ahmed: Anyone receiving mental health treatment, in particular acute mental health treatment, deserves dignity and high-quality care. Where care falls short, this Government's approach is that sunlight is the best disinfectant. That is why we are absolutely committed to learning, and to taking action to protect patients and improve in-patient mental health care up and down the country. I am deeply distressed to hear about this case and about other cases, including at St Andrew's. NHS England and the Care Quality Commission are acting to keep patients safe. I am happy to take forward any further discussions with the hon. Lady, as necessary.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): Patients in Chickerell often struggle to access GP services in their area, and instead must travel long distances. Some years ago, it was confirmed that a new surgery should be built in Chickerell. However, significant delays mean that we are still waiting for that surgery. Will the Minister work with me and the NHS locally to finally deliver a new GP surgery in Chickerell?

Stephen Kinnock: I know that the local town and county council have been working in partnership with Dorset ICB over many years to support GP partnerships in the Chickerell area in developing a business case for NHS capital or revenue funding. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend, and to continue to make plans for applying pressure to ensure that this is delivered.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Twenty-two people a day are diagnosed with lobular breast cancer, including my colleague Councillor Fiona Corps in North East Fife, but many more are living with it, because researchers and clinicians know so little about it. In advance of vigils next week, can we ensure funding for the Moon Shot Project, to give these women hope?

Wes Streeting: We strongly support the aims of the Moon Shot Project; the challenge has been getting the proposal to a suitable standard for funding. The moment we overcome that obstacle, the money will be there.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): The infected blood inquiry recommended action to protect the safety of haemophilia care, but there is mounting concern among clinicians and patients alike that recommendation 9 is not being implemented. Will the Minister meet me and members of the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood to discuss these real concerns?

Dr Ahmed: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making these points about haemophilia care. We are committed to implementing all recommendations of the review, and good progress has been made, including on non-plasma-derived treatments and the revision of the national service provision. NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care will continue to provide updates on the Government response. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is welcome news that NHS England has reduced the faecal immunochemical test threshold from 120 micrograms to 80 micrograms, bringing England into line with Scotland and Wales. We now need investment in endoscopy and other related treatments to ensure that people suffering from bowel cancer are spotted early and given the ultimate chance of survival. Could Ministers look at further investment here to increase survival rates?

Wes Streeting: Yes; as part of our national cancer plan, we absolutely want to see survival rates improve in the way the hon. Gentleman describes. I welcome the new Minister working on this—the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson)—to her place, and thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton) for all her leadership in this area, too.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): My constituent Harley Harris is 15. He has spondylarthritis synostosis syndrome, which has caused his spine to curve 120° and damaged his lungs, leaving him with significantly reduced lung function and in continual pain. Harley needs lifesaving surgery, but his family have been unable to get a referral to have it performed

in the UK. Will the Minister commit to urgently reviewing Harley's case to ascertain what support can be provided to him and his family?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mrs Sharon Hodgson): I am very sorry to hear about Harley's condition, and my thoughts are with him and his family. I am sure my hon. Friend understands that neither the Department nor NHS England can comment on the clinical appropriateness of suggested treatments for an individual. I understand that Harley and his family have already been in touch with the Department, and would suggest that my hon. Friend continues to raise this case with NHS England. We are committed to improving the lives of those living with rare diseases, including Harley's condition of SCTS.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): In 2022, Grantham saw the opening of one of the country's first community diagnostic centres; since then, more than 100,000 tests have been completed for the local population. Now, I want the same for the town of Bourne. Will the Minister meet me, so that I can make the case for a new community diagnostic centre in Bourne?

Karin Smyth: I was happy to announce the further expansion of CDCs this morning. We will continue to work to roll out these centres across the country. I am happy to discuss with the hon. Gentleman the proposals from his local ICB, if he wants to provide a bit more detail on that, as these centres are critical to getting down our waiting lists.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State join me in welcoming the success of sickle cell bypass units in north-west London and across the country in reducing pressure on emergency departments, while improving care for sickle cell patients, who have historically been overlooked? Does my right hon. Friend recognise that the future of these units is threatened, and will he meet me to discuss the need for ongoing central funding, so that these vital and efficient services are not lost?

Wes Streeting: I congratulate the units on their work. I appreciate concerns about sickle cell services, which we must maintain. I am aware of some of the other challenges we have had to address in London, where we have got to a good place. It is so important that we work together—that Labour's investment and modernisation works alongside NHS leaders and those promoting public health—and work with great Labour councils, like my hon. Friend's.

Mr Speaker: For the final question, Shockat Adam.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Over the weekend, it was my pleasure to attend the Beat the Odds event in my constituency, which amalgamated 36 grassroots mental health organisations that support people from all backgrounds and of all ages and help those who have sadly fallen through the cracks. The message from those organisations was overwhelmingly clear: they need more financial support. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that grassroots organisations receive funding to deliver frontline services that save lives?

Dr Ahmed: I commend the community groups in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. He will know that there are record amounts of funding going into mental health provision under this Government. We are committed to

ensuring that that funding is disseminated into the community, by moving more services from hospitals into the community.

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

12.45 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): With permission, I will update the House on the Government's response to the recommendations of the infected blood inquiry's additional report.

I will start by updating the House on the delivery of compensation by the Infected Blood Compensation Authority—or IBCA, as we refer to it. As of 7 April, 3,273 people have received an offer and over £2 billion has now been paid out. That includes the first payments to all eligible groups. I am sure that Members across the whole House will welcome that progress.

In July last year, the infected blood inquiry published its additional report, which made recommendations for both the Government and IBCA. Part of our response to that report was a public consultation on changes to the infected blood compensation scheme. I am here today to update the House on the outcome of that consultation. First, I should say that I am deeply grateful to everyone who responded and provided deeply personal stories. They must be at the heart of the decisions that the Government make, just as they were throughout the work of the inquiry.

The consultation was vital for engaging the community on our proposals. The Government have also sought advice from the infected blood compensation scheme technical expert group. Alongside the consultation response, today I am publishing the group's final report, which sets out its advice to the Government and amendments to the compensation scheme. To inform that advice, the technical expert group conducted roundtable discussions with community representatives on specific aspects of the scheme, and that was separate to the consultation. For transparency, I am also publishing the minutes of the roundtable discussions, the group's own meetings and a summary of written responses to the roundtables.

Let me turn to the changes to the scheme. Today the Government have published our full response to the consultation, and that sets out how the scheme will now change. Before I lay out each change in detail, let me explain the overall package. The community was clear that the scheme must do more to recognise people's individual experiences and compensate them fairly in a way that minimises the administrative burden placed on those who have been harmed, minimises the demand for evidence and maintains the delivery of tariff-based compensation. Those requirements underpin the changes.

For infected people, the changes will increase the amount of core compensation available and increase the options available for supplementary compensation awards. For affected people, additional core compensation will be available to those eligible. We consulted on seven specific areas, and we are making substantive changes in all seven. In four areas, we are actually going further than our original proposal.

Let me turn first to the special category mechanism. We will introduce a new supplementary award to give additional compensation to people who have been assessed as eligible for the SCM or who can now demonstrate to IBCA that they meet the criteria. After considering the community's views, we will ensure that every

eligible person has this award backdated to 2017, because that is when the special category mechanism was first introduced.

Many of those infected suffered from terrible mental health issues as a result of their infection, as we heard in their testimonies. We will amend the scheme so that the new SCM supplementary award gives people additional compensation where the psychological harm that they experienced means that the core route compensation simply does not go far enough. We believe that this will result in more comprehensive recognition of the mental health issues caused by infected blood and the resulting years of harm.

The inquiry recommended that we change the core route's severity bandings to recognise the harms caused to infected people by interferon treatment, and proposed a new "level 2B" severity banding for those who receive this treatment. We accept that change is necessary, and we will introduce this new severity band to increase people's injury, financial loss and care awards. In addition, if someone has had multiple rounds of interferon treatment, they will be compensated for each round.

The inquiry recommended changes to the calculation of past financial loss and past care awards for those who choose to continue receiving support scheme payments. We will remove the 25% deduction applied to past care compensation, as was recommended by the inquiry. The consultation also set out two options for how financial loss could be calculated for those who continue to receive support scheme payments: the way the scheme currently does it, and an alternative. Because of the range of views on which was best, we will ensure that people receive past financial loss compensation based on whichever of the two calculations presented is most financially beneficial for them.

The inquiry asked the Government to look at the evidence requirements for the exceptional loss award. We were keen to hear the community's views on that in order to develop a way forward that avoided lengthy, individualised assessments of people's circumstances. We will ensure that all forms of evidence of actual earnings can be considered by IBCA. We will also make additional compensation available to infected people who lack evidence of earnings but who had clear potential to earn more than average. We will offer a £60,000 lump sum on top of people's core awards to those who can show they either had a job offer or recently started a job where the salary was higher than the median salary but had their progress impeded by their infection.

Through the consultation, we also heard about the experiences of affected people and the particular harms they suffered. We will increase the core injury award for several groups of affected people, including bereaved parents whose child sadly died before they turned 18, bereaved partners, and children and siblings affected under the age of 18. Those changes will give more compensation to affected people whose particular experience of the scandal was undoubtedly profound and deeply harmful. The awards will form part of the core award, and they will not require additional evidence from applicants.

I know that the matter of unethical research is of particular concern to Members across the House. It is one of the most shocking aspects of the scandal. We heard that the existing approach may not have compensated everyone who suffered that wrongdoing. We have therefore

changed the scope of the award so that anyone treated in the UK for a bleeding disorder in 1985 or earlier will receive further compensation.

It was also clear from the consultation responses that the amount offered does not reflect the harm done. I say today to the House that we will increase the unethical research awards. That includes increasing the £25,000 for those who attended Treloar's school to £60,000 as well as introducing a new unethical research award for those treated elsewhere for a bleeding disorder during childhood at a rate of £45,000. We are also tripling the award for those treated for a bleeding disorder in adulthood to £30,000. I have touched on all seven of the areas we directly addressed in the consultation; of course, I encourage hon. Members across the House to read the full response that is being published.

The consultation also invited respondents to raise any other concerns they had about the design of the scheme. One of the most compelling things we heard was that the scheme does not sufficiently recognise the profound impact of infection during childhood. We have heard the community clearly on that, so we will make a further change to the compensation scheme to address it: we will introduce a 50% increase to the core autonomy award for people who were infected at age 18 or under.¹

I hope those changes go some way to showing our commitment to listening to the community and making decisions, with those impacted at the forefront of our minds. In order to make those substantial changes to the scheme, we will bring forward further legislation in due course.

While the consultation provided one way for the community to offer feedback, the inquiry recommended there be an identified way for concerns to be considered. Today, I am pleased to launch a new mechanism that builds on existing engagement and feedback channels through which people can raise concerns about the function of the infected blood compensation scheme with the Cabinet Office and with IBCA. Both organisations will then publish quarterly summaries of feedback received on the scheme's design and delivery, and any action being taken as a result. I expect the first of those summaries to be published in early July.

The findings of the inquiry must be met with tangible, systemic change. I hope that what I have set out goes some way towards showing our commitment to enacting this change. I pay tribute to Sir Brian Langstaff, his team and everyone who gave testimony to the inquiry for ensuring that that human element of this tragedy remains a focal point of the inquiry's work.

The compensation scheme's most basic purpose is to provide financial recognition of the losses and harms faced by victims, both infected and affected. Beyond that, it must reflect and embody their stories if it is to truly deliver justice, not just for those we tragically lost, but for those who continue to fight. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

12.55 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement and for providing an advance copy. We naturally welcome the progress reported today. The fact that 3,273 people have

received offers totalling more than £2 billion is a significant milestone in a decades-long struggle for justice. I thank the Infected Blood Compensation Authority for its work to speed up the payments.

As Baroness Finn said in the other place,

"what we call the scandal was, in truth, the infliction, collectively, of grievous harm upon thousands of people by the state."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 4 November 2025; Vol. 849, c. 1821.]

Nowhere was that more egregious or more shocking than in those cases where victims were infected as a result of deliberate experimentation in the name of science. We therefore commend the Minister for the specific increases to the unethical research awards, and in particular the uplift to £60,000 for the survivors of Treloar's school and the expansion of the scheme to include those treated as adults. Those are necessary recognitions of a truly outrageous chapter of the scandal.

However, while the Minister spoke of tangible, systemic change, many victims and their families will be looking at the fine print with a degree of trepidation. I therefore have a number of questions regarding the delivery and scope of these announcements. The Minister noted that further legislation will be required later this year to enact these substantial changes. Given that the infected blood inquiry's additional report was published back in July last year, will he reassure the House that the legislative timetable will not lead to further agonising delays for those in declining health? Will the first quarterly feedback summaries, which he has promised will come in July, provide a hard deadline for when those new level 2B severity awards and backdated supply chain management payments will actually reach bank accounts? If not, does he have an expectation of when those payments will be made?

I think the Minister mentioned increased core injury awards for bereaved parents whose children died before the age of 18. Can he provide greater clarity on the justification for excluding parents whose children were infected when they were young children but turned 18 before the time of their death? Regarding the 50% increase to the core autonomy award for those infected at age 18 or under, will he confirm that that will also apply to those infected through their mothers in utero?

The Government rightly aim to minimise the administrative burden and the demand for evidence. We welcome the £60,000 lump sum for those with clear potential to earn but who lack evidence of earnings, but how will the Infected Blood Compensation Authority define "clear potential" without falling back into the lengthy, individualised assessments that the Minister says he wants to avoid?

Finally on the compensation scheme, the Minister announced that for past financial loss, the Government will use whichever calculation is "most financially beneficial" for the recipient. We welcome that pragmatic step, but can he clarify whether the removal of the 25% deduction for past care will be applied automatically to all existing offers, or will those people who have already received offers need to reapply to have their awards adjusted? As the Minister said, the compensation scheme must "embody their stories". Justice delayed is justice denied, and we must ensure that the new supplementary awards do not become a secondary bureaucratic hurdle for a community that has already given so much testimony and waited so long.

1. *Official Report*, 25 June 2026; Vol. 788, c. 2WC. (Correction).

[Mike Wood]

Before I close, I turn to a matter that seems to be missing from the Minister's statement: the inquiry. When he last updated the House before Christmas, I raised the need to

"move from a period of review to one of rectification and delivery."—[*Official Report*, 30 October 2025; Vol. 774, c. 516.]

I also asked him how and when the inquiry might be drawn to a close so there could be a degree of policy certainty. I did not hear him refer to that in his statement, so will he confirm that, with the implementation of the key recommendations from the additional report and Sir Brian's letters, the public inquiry has now drawn to a close?

Once again, I thank Sir Brian Langstaff and his team for their diligent and comprehensive work over the past eight years to help deliver some justice after decades of scandal and suffering. Most of all, I again pay tribute to the tireless campaigning of the many victims and their families who were infected or affected by the infected blood scandal. They have suffered for far too long in ways that we can barely begin to imagine, and no compensation scheme can ever reverse the horrific harms needlessly done to them. I hope, however, that the universal acceptance of the conclusion of the reports and the determination of us all to do what we can to make changes that will stop others suffering in future will bring them some comfort.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I thank the shadow Minister for the tone that he took in that response and for the supportive tone that he has taken throughout. I will pick up on some of his earlier points. I agree with him entirely when he talks of the heinous nature of the medical experimentation on children that happened during this scandal. Although I have increased the specific amounts, it should be pointed out that those amounts do not stand in isolation; they are specific amounts for the particularly egregious nature of what happened, which are within much higher settlements, and that is exactly as it should be.

On the point about the inquiry, yes, there has now been the formal exchange of letters between me as the responsible Minister and Sir Brian Langstaff. Also, I entirely agree with the shadow Minister about the need for policy certainty going forward. He asked some very reasonable, detailed questions, and I will come back to him properly in writing on those, but let me just deal with a few of them.

I want to bring forward further legislation as soon as possible. When I have brought forward legislation in the past, parties across the House have always worked in a collaborative way throughout to get it through as quickly as possible. Obviously, positions are a matter for the Opposition parties, but continuing that constructive spirit is helpful in getting these things through as quickly as possible.

On the issue of exceptional loss, again, that £60,000, as referred to by the shadow Minister, is not designed to be a very detailed, individualised assessment. That is not what a tariff-based scheme is meant to do. Rather, it is meant to look at the situation of loss of a chance—the situation where somebody, but for their infection or how they were affected by the infection, would have had the opportunity to have gone on and perhaps been a

higher-than-average earner but were denied that—and is designed specifically to look at that. On the other very reasonable and detailed matters that the hon. Gentleman raises, I will ensure he gets a full written response.

Charlotte Nichols (Warrington North) (Lab): Does the Minister accept that although people co-infected with HIV and hepatitis C represent only around 7% of those on infected blood support schemes, they make up roughly 14% of those receiving special category support, because of the disproportionate harm caused by early hepatitis C treatments? Does he believe that today's announcement properly recognises their suffering?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Whether it is in relation to the co-infected, to whom my hon. Friend so movingly refers, or other people who are both infected and affected by this scandal, the compensation scheme seeks to recognise everything—all the harms that have happened to them and how they have suffered. I will just say, though, that this was always meant to be a tariff-based scheme—it is meant to produce broad justice—and part of the reason for that is to try to prevent those highly individualised searches for evidence which, frankly, with this distance of time, would simply not be possible.

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

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. I especially welcome in his remarks the recognition of people's individual experiences and the commitment to compensating them fairly in a way that minimises the administrative burden placed upon those who have been harmed.

The infected blood scandal is one of the greatest failures in our national health service, which was unacknowledged for far too long. Over 30,000 people were infected across the country and faced the devastating consequences of that systematic failure. Yet there are people who continue to feel that the scheme has not gone far enough, including one of my constituents, from Marple, who feels the scheme should investigate more potential conditions.

Thousands of victims and their families have waited decades for the justice they deserve. Sir Brian Langstaff was straightforward in his findings: victims have been ignored and frozen out of the process they fought for decades to secure, while payments have proceeded at an infuriatingly glacial pace. The Liberal Democrats have long stood with the victims. The Government are right to seek to answer the needs of those infected and affected by setting out a clear timeline for how compensation can be delivered to them. My colleagues and I will continue to hold this Government to account until every eligible person receives the justice they are owed.

Sir Brian Langstaff rightly highlighted how victims have not been listened to by successive Ministers, and we welcome the new feedback mechanism that the Minister has set out today. Will he expand a little on his remarks and confirm that that will be a formal advisory body of victims to IBCA, as recommended by the Langstaff inquiry?

After so many years of secrecy, deceit and delay, the Government should ensure full transparency over the progress of the scheme and open ongoing communication

with all those affected. Enshrining a statutory duty of candour is a long-overdue reform championed by those infected and affected by the scandal, and the continued delays to passing the Hillsborough law are shameful. Victims and campaigners should not be made to wait any longer, so will the Minister say when the Government will get that vital piece of legislation moving again and finally get the Hillsborough law on the statute book?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First, in respect of the feedback mechanism, I wanted it to be not simply somewhere that would receive correspondence, but a proper mechanism to sift the various queries coming in. Some might be administrative things to do with the scheme that might be dealt with relatively quickly and some might be more serious things that need to be elevated either to IBCA's board or to the Cabinet Office.

Secondly, with regard to IBCA and the voice of victims, I have been on more than one occasion to IBCA's offices in Newcastle. It already has what are known as the user consultants, who provide the voice of the community on the premises and who have been encouraged by Sir Robert Francis to do that. I think they make a very important contribution. Thirdly, on transparency, I could not agree more. That is why, on the technical expert group for example, I take the view of publishing everything. I think we have to continue to do that. Fourthly, on the issue of the Hillsborough law, work is ongoing. I have been very involved in that in recent months and, certainly, we are committed to delivering it.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I really welcome the statement from the Minister, along with the changes and improvements that the Government are making to the scheme, but for many people infected by HIV in the 1980s, fear, stigma and poor health meant that the role of parents, as in the case of my constituents, did not meaningfully change after their child turned 18. Will the Minister please consider adding an enhanced core injury payment for parents whose children died over the age of 18 but who had no partner or children of their own?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to speak of those people who were infected with HIV in the period that she talks about and the terrible social stigma, alongside everything else that they suffered. Indeed, I sincerely hope that the scheme reflects that. On the second, very specific question that she raises, if she could send me the details of her constituents, I will come back to her on that particular case.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Over the past 21 months, the Minister has worked tirelessly to try to build on the consensus across the House on the legislation that I put through on 21 May 2024 in order to make the scheme work, and I pay tribute to the work he has done. He has listened carefully to a whole range of inputs on an extremely complicated problem from a heterogeneous group of individuals, and he has done his level best to respond to the advice and best judgment of professionals, to attend to the range of needs and oversights, and to create pathways. I pay tribute to the work that he has done. He assured the House repeatedly that the money would get out as quickly as possible, and it did get out quickly and move swiftly after that initial process had been resolved. However, given that it cost over £150 million

for the public inquiry, let alone the several billions of pounds for the compensation, will he ensure that the proper lessons are learned by the British state, so that not only can such a scandal never happen again but the conduct of public inquiries is as efficient as possible and we can reduce the delays that may have occurred in this situation?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his generous tribute. I have built on the work that he did as a Minister, and I think that the consensus between us, when I was in opposition and now as I am in government, has helped the victims and speeded up the process. I am very grateful for all the work that he did. His second point was very well made. We have to look at the public inquiries landscape. We all recognise that public inquiries provide a real public sense of justice when people have suffered either from a scandal or, frankly, from a cover-up by the state, but we want public inquiries to provide value for money for the taxpayer and to report in a timely fashion. We also need them to make relevant, timely policy recommendations. I am determined to look at that.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the contents of his statement and for the diligence of his work with Sir Brian Langstaff and the victims to ensure that the inquiry's recommendations have been delivered. Noting the incredible damage that has been done to many of our constituents' lives as they try to return to normality, may I ask the Minister to outline further how we will ensure that the community's voice will continue to be heard, bearing in mind that the challenges caused by this injustice will not suddenly stop, even if those people are awarded compensation?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend highlights a really important point. This is why the feedback mechanism is so important in ensuring that, where there are issues, they are treated sensitively and with the seriousness they deserve, and that they are elevated to the appropriate place, whether that is IBCA's board or the Cabinet Office, to be dealt with.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I pay tribute to the Minister and his team for the great work that they have done. I agree with the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) that this work is really cross-party, and the Minister will continue to enjoy our support in the future. I would like to raise two matters of detail. One relates to the Hepatitis C Trust, which has welcomed the funding that it has received, but it is only for one year. Owing to the nature of its work and the fact that these cases are likely to go on for several years, will the Minister confirm that organisations such as the Hepatitis C Trust can expect to enjoy funding in future years to enable them to continue to provide support?

I also welcome the Minister's comments on the new level 2B severity banding for people who received interferon treatment, but I would like to raise a couple of points of detail on that. The Minister might not be able to answer them today, but if he could answer them in writing, that would be helpful. Do these new measures remove the 2017 reduction in rates for compensation, and will they ensure that people are fairly compensated for health harms caused by interferon treatment from the date those harms occurred?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman and his party for the tone that they have taken throughout this process, and I welcome the opportunity to continue to work on a cross-party basis, because that is important. Like him, I have had that discussion with the charities—including the Hepatitis C Trust, as it happens—and I very much understand the case they make about multi-year funding as opposed to single-year funding. The funding comes from the Department of Health and Social Care, rather than from me, but I will certainly write to the relevant Minister to raise that point. The introduction of level 2B banding for interferon treatment is important, because of the specific, awful effects of multiple rounds of interferon treatment. On the two points that the hon. Gentleman has specifically raised, I will ensure that he gets a detailed answer in writing.

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): I commend the bravery of the constituents I have met who have endured decades of anguish as a result of this harrowing chapter in our country's medical history. The Minister will know that there are those across the country with legitimate claims under this scheme, but because some NHS trusts are claiming that their loved ones' medical records have been destroyed, those affected are still having to fight for recognition and compensation. Will he address how we can overcome this seemingly insurmountable obstacle and give my constituents the closure and compassion that they deserve?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. An issue with this scandal is that, due to the passage of time, evidence will simply not be available. Also, the inquiry found evidence of deliberate document destruction. That is why, while of course I entirely respect IBCA's independence, I have always said that a sympathetic approach needs to be taken to evidence in that particular context. Indeed, from conversations I have had with Sir Robert Francis and others at IBCA, I know that that is precisely the approach they are seeking to take.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I, too, want to recognise the Minister's commitment to this cause, which has impacted on so many of us across the House. I have a number of technical questions. First, he says that he wants to bring legislation forward this year. As he knows, delay matters, and the estimate is that one affected person is dying every four days. Can he confirm that the legislation will happen this side of the summer? Secondly, if the legislation is required to change the claim amounts, from when will they be dated? Thirdly, can he confirm that if the small number of claims that have been concluded already were eligible for the increased awards, they could be reopened so that more money may flow to those victims?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the right hon. Gentleman's third question, the answer is yes. His second question related to dates. There are some specific dates that exist in the scheme. For example, assessment for the special category mechanism started in 2017, so that is the date that exists in relevant cases. Finally, I want to bring forward the regulations—this will be the fourth set of regulations—as soon as I possibly can. When I do so, I very much hope that we can collectively deal with them as quickly as possible.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I want to join Members across the House in commending the Minister for his steadfast commitment to this issue and, in particular, for the way in which he has consistently listened to members of the community and acted on what they have said. My constituent, Alex Robinson, lost her father to the scandal in 2006. I spoke to her just a few moments ago on the phone, and she remains concerned by the speed at which applications are being processed. Can the Minister outline what steps he is taking to speed up the process and deliver the justice that Alex and so many others deserve?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend's constituent is entirely right to continue to hold the Government to account on the speed of delivery of the compensation. Particular targets were put in place, including paying the first affected person by the end of last year, and we met that target. On infected people, we have now paid out over £2 billion in compensation. To answer his specific point on how we will continue to ensure that we process the payments at speed, while IBCA is of course operationally independent, I always stand ready as the responsible Minister to assist IBCA in any way that it sees fit. I can assure my hon. Friend that my dialogue with IBCA on this point will continue.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I, too, acknowledge the work the Minister has done on this issue. Last year, I asked him about a constituent who fell under the special category mechanism, so it is welcome news that there will be an additional award for that group, but those affected are frustrated that it has taken this long to get here. The scheme so far, for the vast majority of victims, has been a failure, and only a fraction of those affected have yet received compensation. Is the Minister confident that all those eligible, including those eligible for additional awards from the special category mechanism, will have received payment by the end of 2029?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I should say that 2029 is a backstop not a target, so it is not a question of my being confident about that date; I want the payments to have been made before 2029. On the hon. Member's more general point about speeding up payments, IBCA has used a "test and learn" approach for infected people. The reason for that was to have a small number of representative cases, so that there could be an accelerating point at which the number of cases being paid would increase sharply. That did happen and I would say, as the Minister, that we are now up to over £2 billion having been paid, but he is absolutely right to continue to hold me to account on the speed of payments.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I join my right hon. Friend in paying tribute to Sir Brian Langstaff who leads the inquiry and the people who gave evidence to it, which made his report so powerful, as my right hon. Friend said. I thank my right hon. Friend for the way he has engaged with this process in the short time he has been in office. It has moved things on immeasurably from where we were before, albeit building on the work that was done before.

My right hon. Friend knows how complex this issue is, so the devil will be in the detail of the statement, but I welcome the news that the requirements for evidence

will be reduced where people have already produced evidence and gone through previous thresholds, and are then required to provide it again when it is not available. Mistrust inevitably exists for people who have had to campaign for so long for justice from the state, so I welcome the fact that he is creating a new mechanism to listen to the community continuously as the process goes on. Does he agree that taking that way forward will help to avoid the disagreements we have had in the past?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I thank my hon. Friend and pay tribute to his work with the all-party parliamentary group on haemophilia and contaminated blood, which I was pleased to attend and speak to in recent weeks. He is absolutely right about the new feedback mechanism. It is so important not only that victims feel that their voice can be heard, but that they have a specific process whereby they can raise those concerns and then be elevated to the appropriate person to respond to them. That will be hugely important going forward.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I, too, welcome the statement from the Minister. I pay tribute once again to my constituent Clive Smith, who is the president of the Haemophilia Society, on all the work he has done to press previous Governments and this Government on behalf of those affected and infected.

I am pleased to hear the Minister make specific reference to Treloar's school in Hampshire, where at least 72 children died after being given a drug contaminated with HIV and viral hepatitis. I know that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, have a particular interest because your constituent Mike Webster's son, Gary Webster, was infected. Can the Minister update the House on what progress is being made in pursuing criminal charges against those involved in experimenting on children?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to Clive Smith for his excellent and continuing work on memorialisation in particular, for which I am very grateful.

The hon. Gentleman rightly raises the heinous activities that happened at Treloar's school, which was a place that parents sent their children—vulnerable children—for protection, and then had this truly chilling medical experimentation that happened. We will ensure that things move as quickly as possible, but I also say to the hon. Gentleman that we must ensure that we learn the lessons of what happened there to ensure that something like that never happens again.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I join others in paying tribute to the Minister for his work on this matter and on the Government's response to Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations. I also thank him for his intention to ensure that the administrative burden placed on those infected and affected is limited as much as possible. With that in mind, can I ask him for clarification on the level 2B severity category and the increase for those who were infected when they were younger than 18? Will those new mechanisms be adjusted automatically for existing claims, or will claimants need to apply or work in another way to get those mechanisms applied to their cases?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and for his support and that of his party, which has been helpful throughout this

process. On existing claims where there has been a change, the objective is to make the process as easy as possible, because I do not want to go back to the situation where people are being asked repeatedly to produce different pieces of evidence. Where there is an impact on an existing claim, the intention is absolutely to make it as easy as it can be.

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): I, too, welcome the Minister's statement and his commitment to updating the House regularly on this issue. However, my constituent was infected with hepatitis C in 1993 and is still yet to receive any support because of the scheme's original cut-off date. I know that the strict cut-off dates have been relaxed, but her cohort of the infected but never compensated—and, in some cases, never registered—still seem to be at the back of the queue. That compounds the harm and the feeling that they have been shut out for so long. Can he reassure my constituent that there will be renewed urgency on that particular cohort?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First, IBCA has published a prioritisation list. It published the rationale for that and is obviously moving through that list on the basis of that prioritisation. Given that this scandal happened over decades, there is obviously an urgency—it is shared by IBCA, me and the Government more widely—to get those payments to people as quickly as possible, including the hon. Gentleman's constituent.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I join Members across the House in paying tribute to the Minister for his work and the previous Government who started the compensation scheme. My constituent met me at a surgery last year and spoke to me about her late brother, who tragically died in 1988 after being infected with contaminated blood as a haemophiliac. Her family applied to the compensation scheme in June 2024, yet they feel that they are being treated as a lower priority because he is no longer alive. Can the Minister explain why bereaved families like hers are effectively being asked to wait longer? How can this two-tier form of justice be justified to those who have already waited for decades? Will he meet me to discuss this particular case and how the delays to compensation for my constituent can be alleviated?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First, the intention is certainly not to produce any form of two-tier scheme; it is to compensate everybody for the harm they have suffered. On the hon. Gentleman's constituent, I would greatly appreciate it if he would write to me with the particular individual circumstances and then I can look specifically at what has happened in that case.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I join others in thanking the Minister for his update. I met a constituent in Wokingham last year who was one of the 30,000 people affected by this scandal. The Infected Blood Compensation Authority should have been life-changing for them and others affected by the scandal, but when an offer of compensation was made, my constituent felt that they had to accept it, although they felt it was not good enough, and that they were under duress. Will the Minister meet me and my constituent to discuss this case and the fact that my constituent felt pressurised to accept the offer?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: One of the reasons I signed off funding for both financial advice and legal advice was precisely to ensure that, in a situation where an offer of compensation was received, people could access it. Obviously, I do not know whether that opportunity was taken in that particular case, but if the hon. Gentleman would write to me with the circumstances, I can certainly look into it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The Minister is indeed a bearer of good news, and I thank him for his diligence, energy and commitment to delivery. His and his team's hard work is much valued by my constituents and by all Members present. He has made a full statement on the changes that will be implemented. I note the greater support for children under 18 years of age and for bereaved families in particular. Can he confirm that those people will be able to make claims under the mental health support section, as the loss of a parent can be devastating in the long term?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his generous comments. On that particular issue, I would be grateful if he wrote to me with the very specific details. I would be more than happy to see whether the claim is eligible.

In an earlier question, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) asked about the potential for criminal prosecutions relating to this matter. Of course, prosecutions are a matter for the independent Crown Prosecution Service, but I have made it absolutely clear that the Government stand ready to provide any evidence required by the authorities.

Knife Crime

1.30 pm

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): Before I come to the statement, I want to echo the Home Secretary's words yesterday following the publication of the Southport attack inquiry report. That was a truly sickening crime, and my thoughts, and those of everybody in this place, are with the families, victims and everyone who was affected.

With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on the Government's plan to halve knife crime in a decade. That commitment, made in our manifesto, is rooted in recognition of a tragic truth: in too many places, a deadly cycle has taken hold, as fear and violence feed off each other, leaving people—and especially young people—feeling that they have no choice but to carry a weapon to stay safe. In the most devastating cases, that results in the loss of lives that have barely begun.

All that is wretchedly familiar to the House and to me. We know it from the long list of tragedies about which we have spoken with families across the country. We hear it in the anguished words of bereaved parents, whom many of us have met after fatal stabbings in our constituencies. We see it when we look at our children, whose safety is too often the cause of worry and sleepless nights. In these and so many other ways, knife crime is destructive and devastating, and has for too long been plaguing communities and destroying lives.

The task of putting that right falls to this Government. Since the general election we have acted decisively to deliver a response that matches up to the scale of the threat, implementing bans on zombie-style knives, zombie-style machetes and ninja swords; restoring neighbourhood policing to the heart of our communities; getting more than 63,000 knives and dangerous weapons off our streets; ramping up action against county lines gangs to record levels, with over 2,700 lines shut down last year; setting up the coalition to tackle knife crime; and legislating to deliver the toughest crackdown yet on online knife sales. The concerted effort that we have mounted, alongside our partners in the coalition, law enforcement and communities across the country, is having an impact. Since the start of this Parliament, knife crime is down by 8% and knife homicides are down by 27%, to the lowest level in a decade.

Together, we are making progress, but it is not enough. Knives are still being carried, stabbings are still occurring and lives are still being lost. Indeed, there have been several fatal cases in recent days and weeks, and I take this opportunity to express my deepest sympathies to the victims' loved ones. For them, for all the families out there whose world has been forever changed by knife crime, and for the country as a whole, we must do more, and we are doing more.

We have published the "Protecting lives, building hope" plan, which details the action that the Government are taking and will take to further reduce knife crime and, ultimately, achieve our goal of halving it in a decade. The plan outlines activity and investment designed to drive progress across four key outcomes: supporting young people, stopping those at risk from turning to knife crime, policing our streets and ending the cycle of knife crime. I will address each in turn.

First, we will do much more to give every boy and girl the best possible start in life by addressing the root causes of knife crime; increasing investment in youth services; launching 50 Young Futures hubs to bring together wellbeing support, careers guidance and positive activities in areas badly affected by knife crime; stepping up support for children who are persistently absent from school; and investing in mental health support teams in schools. We do all that and more because we recognise that, to deliver the change that is needed, we must act early and prevent harm before it escalates into violence in later life.

Secondly, we are ramping up efforts to stop young people being drawn into knife crime, be they at risk of being an offender, a victim or both. A new Safety In & Around Schools Partnership, backed by Government funding, will see around 250 schools given targeted support to boost their capacity to tackle knife crime and reduce the risk of harm. We are also investing in the county lines programme and the highly effective network of violence reduction units, and strengthening crime prevention in the communities that need it most.

Thirdly, we will ensure that victims of knife crime get the justice that they deserve, and that dangerous criminals face the full force of the law, through a robust and effective police response. Visible local policing is central to our approach not just on knife crime but across the full breadth of this Government's agenda on law and order. The severity of the situation that we inherited has been well documented, so I will not retrace that ground, except to say that we have made it a first-order priority to rebuild neighbourhood policing, by putting an additional 13,000 police personnel into neighbourhood roles in England and Wales by the end of this Parliament, with over 3,000 in place two months ahead of schedule, and by implementing the neighbourhood policing guarantee, under which every community has named, contactable officers devoted to tackling local issues.

Police boots on the ground are essential, but we must also ensure that forces are equipped and empowered to make interventions that are precise, timely and effective. We will therefore support the development of tools and approaches that have the potential to enhance prevention and detection, with substantial funding to enhance crime mapping, invest in research and development aimed at improving our capability to detect high-risk knife carriers, and enable targeted action in the police force areas that see the most knife crime through a new knife crime concentrations fund. We will also support forces in maximising the use of intelligence-led stop and search, and where the law needs strengthening, we will not hesitate, as shown by our commitment to introducing much tougher rules around the online sale of knives, through measures we know as Ronan's law, after Ronan Kanda, who was fatally stabbed aged 16 and whose mother and sister have campaigned heroically for change since his death. That will all be underpinned by the most radical programme of police reform in 200 years.

Fourthly, we will seek to end the cycle of repeat harm by strengthening the youth justice system, improving the rehabilitation of adult offenders to reduce the risk of reoffending and developing a new national approach to identify, prioritise and manage habitual knife offenders who pose the greatest risk to public safety.

Each of those four strands is important on its own, and the steps that we are taking within them have been chosen because the evidence supports that. Equally,

I am clear that this work transcends individual policies or initiatives. Ours is a whole-of-Government, whole-of-society mission aimed at building a safer, more hopeful future for all. The publication of this plan marks a significant moment in that mission, not because of what it says, but because of the action that it will drive.

Above all, we think today of the victims, and of the families that are smaller than they should be. Although we can never undo the pain inflicted on them, we can prevent others from suffering as they have. It will not be easy, but this Government will be unrelenting in the vital effort to protect lives and build hope. As Pooja Kanda so aptly put it,

"Every child deserves to grow up safely."

She is right, and we must and will do everything in our power to make those words a reality in every part of our country. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Minister.

1.39 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement. Halving knife crime is a measure that every Member of this House would subscribe to. It is a devastating crime with devastating consequences. Only yesterday, this House discussed the tragic events in Southport and the impact they can have on a community. Those events are, unfortunately, representative of a much broader problem, whereby too many people view it as appropriate to carry and use a knife criminally. That is horrific and must be stopped. We owe it to the country, and particularly those in communities affected by knife crime, to take knives off our streets and prosecute those who believe that using weapons is acceptable.

Unfortunately, since the election, knife-enabled crime recorded by the police has increased. In addition, we must acknowledge that, based on the data up to September 2025, 30% of all knife offences took place in London, despite London making up only 15% of the population. We need proposals that recognise the geographical nature of this crime, with so much of it occurring in particular areas. As such, it is welcome to see that the Government's plan includes the knife crime concentrations fund, to support surges in policing where knife crime is most prevalent. However, I am afraid that the Labour Government's proposals will not be sufficient without two critical foundations: powers for officers to stop and search individuals, and sufficient officer numbers to put this strategy into effect.

The hotspot policing outlined by the Government must be used in conjunction with effective stop and search, which the Government's strategy acknowledges is broadly supported by the public. That is why we have set out plans to triple the use of stop and search and to use section 60 suspicionless stop and search in high-crime areas. That should be supported by changes so that a single suspicion indicator is enough to merit a stop and search.

That would be supported by 10,000 new officers. In contrast, the Government have presided over a decrease in officer numbers, with 1,300 fewer officers during their time in power, with particularly steep falls in the Metropolitan police, who cover the area where this crime is most prevalent. In the Government's plan, they talk about the need for officers, but that is not reflected

[*Matt Vickers*]

in the overall figures, as police forces across the country highlighted during discussions on police funding. If we want to see the police help achieve these reductions and the Government meet their targets, there cannot be fewer officers.

In addition, under the Sentencing Act 2026, many of those convicted of knife crime will be eligible for release earlier than under previous rules. The strategy covers many important areas, but there are few references to sentencing perpetrators of knife crime for longer. It is pitiful that those convicted of knife crime offences who would previously have gone to prison could now avoid it. That is unsurprising, as it took extensive effort from Opposition Members and those in the other place to increase knife crime sentences in the Crime and Policing Bill. The Labour party repeatedly speaks strongly, but it fails to back this up with the necessary custodial sentences.

The Government's statement today and their strategy set out a number of important proposals and rightly recognise the importance of education and culture, building on work conducted by the previous Government on violence reduction units and the county lines programme. However, that must be supported by stronger enforcement, ensuring that those who commit these crimes are imprisoned with appropriate custodial sentences. Knife crime is truly horrific, and we owe it to everyone to give the police every power necessary to investigate and seize these weapons. I worry that without stronger enforcement, this plan will not be the significant moment the Government believe it will be.

Sarah Jones: I thank the shadow Minister for welcoming the target of halving knife crime, the content of the plan and the knife crime concentrations fund in particular. Where we can, we should try to work cross-party on tackling such heinous crimes.

The shadow Minister mentioned sentencing. It will always be the case that people found guilty of serious knife crime offences will go to prison—that is not changing. We are making a couple of changes that he would hopefully support. To give one example, currently around 1,000 children a year are found in possession of a knife, and no action whatsoever is taken to try to get them away from that activity—none whatsoever. We have changed the rules on that, so that every single child who is found in possession of a knife will be given a plan, which will ensure that they get the support and the interventions they need to move away from crime. If they do not adhere to those conditions, it will become a criminal matter if necessary. That is a big gap we are filling.

In the Crime and Policing Bill, which the House will debate this afternoon, we are introducing a new offence of knife possession with intent—currently, there are offences of possession of a knife, and possession involving a threat to life—and there will be a seven-year maximum sentence for that crime. I hope that that reassures the shadow Minister.

We could get into a debate about numbers, but I do not want to do that today, because we have done it many times before, and I am sure we will do it many more times. However, I reiterate that there are 12,000 officers in our country who are sitting behind desks. We do not think that is right. We want to get them out into our

communities. There has been an 18% increase in the number of police in our neighbourhoods in the last year. We want those officers to do the job that we want them to do, not waste time on bureaucracy, so we are investing hugely in artificial intelligence and new technology. That will free up the equivalent of 3,000 full-time officers—just by giving them the tech that they should already have had to help them do their job. We are pushing as hard as we can, not on the exact number of officers, but on outcomes.

I end by repeating a statistic that I am very pleased about, and that shows that we are moving in the right direction: knife crime is down 8% overall, and knife murders are down 27%. We are focusing on outcomes, not police numbers.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): On Sunday, there was a horrific attack in my constituency; a 16-year-old boy was fatally stabbed in Orton. My thoughts—and those of the House, I am sure—are with his family.

I welcome the Government's ambition to halve knife crime. How will that help to tackle the issue in Peterborough and across Cambridgeshire? What work is under way on understanding the root causes of why, in certain regions, knife crime is not following the national trend and decreasing, so that we can better address those root causes?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his question; of course, all our thoughts are with the family of his constituent who has lost his life. These things are always tragic, and I know that he will be involved in trying to help the community heal from such a difficult situation. I know that arrests have been made on suspicion of murder and other offences; I think four people have been arrested. That is good, but of course, nothing will bring back that young lad.

We have to understand where knife crime is happening and why, and we are investing a huge amount of funding in exactly that. Through our work, we are able to identify exactly where the knife-crime hotspots are across the country, and we are working with local partners and the police to ensure that we understand exactly why there are these hotspots. In some parts of the country, this is happening just after school, because, sadly, this is a crime that involves young people. Sometimes the night-time economy is driving knife crime, and sometimes it is other things. We are absolutely focused on the causes of knife crime, and on providing a lot of support to young people to try to bring them out of a life of crime, but also on understanding exactly what is going on in some areas. As my hon. Friend says, there will be some areas where knife crime is going up, and some where it is coming down. We need to understand that and address it.

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

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): The Liberal Democrats welcome the publication of the strategy, and I am particularly glad to note the involvement of the Ben Kinsella Trust in formulating it. The trust does remarkable work with young students and teachers to make sure that we take a holistic approach to knife crime, which is badly needed. That is particularly true of its chief executive officer, Patrick Green, who I had

the pleasure of meeting at Finsbury library last year. We Liberal Democrats have said time and again that we need a smarter approach to knife crime, not just to save lives but to improve them. Will the Minister commit to securing long-term funding for the measures outlined in the strategy? Without that guarantee, the strategy will be little more than warm words.

Secondly, will the Minister confirm whether the 13,000 new police officers in the neighbourhood teams that the Government claim to be deploying are actually a new resource, or is this an accounting trick, whereby existing officers are redeployed? The Minister may not want to talk about numbers, but they are particularly important in London; the Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Mark Rowley has said that it is increasingly difficult to keep Londoners safe with a shrinking force, and estimates suggest that there are 2,503 fewer police officers in London today than there were in May 2024. I am happy to be corrected on that number.

Finally, will the Minister explain why the Government continue to skirt around the edges of a meaningful public health approach, without adopting one outright? We know that knife crime is not just a policing issue; it is a public health crisis. If we are serious about tackling it as the epidemic that it is, we must treat it as one, and bring together every person who sees the warning signs: teachers, GPs, youth workers, social workers, sports coaches—trusted adults who know when something is going wrong—and, tragically, as we have read in the conclusions of the Southport inquiry report, parents too. Right now, all those groups are isolated and do not talk to each other. We need to break down the silo walls and build real partnerships across civil society. Until the Government recognise that and invest in a public health approach, our progress will be blunted.

Sarah Jones: I appreciate the Liberal Democrats welcoming the plan. I join the hon. Gentleman in praising the Ben Kinsella Trust and Patrick Green. Patrick has been brilliant throughout the development of the strategy, as have the members of the coalition that brought together a group of people, many of whom have lost loved ones in very difficult circumstances, to push for action to stop other people losing their loved ones. I pay tribute to all of them.

The funding for the plan will come from across Government, not just the Home Office. Home Office funding amounts to about £130 million—a substantial sum—but the Department for Culture, Media and Sport is leading on the Young Futures hubs, the Department for Education is leading on interventions in schools, and the Ministry of Justice is making a huge investment in the youth justice system, so there is a big cross-Government approach.

I have done a lot of work over the years on the public health approach. It is quite simple; it basically says that violence is catching. If people have violence in their life, they are more likely to be violent. Someone who was in a domestic abuse situation as a child is more likely to be violent; people who join a gang are more likely to become violent—it is relatively straightforward. The interventions that we are putting in place are designed to prevent those crimes and stop that violence spreading. That is why the figures on violence are coming down, and we are seeing the first shoots of success.

On the numbers, there has been a 0.6% drop overall in the number of police officers from March 2025 to September 2025—that is a very small drop. The key question is: what are our police officers doing? Having 12,000 officers behind desks is not right; they should be out in our communities. Obviously, some of them need to do jobs that do not involve being out on our streets, but we want our officers out on our streets. We have always said—we said it in our manifesto—that the 13,000 will be a mix of new officers, police community support officers and redeployed officers.

We are introducing new technology, so that we can free up the equivalent of 3,000 officers' time. It is much better for that 13,000 to be a mix of officers; it means that we have already been able to deliver 3,000, some of whom are already trained officers, so they know what they are doing. If we were just recruiting new people, there would be the challenge of new officers not having the experience that others have. We have always said that we would be taking a mixed approach. The point is that we are putting 13,000 police officers into our communities and neighbourhoods, which is what the public want. Those officers will help to tackle the epidemic of everyday crime, and knife crime too.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I thank the Minister for agreeing to meet me and members of the safer knives group, which brings together experts on the type of knives most commonly used in knife crime. Does she agree that restricting sales of pointed knives, and moving to rounded-tip versions for kitchen use, could limit the number and type of injuries caused, especially in domestic and impulsive violence, potentially reducing death and serious injuries?

Sarah Jones: I applaud the work that my hon. Friend has been doing with others, including Leanne Lucas, who was sadly at the horrendous event in Southport, and who has been campaigning on the issue since then. I have had the honour of meeting her several times to talk about this. My hon. Friend is right that ordinary kitchen knives are used extensively in domestic and impulsive violence. When it comes to the streets, there are a whole range of horrific knives that we are looking to reduce in number, ban and control through legislation, but the basic impulsive act of picking up a kitchen knife is also a significant crime. There is evidence that a knife attack would have less impact if the end of the knife was rounded, and we have worked with manufacturers and others who are introducing that kind of knife.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Where psychopaths are concerned, deterrence is unlikely to work, but I was interested to hear an expert from the Internet Watch Foundation, who was interviewed on Times Radio this morning, say that people who commune on the internet with those who supply them with knives could instantly bring together red flags and warn people, if they wanted to. Is it part of the Minister's strategy to try to arrange for that? As for others, am I right in thinking that a very high proportion of people who commit knife crimes are detected? If so, surely a campaign saying, "If you commit knife crime, you will almost certainly be caught" could act as a real deterrent to those capable of being deterred.

Sarah Jones: Yes, the right hon. Gentleman is right that a very high proportion of people who commit knife offences are detected and charged. How we influence people who may want to pick up a knife is an interesting and difficult question. We are investing a small amount of money in trialling some communication techniques. A lot of money has been spent on the violence against women and girls campaign, which many people will have seen; it tries to educate men on violence and how to behave. We are going to do some testing on which messages might work, and which might not, to try to target people who might pick up a knife.

The right hon. Gentleman's first question was about the sale of knives online, and whether retailers can detect issues that should be raised. The National Knife Crime Centre, which was launched a couple of weeks ago and has £1.7 million in Government funding, has a team of police officers who will investigate the sale of knives online. We are introducing legislation about buying knives in bulk; sadly, people buy, for example, 300 knives, and then sell them in their communities. Retailers will have an obligation to tell the police if people buy in bulk. We will be able to see the patterns and intervene at the right time.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): A family and my whole community have been left reeling, following the fatal stabbing of Jamie Collins, a 21-year-old student at the University of the West of England, last week in Filton. Jamie has been named by police today, following the arrest of another young man. I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House are with Jamie's loved ones, as are my thoughts, at this unimaginably difficult time. I have listened to the Minister's statement with interest. How will the new knife crime plan seek to reduce youth knife crime specifically, so that fewer families have to face the impossible, and so that we can ensure that young people have the safe and bright future that they deserve?

Sarah Jones: All our condolences go to Jamie's family at this incredibly difficult time. I know that the community in Filton will be reeling, and that my hon. Friend will play her role in bringing people together to come to terms with what has happened. It is catastrophic when someone loses their life at such a young age.

Through the action plan, which I commend—*[Interruption.]* I am not supposed to hold things up, am I? My point, in holding up the document, was to show that the action plan is substantial; it has a lot in it to ensure that young people do not get involved in crime in the first place and to tackle the challenge if they do. DCMS is leading on our Young Futures hubs: 50 youth centres across areas that are impacted particularly by knife crime. The hubs will bring together lots of different services for young people in one place so that they can be supported.

We are also doing more on interventions for young people if they are found to be in possession of a knife. We are backing the violence reduction units with £66 million, and they are doing a range of evidenced interventions to try to make sure that young people step away from crime. There is a whole plan of activities to get them out of crime and to prevent crime from happening in the first place, and I hope that my hon. Friend's community will see the effects.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I had the opportunity to go out with the local police in my constituency on an operation to combat youth crime. One thing I found most distressing was the liberal ownership and unthinking use of knives among teenagers, which I know the police in my constituency are desperate to sort out. Following the Government's consultation on knife sales, will the Minister reassure my constituents, the police and the public that the Government will put forward a knife licensing scheme, whereby all knife retailers, including online, bricks-and-mortar and private sellers, must be registered to sell any kind of knife in order to prevent attacks from taking place?

Sarah Jones: We are already putting in place a range of interventions through the Crime and Policing Bill—which is going through Parliament and which we are debating this afternoon—to strengthen age verification for knives, and to ensure that online companies have a duty to remove violent content and knife sale content, and are doing more to do so. As the hon. Lady says, we have also consulted on whether we should have a licensing scheme. We are looking through that at the moment and deciding where we go. The campaign has been led by Pooja Kanda, the mother of Ronan Kanda, who died; she has been campaigning on this issue ever since. We are certainly very sympathetic, but we are the stage of looking at the consultation and seeing what a workable licensing scheme would look like.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): If we want to end the scourge of knife crime, we have to tackle supply, demand, enforcement, education and culture. Oldham has seen some of Greater Manchester's highest numbers of section 60 stop-and-search areas, and there is often a clear pattern of gang activity, resulting in children carrying knives and other weapons. Petty postcode wars can escalate from online bullying to on-street attacks with serious injury and loss of life. I welcome the announcement of the Young Futures hubs, but given the overwhelming evidence of youth knife crime in Oldham and the cross-border activity in neighbouring Manchester, which has been selected for one of the new hubs, can Oldham be urgently considered as the programme rolls out?

Sarah Jones: We are working with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport on where the Young Futures hubs will be, but they will be in the areas most affected by knife crime. There is a whole range of other interventions, which I hope will support my hon. Friend's community to bring down knife crime overall. It will not just be the Young Futures hubs; many more interventions in our strategy are also designed to support. Greater Manchester has a big investment in addressing county lines, with which he will probably be very familiar. That has been incredibly successful and has got more successful every year that it has been in play. We are funding that this year. Hundreds of knives are being taken off our streets, and thousands of young children are being safeguarded as a result.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): It was around this time last year that I led the Backbench Business debate in the Chamber on preventing knife crime among children and young people, so I welcome the measures

announced by the Minister and hope that they have a huge impact, reducing the use of knives by young people. I want to touch on two points in her announcement.

When it comes to banning zombie knives, we know that they and ninja swords account for less than 4% of all fatal stabbings. Screwdrivers account for more fatal stabbings, and household kitchen knives account for over half of all those stabbings. Given how easily accessible they are, do the Government have any steps in place? I appreciate that stopping access to kitchen knives is an impossible task, given that everybody in this Chamber has them at home, but are the Government considering any measures to dissuade people from using kitchen knives in this way? Furthermore, we know that social media has a huge influence on children, creating the fear that leads to them carrying a knife. Does the Minister have any steps to address that?

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming the strategy and for the work he has done. He is absolutely right: people commit knife crime offences with all different kinds of knives. Some of the knives that have been banned have a particularly pernicious impact, given the damage they do to people's bodies. We are putting in place a whole raft of interventions to ensure there is more control over the sale of all types of knives. These includes the age verification checks in the Crime and Policing Bill, and interventions on the sale of knives generally: making sure that young people are not buying knives, and putting in place a duty on companies to report if people buy in bulk. My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) also mentioned the work that campaigners are doing on the design of knives to stop them being so impactful.

The hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) is absolutely right about social media. In the Bill, we are putting more onus on social media companies to do more, with a duty to report the sale of knives that are illegal. There is a lot more to be done with regard to very serious violent content online. This Government—including the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones)—have done a lot of work on this issue and are doing a huge amount to address porn, child sexual exploitation and violence against women and girls, but there is another piece of work to be done with the companies to ensure that all violent content is removed.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): My family sadly knows the devastating consequences of knife crime. As the Government launch their welcome action plan today, I think of my cousin David Charlton, who was killed with a knife in 2012. Reducing knife crime is a moral imperative, so that there are fewer families like David's or indeed like the family of Connor Brown, whose bereaved parents have done excellent work in tackling knife crime in Sunderland and the north-east and were recently recognised with MBEs for that work. Their approach has focused on education, so will the Minister say a little more about the plan's commitment to update the curriculum from September so that every child receives knife violence prevention education in school? Will she support the involvement of bereaved families where they want to be part of the delivery of that curriculum?

Sarah Jones: May I say how sorry I am to hear about the death of my hon. Friend's relative? What a tragedy that is, not just for the immediate family, but for the wider communities in which people live.

Education is key, and I have worked very hard on this raft of measures with the Department for Education. As my hon. Friend says, there is new guidance to schools on violence prevention, which will help to educate young people. Just a couple of weeks ago, I was with a bereaved parent who is going into schools and helping to teach young people about the reality of knife crime and what happens. That is a very important part of the picture. We are targeting in particular 250 schools in areas where there are very high concentrations of knife crime; we will be giving them more support so that they can access the services they need. We are very joined up with the Department for Education on this action plan.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Will the Minister speak to Sadiq Khan and ask him to get a grip on the knife crime epidemic that is plaguing London? Can we increase the stop-and-search powers of the Met police so that they can actually do their job and provide the enforcement that people across London are asking for? My husband was attacked by someone with a knife while he was caring for his mother-in-law, and one of our wonderful members of staff in the Tea Room was attacked in Brixton by someone with a knife just last week. This is a problem across London. My residents want to feel safe. Will the Minister do something to stop the knife crime epidemic that is plaguing London?

Sarah Jones: Can I start by saying that I am very sorry that somebody from the Tea Room was attacked last week? I had not been aware of that, and I will find out more about it. I am also very sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's husband.

The growing narrative around London is just wrong. It has been debunked by lots of sensible people in lots of ways, so I will not go into all the details, but we know that the Mayor of London has invested more in policing than at any time before. Stop and search is an important tool, and the Mayor of London and the police in London use it; across the country, there are about 14,000 searches per year where a weapon is found, which is a high number. Stop and search is used effectively, and its use actually went down every year when Boris Johnson was Mayor of London. It is better to use effective stop and search, which is what we are doing—it is an important tool. Only last week, the Mayor of London announced that he is going to be opening a youth club in every single London borough, which will help to make sure that young people have somewhere to go and something to do. I hope the hon. Lady welcomes that.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I welcome the serious action that this Government are taking to tackle knife crime. My constituent Tracy set up Changes Are Made following the fatal stabbing of her grandson Cameron. Tracy's ambition is to get a youth hub set up in our local area, and she has already spoken to almost 1,000 young people in schools across Bournemouth and Poole. Some 62% of those young people have said that better education is the best way to prevent knife crime, so can the Minister please assure me that equipping

[Jessica Toale]

young people with the knowledge they need is part of our strategy, and that areas such as my constituency will be part of our plan for support?

Sarah Jones: I assure my hon. Friend that every part of the country, including Bournemouth, will be part of our action plan. We are making interventions across the whole country, as well as very targeted interventions where knife crime is particularly acute. I have already outlined our interventions in schools, whether that is support for the schools where the problem is most acute, or the overall interventions to make sure schools are fulfilling new guidance on violence prevention. Lots of brilliant people—my hon. Friend spoke about Tracy—are going into our schools and sending really powerful messages to our young people. I absolutely support that work, and a lot of our violence reduction units provide funding for those kinds of interventions.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): While I of course welcome the statement and any attempt to reduce and tackle knife crime, does the Minister not agree that without saturation stop and search, and without immediate custody of anyone found in possession of a knife without a valid reason, the rest is just white noise?

Sarah Jones: I welcome the hon. Lady's welcoming of the statement—it is appreciated.

Stop and search is a really important tool. I am not entirely sure what “saturation stop and search” is, but if we stopped and searched everybody, all our police would spend all their time stopping and searching people to no particular end. Stop and search has to be evidence-based and targeted, and that is what the police are doing. We support that. We want more intelligence-led stop and search. It is a good thing, but anyone who thinks that it is the only answer misunderstands the problem. We have to prevent crime from happening in the first place, as well as to tackle the perpetrators who are already involved and make sure we address reoffending. Doing one intervention without all the rest is not going to work, which is why our action plan involves multiple Government Departments, lots of funding, and lots of support from the Prime Minister down.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): Bedfordshire police welcomes the Government's plan to refer all child knife possession cases to youth justice services, building on its work with the NHS, schools, charities and community groups to discourage under-16s from carrying knives. Can the Minister outline how the new national co-ordination unit will crack down on illegal online knife sales in order to strengthen such local partnerships, which are working to prevent young people from having knives in the first place?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and pay tribute to the police in Bedfordshire, who I know are doing a really good job.

Among all the agencies he talked about, the NHS has a really important role to play. Of course, we put youth workers into most of our A&Es, so that if a young person who has been stabbed comes in, we have some chance of intervening with them to get them out of the cycle of violence they are involved in. The brilliant

investigative police officers at the new National Knife Crime Centre will be investigating the sale of knives online. That will be a focused piece of policing work, and the Government are providing £1.7 million for it. Those officers will look at the sale of knives online and go after the people who are selling them illegally. Increasingly, we are seeing young people in the grey market buying knives in bulk and selling them to each other. We are going to make that very difficult for people to do, but where it does happen—where knives are coming in from countries that they should not be coming from, where age verification checks are not being done, and where companies are making money in a way that is not legal—we will come down on them like a ton of bricks.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Sadly, we have had several stabbings in Yeovil, which has led to growing local anxiety. My constituents keep telling me that they want more visible local policing, but south Somerset is so often overlooked that locals have all but given up on change. They are worried that it is not going to happen, so can the Minister tell my constituents when they will see proper funding for more visible community policing and accessible youth services in rural south Somerset?

Sarah Jones: I want to reassure the hon. Member's constituents in Yeovil that I understand their concern. Neighbourhood policing has been decimated over recent years, which has had a real impact. It is why we have seen shocking rises in things like shop theft and antisocial behaviour—the things that have not been tackled because the police were not physically present on our streets. We are putting that right. We have already put 3,000 more police on our streets in our neighbourhoods—an 18% rise from what we inherited when we entered government—and we will continue to do so. We believe that the right place for our police officers and PCSOs is out on our streets, making sure they are tackling the epidemic of everyday crime, and that is what we will be doing.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement, and welcome the Government's plan to halve knife crime in a decade. In my constituency we have seen far too many lives taken as a result of knife crime—indeed, just last month, another young life was lost when a 25-year-old was killed. As such, it is really important that the Government are seeking to tackle the root causes, investing in youth services as well as preventive services. Already in my constituency, though, we have some fantastic organisations doing incredible work, such as Carney's Community. The Minister's predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), agreed to visit Carney's to see some of the work it is doing and how it is seeking to deter young people from a life of violence and crime. Will the Minister honour that commitment and join me in a visit to that organisation in my constituency?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her question—how sorry I am that a 25-year-old lost their life recently. My constituency and that of my hon. Friend are not too far away from each other, and we have faced similar challenges. Of course, I am very happy to fulfil any commitment that my predecessor made, and I would very much like to see what is happening in my hon. Friend's constituency.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank the Minister for her statement and welcome the Government's plan to halve knife crime in a decade. Unfortunately, though, knife crime is not limited to London or city centres; in Dewsbury and Batley, knife crime is higher than the national average, and violent crime—which includes knife crime—makes up the largest share of reported crimes. In just the past few weeks in my constituency, we have seen a number of deeply concerning incidents, including reports of a machete being used in a street fight on 10 April, a 15-year-old boy being stabbed the same day, and a knife-related assault in the town centre earlier that week. These are not isolated incidents; they are a worrying pattern that is causing real fear. Will the Minister set out what immediate, targeted action her Department is or will be taking in areas experiencing clusters of knife crime, such as Dewsbury and Batley, and how quickly residents will be able to see a tangible, positive impact?

Sarah Jones: Our knife crime concentrations fund of £26 million will be targeted at areas where there is a high concentration of knife crime. It is quite extraordinary: from the state-of-the-art mapping on police-recorded knife crime that we have done, we can see that all of our knife crime happens in less than 2.5% of England and Wales, so targeting resources at those areas is obviously the right thing to do. That does not mean that we do not also have to worry about other areas outside that 2.5%, which is why we are investing in neighbourhood policing and supporting our children across the country through interventions in schools. It is why we are funding things like efforts to tackle county lines, which impact the whole of the country even if they start in cities. We are making sure that we are targeting all parts of the country while also using the bulk of our resources where the highest numbers of crimes happen.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I encourage Members to ask short questions. We have important business on crime and policing to follow, which I am sure Members will want to get through.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I welcome the publication of this strategy, and I pay tribute to the Minister for her strong commitment over many years to this area of policy and the depth of her thinking on it. In my constituency, we have seen far too many horrific tragedies. Out of those tragedies, however, has come some truly exceptional work in response from the community and from our grassroots youth-led organisations, in providing services that support young people. Those services provide positive opportunities for young people, help the community to come to terms with the trauma they have experienced and set young people back on a positive track. However, those organisations tell me that they struggle to access long-term sustainable funding. What is the Minister doing as part of this strategy to ensure that our youth organisations can keep the lights on and do their important work as part of the infrastructure of services that we need to tackle this problem?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend and I take the same approach, and knife crime is such an important issue in our constituencies. It is front and centre of everything

that we do and think about. She is right to say that from tragedies come exceptional people doing exceptional things, and those people need support. She is also right to ask the question about long-term sustainable funding. The funding on youth justice interventions is long-term, and our local authorities have now got long-term funding, too. The funding for our violence reduction units has been for just this year, but I very much hear the call that long-term funding helps those organisations to plan much better for the future.

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I welcome the Minister's statement, and I send my deepest sympathy to the families of everyone who has been affected, especially the family of Khaleed Oladipo, a 20-year-old young man who was stabbed in my constituency just a few weeks ago and sadly lost his life. I also pay tribute to grassroots organisations and individuals with street experience, such as Ditch the Knife, for the vital work that they do. I am glad that the Minister is aware of the work being done by De Montfort University on round-bladed knives, because in 2025 alone 95 lives were lost to kitchen knives. Will she commit to ensuring that grassroots organisation and those with real-life street experience are empowered to play a greater role in delivering lifesaving work?

Sarah Jones: I express my condolences over the death of the man in the hon. Member's constituency. Grassroots organisations are incredibly important and we have done a lot of work, as have the violence reduction units, in making sure that things are evidence-based, so that we know they are having an impact and are working. The Youth Endowment Fund has done a whole raft of work looking at what does and does not work, so that we know that and fund it appropriately. I hope that he can be reassured that we will continue to support, through violence reduction units and other vehicles, those local grassroots organisations to make sure that they are having the impact we need them to have.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's comments, but she will know that youth charities have described knife crime as a public health issue linked to cuts in youth services. Will she therefore outline how this strategy addresses those structural drivers in areas that will not receive one of the 50 Young Futures hubs, including access to youth provision, mental health support and family services? Will she meet me to discuss how the brilliant Salford Youth Zone can play its part in the Government's strategy and receive the additional resources that it needs to deliver the Government's plans?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The decimation of our youth services that we saw over the past 15 or so years, because they are not a statutory function for local authorities, has been catastrophic. We all know the impact of that. We are rebuilding infrastructure that has been torn away, and that is a challenge. As she says, we are introducing 50 youth hubs. The Mayor of London announced a youth centre for every borough in London, and other mayors across the country are doing what they can with their funding to make sure we are putting these services back. There is a huge push in the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care to make sure that we have got people

[Sarah Jones]

supporting our kids' mental health in schools. There is a whole raft of interventions, but I am happy to talk to her about what Salford youth club is doing.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): In Luton South and South Bedfordshire, we know all too well the devastating impact of knife crime, so I welcome our Government's ambitious plan to halve it over the next decade, and in particular the emphasis on supporting young people and youth services. The Luton Youth Partnership Service is doing excellent targeted early-intervention work locally. Will the Government collaborate with existing programmes that focus on multi-agency partnerships to ensure that best practice is built on and expanded?

Sarah Jones: I am interested in what the Luton Youth Partnership Service is doing, and perhaps my hon. Friend and I can have a chat about that at some point. We are not trying to reinvent the wheel, but rather support the organisations that already exist. There are some gaps that we are trying to fill. For example, we are running a whole range of pilots across the country where we are intervening with young people who have been arrested but not charged; a lot of those people slipped through the net. We are doing a lot of work in that space, but we do not want to reinvent what is already working. I am happy to talk to my hon. Friend more about her partnership.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the Minister, like me, has had conversations with a parent who has lost a loved one. As an MP, they break your heart. I think particularly today of the mother of Josh McKay, who was murdered in my constituency a few years ago. He was a young man with his whole life ahead of him and a young family. I also thank the Minister for her open acknowledgment of the value of voluntary and community groups such as Street Fathers, Project Zero, Spark2Life and Break Tha Cycle, which do fantastic work in my community with our young people. May I press her on something? She talks powerfully about the importance of making school a safe place, but she will know of the concerns many of us have about the unilateral decision to withdraw school safety officers in my constituency. Headteachers tried to raise that concern. What confidence can she give us that those officers will return? They were such an important part of our fabric of supporting our young people to be safe.

Sarah Jones: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that she does in her constituency, and I send my condolences to Josh's family, who will still be reeling after their loss. I agree with her that organisations such as Break Tha Cycle and Street Fathers do incredibly important work that we need to support. The target from this Government is that we should have a massive increase in our neighbourhood police officers, and we expect those officers to have a role going into schools and building relationships. We know that those relationships can be powerful. With those neighbourhood officers, we are trying to have consistency and to professionalise the neighbourhood route, so that people want to stay in it, rather than moving on up through the ranks and

moving away from it. We want to have some continuity. We are also working to ensure that they are not abstracted, which is the other challenge that we have, particularly in large cities. When we have our proper cohort of neighbourhood officers, those people can be involved in their local schools, as we would expect them to be.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her tireless work and campaigning on this issue, both in this place and in our community of Croydon. I know that this moral mission is personal to her, but given her experience, does she agree that tackling knife crime requires a whole-system approach bringing together policing, schools, health and communities? Can she outline how this plan strengthens the partnerships at a local level in communities like ours in Croydon?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her kind words, and I know that we tackle this issue together in Croydon. The point of this package of interventions is not just to stop kids getting involved in crime, but to make sure that we have got the right justice system and the right policing system, while stopping repeat offenders. A whole raft of interventions will directly impact on Croydon, which has a really good violence reduction unit that is working hard, and we want to support all the local organisations there. Our increase in neighbourhood policing will also significantly help. In Croydon, we also have live facial recognition, too, which is an interesting and powerful intervention in tackling crime. We are consulting at the moment on its legal basis.

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): I welcome the Labour Government's focus on knife crime. One courageous family in my constituency lost their beloved boy, Kory, who was stabbed to death by a 13-year-old boy. Kory's family and I have asked the Scottish Government and Glasgow city council to confirm that the council has thoroughly reviewed all their dealings with the 13-year-old child convicted of killing Kory. That review is essential so that lessons are learned to prevent future tragedies. However, it is also essential to ensure that the rehabilitation of the child convicted of killing Kory is underpinned by a thorough understanding of that child's background. The Scottish Government and Glasgow city council absolutely refuse to confirm that a thorough case review has taken place. Does the Minister agree that when children commit serious crimes, it is essential that thorough case reviews are carried out?

Sarah Jones: What a horrific thing it is that has happened in my hon. Friend's community—the murder of a child by a 13-year-old child. Of course we need to understand what has happened. I completely agree with my hon. Friend about the need to ensure that we always learn the lessons and that proper reviews are in place, and the framework is there to do that. While responsibility sits with the Scottish Government and local partners in this case, I cannot but agree wholeheartedly with what my hon. Friend has said.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Derby is a city that unites to tackle the toughest challenges. When more co-ordination has been needed in relation to knife crime involving young people, school leaders, the council and Derbyshire constabulary have been around the table to strengthen that joined-up response locally. Local

organisations such as Safe and Sound also do crucial work with our young people. Does the Minister agree that tackling knife crime requires a partnership response that brings together communities, the police, schools and health authorities, and can she say a little about how the Government's plan will strengthen those local partnerships?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she is doing in bringing together local organisations to help ensure that we are tackling these issues. A raft of interventions in the plan will help local organisations to do the work that needs to be done, and we are introducing the biggest police reform in 200 years, which involves work relating to prevention and how community safety partnerships work locally. We have committed ourselves to reviewing that whole landscape to ensure that rather than people duplicating work, sitting in different meetings and doing different things, everyone is coming together with a single plan to tackle violence.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): Like many other Members on both sides of the House, I am often struck by the courage and bravery of bereaved families who have lost loved ones to knife crime. Last year I spoke to a father who had lost his son, and who is dedicated to improving life and seeing positive change in other communities to ensure that no one else suffers the grief that he has suffered. How best can he and others like him play their part in delivering this action plan?

Sarah Jones: I never cease to be amazed by how incredibly resilient people are in their ability to suffer such loss and then come forward and campaign to ensure that it does not happen again. There are a number of different ways in which people can get involved—for instance, through the work of violence reduction units and local violence reduction plans. I am sure I can give my hon. Friend a list of organisations with which her constituent could potentially get involved. We need as many people as possible to help in this regard, because what is needed is a community-led and community-driven response.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I regularly raise the need for more resources for frontline policing in Cleveland. We have a small population but high deprivation, and the police funding formula does not take account of the severity of crime in our region—including knife crime, the prevalence of which is among the highest in the country. I welcome the 48 new police personnel who have begun neighbourhood roles over the last year, but what more can we do to get more resources to the frontline and make our streets safe again?

Sarah Jones: Cleveland police is one of the forces that we talk to regularly, because, as my hon. Friend says, the current police funding formula is not fit for purpose. It is very old, and it needs reform. We are reforming the whole structure of policing, and as part of that we will review the formula to bring it up to date and make it fit for purpose. Although I have no answer for my hon. Friend now, the question of the formula bears heavily on my mind, and we are doing a great deal of work on it in the Department.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I welcome the 8% reduction in knife crime and the increase in neighbourhood policing, which has seen a named officer in every ward of Hartlepool, but the Minister is right to say—and my constituents would agree—that it is not enough. Frontline officers tell me that they are taken off the street for far too long because they have to travel to Middlesbrough owing to the closure of our custody suite by the Conservative party. Given that the funding formula is broken and unfairly punishes Cleveland, can the Minister commit herself to reviewing it so that we can receive the funding we need to reopen that custody suite for my town?

Sarah Jones: I have spoken to forces in areas across the country where the distance that has to be travelled just to get to a custody suite is a disincentive to arrests, which is absolutely not the approach that we want to see. The challenges that we face are great, but we are reviewing the funding formula and will be establishing a fairer formula. The police estate has not received the investment that it should have received for a very long time. Our priority is to get police out into our communities, but we need to look at the estate as well.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): In Derby and Derbyshire, 71% of habitual knife carriers are aged 25 or under. Does the Minister agree that, in Derby and throughout the country, we need to provide a tailored support package so that we can break the cycle of young people's involvement in knife crime and keep our communities safe?

Sarah Jones: Knife crime is horrific in all its forms, but there is something uniquely horrific about young people picking up knives and using them against other young people. There is a raft of interventions that we need to make and we are doing that through our action plan, but while the progress that we have seen so far is to be welcomed, it is not enough. Only when we reach our target and fulfil our ambition of halving knife crime will we know that we are actually making a difference and giving a future to those young people.

Point of Order

2.36 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was told by a journalist today that the members of the shadow Cabinet had visited my constituency this morning. I understand that they may have gone there to clean some graffiti off a privately owned wall, but while I am grateful for their efforts, I believe they are mistaken if they think that this altruistic act will in any way make up for the swingeing cuts in the budgets of my local authorities that took place on their watch. I received notifications from only two Conservative Members that they were visiting my constituency, and one of them was given after the event. May I seek your advice, Madam Deputy Speaker, on how I can find out exactly which members of the Shadow Cabinet visited my constituency this morning without following the required protocol of notifying me in advance of their visit?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for her point of order. Perhaps it will be instructive for all Members if I refer to the book of courtesies of the House, point 44 of which states very clearly:

“Members must inform colleagues in advance whenever: ... A Member intends to visit another colleague’s constituency (except for purely private purposes).

All reasonable efforts should be taken to notify the other Member and failure to do so is rightly regarded by colleagues as very discourteous.”

I am sure that the Opposition Whips have heard the hon. Lady’s point of order, and will be drawing it to the attention of the shadow Cabinet.

Type 1 Diabetes Screening (Children)

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

2.38 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision for a national programme of screening for type 1 diabetes in children; and for connected purposes.

We have all just returned from the Easter recess, and I am sure that, given the number of chocolate eggs that have been consumed, many people will have been told, “Not too much chocolate, or you will get diabetes.” While they are made in jest, comments of that kind reinforce the problem caused by the misunderstanding of diabetes. About 350,000 people in the UK—including me—currently live with type 1 diabetes, and 85% of type 1 diagnoses occur in people, such as me, with no known family connection with it.

Let us take a step back. What is type 1 diabetes? It is an autoimmune condition whereby one’s body, mainly one’s pancreas, no longer makes insulin. Without insulin, the body cannot use glucose for food and thus for energy. When people with type 1 eat, the glucose from their food stays in their bloodstream, but then their body seeks to burn energy and finds an alternative source, namely muscle or fat. The by-products of that are ketones, which are acidic and poison the body. Left untreated, people can enter a state of DKA—diabetic ketoacidosis—which can prove fatal, and sadly has done so in some cases. A patient has done nothing to cause type 1; likewise, there is no cure, just management and treatment of the condition. It is essential that we all recognise the signs of type 1. Although the four Ts—thirst, toilet, tiredness and thinning—are a crucial tool, ultimately these are signs that the condition has progressed and is under way.

There are three distinct stages to the development of type 1, but before I run through them, I will pivot to explain antibodies and autoantibodies, because they are essential to understanding the development of type 1. Antibodies are a protein that a person’s immune system produces when it detects a threat. The problem here is that, with type 1, an individual’s immune system makes these antibodies in response not to a threat, but to their own insulin-producing beta cells. These are called islet autoantibodies, and scientists can test for them to see if a person has early-stage type 1.

Let us go back to the three stages. Stage 1 is where there are two or more autoantibodies present, but with normal blood glucose levels. In stage 2, multiple autoantibodies are present and blood glucose levels are abnormal, but there are no symptoms. Finally, in stage 3, known as persistent islet autoimmunity, blood glucose is elevated and the person is typically symptomatic. That means high blood sugars, thirstiness, urinating more frequently, unexplained weight loss, tiredness and blurred vision. This is the stage at which most people are diagnosed as having type 1.

Although it is difficult to give a precise number, a study found that about 38% of those newly diagnosed between 2015 to 2020 were in a state of diabetic ketoacidosis, and 44% of them were under five years old. No one

should underestimate how traumatic it is to be diagnosed, let alone when someone is in a state of DKA, which requires hospitalisation and emergency treatment. A US study found that being diagnosed while presenting with DKA was associated with significantly greater use of health services and potentially greater healthcare costs in the long term.

Armed with that knowledge, it is clear that we should aim to identify the condition before people become symptomatic in stage 3. That would mean that individuals are given an opportunity to get on to a trial to delay the disease, which is a point I will come back to. Furthermore, early identification gives families the time to prepare emotionally and learn how to manage the condition—hence my call today for a national screening programme for children.

Currently, there is no comprehensive NHS screening to identify individuals in the early stages of type 1, despite compelling evidence for it. International programmes, such as those in Germany, Italy, Australia and the US, demonstrate that comprehensive screening, paired with public awareness campaigns and psychological support, can successfully reduce DKA rates and improve long-term health outcomes. As I mentioned, there is also a pipeline of disease-modifying drugs emerging, which means that future generations identified as having markers for type 1 diabetes will be able to delay its development. Teplizumab—a tricky name to say—is one such drug that can, in at least half of people, delay the onset of diabetes by about two to three years. Designed for individuals aged eight years and over who have stage 2 type 1, it works by disabling the immune cells that attack the pancreas and destroy the insulin-producing beta cells, allowing the body to maintain its own insulin production for longer, so early identification is really important.

So what next? Well, adoption of any screening programme requires the Wilson and Jungner criteria, set in 1968, to be met. They look at the viability, effectiveness and appropriateness of any screening programme. Type 1 meets some of those because it is an important health problem, it has a recognised latent or early symptomatic stage, and the development of the condition is adequately understood, but further work is required to meet them all. For example, the target population for screening has not yet been clearly defined, but I hope it will be soon.

Currently, we are looking at the appropriate ages at which to carry out the testing. Although there are numerous opportunities for screening throughout a person's lifetime, the early years are critical, given the possibility of becoming symptomatic in childhood. If we were to screen children at the age of three to four, we might catch 40% of cases. However, three periods of testing between the ages of two to four, six to eight and 10 to 15 would increase the number of childhood type 1 cases caught to around 80%, which would ultimately improve the efficacy of the screening and help meet the criteria.

While a final determination is being made on the correct ages at which to screen children, we are working on other questions. How can we embed this into clinical care and ensure that the follow-up programme is successful, as it may go on for years? Once we are aware of a child presenting—perhaps in stage 1 or stage 2—how do we keep in contact? If they test at the age of three, how do we make sure that they come back for the repeat tests?

How do we make it clear that one negative test does not mean that someone is free of type 1? For those for whom it is coming, how do we make sure that they have the support and training to be ready?

We also have to firmly establish a clear balance between the benefits and the harms. I have already described some of the benefits, which include reducing DKA diagnosis and the long-term benefits that follow. On harm, we have to think about the behavioural and anxiety changes, because we need to ensure that psychological support is available for patients who know that a condition is coming. Sometimes ignorance is bliss, and living with knowledge of an impending condition could be overwhelming, but knowing the signs and preparing is vital. We need to make sure that we can offer treatments that work for all, and particularly for younger people.

There is clearly some interest in introducing a screening programme in the UK, because the ELSA study, which is funded by Diabetes UK and Breakthrough T1D, offers children aged two to 17 a simple finger-prick blood test to determine their risk of developing type 1. The study—I emphasise that it is a study—is currently open to families in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, with over 20,000 children having been screened so far, but it is really important that we move from studies to a national screening programme. At the moment, ELSA is available only for the early adopters—those who come forward to seek screening—which explains why nearly 40% of the participants are relatives of people with type 1. We need to make sure that any screening system is universal, so that we have a fair application that does not discriminate based on background, wealth or ethnicity.

For all the reasons I have set out, I am calling for a national screening programme. Although type 1 is an unpredictable and relentless condition to live with, I hope that within the next few years we can make the diagnosis of this condition far less traumatic, and give families and patients the skills and tools to live with type 1. I hope that one day we can cure this condition. Until then, if we can diagnose earlier and delay the onset to allow more care-free childhood years, we might just make people's journey with type 1 that little bit better.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Sarah Bool, Tom Gordon, Josh Newbury, Charlie Dewhirst, Mr Andrew Snowdon, Rebecca Smith and Jim Shannon present the Bill.

Sarah Bool accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 8 May, and to be printed (Bill 417).

CRIME AND POLICING BILL (MONEY)

King's recommendation signified.

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Crime and Policing Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State, and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under or by virtue of any other Act out of money so provided.—
(Sarah Jones.)

**CRIME AND POLICING BILL
(WAYS AND MEANS)***Resolved,*

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Crime and Policing Bill, it is expedient to authorise the charging of fees under or by virtue of the Act.—(*Sarah Jones.*)

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As you know, I have tabled an amendment to Lords amendment 312 seeking to disagree with their lordships. This House will not be given the opportunity today to vote on this singular matter, notwithstanding that it does—in my view and that of many thousands of people watching our proceedings—represent a dangerous erosion of civil liberties, including those under article 9 on freedom of thought and religion, article 10 on freedom of expression and article 11 on freedom of assembly and the right to protest, which this Parliament has long since immortalised in our celebrations of the cumulative and persistent protests of the suffragettes and the anti-apartheid movement, marked by the plaque in honour of Nelson Mandela in Westminster Hall.

If the Government were confident of their amendment, they would put it to a vote, but in a move that in my view is disrespectful of this House, they have decided to wrap up such a hugely significant constitutional matter among their other, excellent, amendments, which this House will doubtless wish to prevail. Madam Deputy Speaker, I seek your advice as to how I may secure a binding, singular vote on Lords amendment 312, as this key constitutional measure, if not challenged, will inevitably erode and restrict the right to peaceful protest.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order, and indeed for giving notice of it. The Government's programme motion, which the House is about to consider, will establish the time available for today's debate and the order in which the Lords amendments are to be considered. If Members

are not content with the way the Bill has been programmed, it would be for them to express that—for example, by disagreeing to the programme motion. If the programme motion is agreed to by this House, as Chair all I can advise him is that, under the terms of Standing Order No. 83F, a vote on his motion seeking to disagree with Lords amendment 312 would be possible only if it is reached before 7 pm.

CRIME AND POLICING BILL

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Crime and Policing Bill for the purpose of supplementing the Order of 10 March 2025 (Crime and Policing Bill: Programme), as varied by the Order of 17 June 2025 (Crime and Policing Bill: Programme (No. 2)):

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(1) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at 7.00pm at today's sitting.

(2) The Lords Amendments shall be considered in the following order: 263, 361, 2, 6, 10 to 12, 15, 256 to 260, 264, 265, 311, 333, 334, 339, 342, 357, 359, 360, 368 to 372, 439, 505, 1, 3 to 5, 7 to 9, 13, 14, 16 to 255, 261, 262, 266 to 310, 312 to 332, 335 to 338, 340, 341, 343 to 356, 358, 362 to 367, 373 to 438, 440 to 504 and 506 to 532.

Subsequent stages

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

(4) Proceedings on the first of any further Messages from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion three hours after their commencement.

(5) Proceedings on any subsequent Message from the Lords shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement.—(*Sarah Jones.*)

Question agreed to.

Crime and Policing Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I must draw the House's attention to the fact that Lords amendments 12, 256, 260, 264, 335, 361, 366, 367 and 369 engage the Commons' financial privilege. If any of those Lords amendments are agreed to, I will cause the customary entry waiving the Commons' financial privilege to be entered in the *Journal*.

2.53 pm

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): I beg to move amendment (a) to Lords amendment 263.

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

Lords amendment 263, and Government amendments (b) to (g) to Lords amendment 263.

Lords amendment 361, and Government amendments (a) to (e) to Lords amendment 361.

Lords amendment 2, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendments (a) to (c) in lieu of Lords amendment 2.

Lords amendment 6, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 10, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu of Lords amendment 10.

Lords amendment 11, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 12, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 15, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 15.

Lords amendments 256 and 257, Government motions to disagree, and Government amendments (a) and (b) in lieu of Lords amendments 256 and 257.

Lords amendment 258, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 258.

Lords amendments 259 and 260, Government motions to disagree, and Government amendments (a) to (d) in lieu of Lords amendments 259 and 260.

Lords amendment 264, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendments (a) to (f) in lieu of Lords amendment 264.

Lords amendment 265, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendments (a) to (c) in lieu of Lords amendment 265.

Lords amendment 311, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 333, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 333.

Lords amendment 334, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 339, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 342, Government motion to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 342.

Lords amendment 357, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 359, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendments 360 and 368 to 372, Government motions to disagree, and Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendments 360 and 368 to 372.

Lords amendment 439, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 505, and Government motion to disagree.

Lords amendments 1, 3 to 5, 7 to 9, 13, 14, 16 to 255, 261, 262 and 266 to 299.

Lords amendment 300, and motion to disagree.

Lords amendment 301, and motion to disagree.

Lords amendments 302 to 310.

Lords amendment 312, and motion to disagree.

Lords amendments 313 to 332, 335 to 338, 340, 341, 343 to 356, 358, 362 to 367, 373 to 438, 440 to 504 and 506 to 532.

Sarah Jones: I am delighted to see the return of this Bill—the largest criminal justice Bill in a generation—to this House. The Bill will support the Government's mission to halve knife crime and violence against women and girls in a decade, and give our police and law enforcement agencies the tools they need to tackle antisocial behaviour, sexual violence, terrorism and online harms. The amendments made in the House of Lords support these aims.

Given the number of Lords amendments, I will focus my remarks on the Government amendments made in response to commitments given on Report in the Commons last June by my predecessor as Policing Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson)—she was sitting on the Front Bench earlier—before outlining the Government's response to the 19 non-Government amendments added in the other place.

First, my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) rightly raised concerns about the depiction of strangulation and suffocation in pornography, an issue which was also highlighted by Baroness Bertin's independent pornography review. As set out in our violence against women and girls strategy last December, the Government have announced our intention to criminalise the possession and publication of pornographic images that depict strangulation and suffocation, and Lords amendments 261 and 262 give effect to that commitment.

Secondly, my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) rightly pressed the Government on when we would deliver our manifesto commitment to make all existing strands of hate crime an aggravated offence. I am pleased to commend Lords amendment 301, which extends the existing racially and religiously aggravated offences to cover hostility based on sex, sexual orientation, disability and transgender identity.

[Sarah Jones]

Thirdly, my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) pointed to the long-term impact, including on employment opportunities, for those convicted of the offences of loitering and soliciting while under 18. Lords amendments 270 and 271 therefore introduce a new disregards and pardons scheme for anyone convicted or cautioned as a child for those offences.

I will now turn to the 19 non-Government amendments added in the other place. First, Lords amendment 2 seeks to bar the issuing of fixed penalty notices by enforcement companies and contractors for profit. The Government do understand the concern about enforcement agencies issuing fixed penalty notices where there may be a financial incentive to do so. To be clear, local agencies are expected to issue fixed penalty notices only when it is appropriate and proportionate to do so. However, Lords amendment 2 risks weakening crucial enforcement action to tackle antisocial behaviour. Our amendments in lieu instead provide that statutory guidance will address the need to ensure that the issuing of fixed penalty notices by authorised persons is proportionate.

On Lords amendments 6 and 10 to 12, I fully appreciate and understand the damage that fly-tipping can do to our communities. The Government's waste crime action plan, published on 20 March, sets out proposals to radically improve enforcement in this area, including by granting courts the power to impose between three and nine penalty points on the driving licence of those convicted of fly-tipping where driving a vehicle was used in or for the purposes of the offence. Our amendment in lieu implements this commitment.

Turning to Lords amendment 15, on its introduction the Bill provided for a maximum four-year prison term for those convicted of a new offence of possession of a weapon with intent to cause unlawful violence. While this was drafted in line with other possession offences, the Government accept that the intent element of this new offence justifies a higher maximum penalty. Our amendment in lieu therefore provides for a seven-year maximum rather than the 10 years provided for in the Lords amendment, which we believe is disproportionate given that this remains a possession offence.

Lords amendments 255, 256, 258 to 260 and 505, introduced by the Government and by Baroness Owen and Baroness Bertin, all seek to further tackle the proliferation of demeaning and degrading intimate images online. The Government share these aims, and we are clear that intimate image abuse is completely unacceptable.

Lords amendment 255, brought forward by the Government, will criminalise the making, adapting and supplying of nudification tools. These tools use artificial intelligence to create deepfake, non-consensual intimate images, many of women. While creating, sharing and threatening to share non-consensual intimate images is already illegal, this amendment goes further, and criminalises the developers making and supplying these tools. As well as the criminal duties, once this new offence is in force the requirements of the Online Safety Act 2023 will kick in. This means that social media services will be required to take down content that supplies nudification tools, and search engines will have to reduce the visibility of search results linked to these tools.

3 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I am very grateful to the Minister for giving way on that point. I am not sure whether she will come on to this, but the Government have tabled amendments on online safety, and have identified that the next frontline in this war is artificial intelligence. As she knows, we have already seen children taking their own lives after interactions with AI chatbots, and we know that tech companies will always prioritise profits over user safety, so there must be more focus on a safety-by-design approach that prevents AI products that could be harmful to users from coming to market. This approach has been suggested by Baroness Kidron in the other place. Why are the Government not supporting her amendment?

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She is, of course, right about the growing concern around chatbots and the need for safety by design. I will come on to Baroness Kidron's amendment and the Government's response to it later on in my speech.

Furthermore, the Government have brought forward Lords amendment 367 to take a power to extend the scope of the Online Safety Act 2023 to cover unregulated AI chatbots. It means that general-purpose AI chatbots, such as Grok, which allow the creation and sharing of non-consensual intimate images, will have to proactively remove that illegal content from their services or face enforcement from Ofcom. Taken together, the measures will deliver an effective ban on nudification tools. Given that, we do not believe that a separate possession offence, as provided for in Lords amendment 505, would make a meaningful difference, not least as many such tools are accessed online, rather than possessed.

Where a person is convicted of an intimate image offence, we agree that it is vital that those images are deleted from the perpetrator's devices. Amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 258 enables the courts to make an image deletion order following a conviction for an offence related to intimate image abuse. Breach of the order will be a criminal offence. The amendment also enables the courts to require the deletion of other intimate images of the same victim. This approach gives courts the required flexibility to consider the details of each case when applying their powers, while ensuring that the offenders are held accountable for compliance with the order.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I really welcome the Government's amendment on image deletion orders, which will ensure that after a conviction, courts are properly mandated to destroy those intimate images and film. They will be able to give prison sentences, too; that is incredibly important. Does the Minister agree that this, coupled with the Government's new requirements for tech firms to delete this horrifying content when it is found, is a crucial step forward in ensuring that non-consensual intimate imagery victims can finally move forward with their life?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and I agree with her. This is the culmination of a lot of good work in the Lords and the Commons, from Members of all parties. MPs have pushed as hard as we can on this emerging technology, which is so dangerous and so high risk, and we have a Government who are committed

to acting and doing the right thing. Everybody has worked really hard, together, to get us to a much stronger place. The power allowing courts to require the deletion of intimate images will also be available for the offence of breastfeeding voyeurism recording, and the new offence of sharing semen-defaced images.

Online platforms need to do more to ensure that non-consensual intimate images are removed quickly, as my hon. Friend said, and not after the 24-hour timeframe envisioned by Lords amendment 256. To that end, amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendments 256 and 257 strengthens platform and senior executive accountability by making it a criminal offence for a service to breach an enforcement decision by Ofcom on duties to deal with and remove reported non-consensual intimate images. That means that senior executives of the service could be criminally liable for the breach. As well as taking this enforcement approach, the Government are also strengthening safeguards against malicious reporting. We will also bring forward regulations under existing powers in the Online Safety Act to amend schedule 8, so that Ofcom can require providers to be fully transparent about both the speed of intimate image removals, and how clearly and effectively platforms enable users to report such content.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): These provisions are so important. The main thing that witnesses who came before the Women and Equalities Committee said, when talking about the impact of non-consensual intimate image abuse, was that the harm grew and grew, the longer the images stayed online. This measure is vital, and I thank the Government for listening to the Committee's important work.

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend, and pay tribute to the Women and Equalities Committee and its work. As I said, this has been a journey, and a lot of Members from both Houses have played a really important role. Ministers in the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Home Office have been listening very carefully to what MPs have been advising. I am very pleased that we were able to respond.

In addition to bringing in the take-down duty, we will give statutory backing to a register of non-consensual intimate images. Amendments (a) and (d) in lieu of Lords amendments 259 and 260 will enable the Government to designate a trusted flagger, most likely the revenge porn helpline. That will give Government backing to a trusted source of NCII content that can be used by platforms and internet service providers to identify those images. The amendments will also enable the Government to make further provisions, by regulations, on the operation of the register, following a scoping exercise. Those provisions include provision for the Secretary of State to impose requirements on providers to share hashes, and other information deemed necessary, with the register. Hashes, for the benefit of the House, are unique codes used to mark non-consensual intimate images. The scoping exercise will allow us to evaluate the technical requirements, so that we can ensure that the register can be used by victims, platforms and internet service providers to remove or block NCII content. As Lords amendment 260 recognised, proceeding

by regulations will enable us to properly evaluate the requirements necessary to ensure that the register operates as effectively as possible.

Turning to two more amendments from Baroness Bertin, Lords amendments 263 and 265, I think we in this place all share her determination to stop the spread of dangerous, demeaning and illegal pornographic content online. On Lords amendment 263, I completely agree that there is a need to curtail the depiction of step-incest pornography, in cases where what it portrays is illegal. The Government's amendment in lieu will extend the new offence of possession and publication of incest porn to include depictions of step-incest where one of the persons is portrayed as being under 18. Additionally, amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 265 addresses the concerns raised by Lords amendment 265 by criminalising the possession or publication of pornography that depicts an adult credibly role-playing as a child. That makes it clear that content that mimics and risks normalising child sexual abuse will not be tolerated. But we will not stop there. As well as introducing those offences, the Government have committed to producing a delivery plan for how we can close the gap between the regulation of online and offline pornographic content. What is illegal offline should be illegal online.

Lords amendment 264 rightly raises concerns about how we best strengthen safeguards against the sexual exploitation of persons appearing on pornographic websites, an issue raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft on Report. We agree with the principle and the need to address this issue, but further work is required across Government on considering what the most effective approach would be to strengthening arrangements to ensure that persons appearing in pornographic material are aged 18 and over, and consent to the material being shared online. Government amendments (a) to (f) in lieu of Lords amendment 264 place a duty on the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the outcome of this work within 12 months of the Bill receiving Royal Assent, and introduce a power to make regulations giving effect to that outcome.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for reassuring us that these amendments have a timescale of 12 months. What are the Government doing behind the scenes to progress this work as quickly as possible? Can she outline the work that she has undertaken to ensure that the regulations are introduced within those 12 months?

Sarah Jones: There is a powerful group of Ministers working very hard on that. Not least among them is my colleague in the Home Office, the Minister for Safeguarding, who is leading the wider work on violence against women and girls. There is a whole programme of activity, whether by Ministers or officials, across DSIT, the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice to make sure that we get these things right. They are complex, and they involve Departments working together, stepping up and taking responsibility for this work, which is very much ongoing. We want to get this right; that is why we have set the 12-month timescale. The important thing is not only the outcome of that work, but the power to make regulations, as we will, that give effect to that outcome.

[Sarah Jones]

Lords amendment 311, introduced by Lord Walney, seeks to grant a power to the Secretary of State to proscribe organisations deemed to be extreme criminal protest groups. The Government understand the concerns expressed in both Houses about the sustained impact of criminal activity by certain protest groups, and, where such conduct meets the threshold for a proscription order under the Terrorism Act 2000, the Government will act, and have already acted. However, we are not persuaded that the introduction of a proscription-lite regime is necessary or proportionate in instances where that threshold is not met. This view is shared by Jonathan Hall KC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, who recently expressed concerns about the adverse consequences of this amendment for the established proscription regime in the Terrorism Act 2000. I urge hon. Members to read the four-page note that he published online last week.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend will recognise, though, that many of us are concerned about the integrity of the concepts of terrorism and terrorist organisations, and the importance of people's ability to protest the concept of proscription. Those are two very different things. Does she recognise that concern, and will she look at how we can better delineate those two things, so that people can express their concerns about the concept of proscription and how it is evolving under this Government without facing arrest for wanting to have that conversation?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend will have debated these issues in this place, and I think there will always be a debate about the right to protest and where we draw a line in this country. I am very happy to have further conversations with her on that wider issue. Jonathan Hall set out in his letter—I can pass it on to my hon. Friend, if she has not seen it—why he does not think that this amendment will work, and that is why we are not persuaded on this occasion. I am, of course, happy to have further conversations with my hon. Friend on this.

Turning to Lords amendment 333, tabled by Baroness Buscombe, I fully agree that the Government, local authorities and law enforcement agencies need to do all they can to tackle money laundering and associated criminality on our streets. The high streets illegality taskforce, announced by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer in her most recent Budget, will examine the use of enforcement powers in this light, including the closure power. It will have a £10 million budget to support its work. While we support the principle of extending the duration of closure orders, we should first consult to avoid any unintended consequences on legitimate businesses or residential premises. Accordingly, amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 333 will enable us, following targeted consultation, to extend the maximum duration of closure orders and, if necessary, to make different provision for commercial and residential properties.

I know that my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn), and for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt), have been campaigning on high street illegality, and will no doubt speak about it

later. I want to assure them and others in this place that we know that we need to go further, as we will, not just on this measure, but on the wider challenge of high street illegality. We will be very keen to work with Members in this place on that work.

3.15 pm

Lords amendment 334, which seeks to abolish non-crime hate incidents, is unnecessary. The Government have been clear that the current arrangements for the recording of non-crime hate incidents are not fit for purpose and brought forward Lords amendment 332 to abolish the code of practice introduced by the previous Government. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has also accepted the findings and recommendations of the College of Policing's review into non-crime hate incidents, published at the end of March. A key recommendation is the introduction of a new national standard that sets a higher threshold for recording incidents, which is closely tied to core police work. The Government will now work closely with the College of Policing and the NPCC to implement the review's recommendations.

On Lords amendment 339, the Government are already commissioning an end-to-end independent review into the police misconduct process, and the issue of misconduct proceedings following the acquittal of a police officer at a criminal trial will be examined as part of that review. However, creating a blanket presumption that in all such cases, officers should not face further disciplinary action is wrong in principle. The police misconduct process operates at a different evidential threshold and considers different issues from a criminal trial, including whether an officer has breached standards of professional behaviour.

On Lords amendment 342, the Government fully agree with the principle that a court should impose a youth diversion order only where it is necessary and proportionate. The Bill already ensures that an order can be imposed only where it is necessary to protect the public from a risk of terrorism or serious harm, but enshrining in the statute the evidence that must be presented to a court to support an application for an order risks building inflexibility into the process. Our amendment (a) in lieu makes it clear that the statutory guidance to be issued under proposed new section (1A) may, among other things, provide guidance to chief officers on consideration of alternative interventions and how they should engage multi-agency youth offending teams before applying for an order.

On Lords amendment 357, the Government are clear that glorifying acts of terrorism can cause serious harm, which is why the offence of encouraging terrorism was introduced 20 years ago. This offence criminalises statements that may encourage another person to commit an act of terrorism and sits alongside broader terrorism legislation, which includes offences such as inviting support for a proscribed organisation. Critical to the encouragement offence is the historical safeguard, which ensures that the right balance is struck between criminalising statements that could generate terrorist risk and not inadvertently criminalising discussion of historical events that carry no similar risk today.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Despite the current legislation, in Northern Ireland, not only individuals but Sinn Féin Government Ministers engage in acts and

make speeches on an almost monthly basis that not only glorify but encourage terrorism, praise those who took place in bomb attacks on police stations and individuals, and, indeed, name play parks after those individuals. Does the Minister accept that the current legislation does not rule out the possibility of people engaging in acts of glorifying terrorism, which not only impacts the people of the past but poisons the minds of young people in the present?

Sarah Jones: I appreciate the challenge that the right hon. Gentleman is raising, and I know that DUP Members of Parliament in particular have raised these concerns before. The challenge here is that Lords amendment 357 would remove the historical safeguard for statements that glorify acts of terrorism committed by proscribed organisations. Our view is that these statements may not necessarily create terrorist risk and may result in the offence capturing legitimate political and social discourse and debate.

I will say two other things to the right hon. Gentleman. First, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, Jonathan Hall KC, strongly advised against the removal of the historical safeguard in his review of terrorism legislation following the 7 October attacks in 2023. Secondly, in the light of the concerns that have been raised in the Lords and by Members in this place, the Government will ask the independent reviewer to conduct a more detailed review of the encouragement offence within six months of Royal Assent.

Let me turn to Lords amendment 359. It is a long-standing principle that has been adopted by successive Administrations that the Government do not comment on which organisations are being considered for proscription. Mandating that the Government review whether to proscribe Iranian Government-related organisations would violate this principle and tie the Government's hands unnecessarily. The Government are already taking decisive action to deter threats from Iran, and we have committed to introducing a new state threats-based proscription tool.

I turn now to Lords amendments 360 and 368 to 372 tabled by Baroness Kidron, which concern chatbots. The Government are clear that we need to act quickly to bring all unregulated AI chatbots within the scope of the Online Safety Act's requirements on illegal activity. As I mentioned earlier, the Government are seeking to take a regulation-making power to do this, under Lords amendment 367. By taking this power, the Government will be able to remove any ambiguity over whether services like Grok are subject to the Online Safety Act's provisions to tackle illegal content. This approach also allows us to design regulations that are effective, targeted and informed by necessary consultation with subject matter experts. Amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 372 commits the Government to reporting to Parliament by the end of the year on our progress to develop regulations.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: I don't mean to bang on about this, but the fact is that the Government's approach is too narrow. It is focused on taking down illegal content when it should be the responsibility of the company to prevent harms in the first place, rather than to deal with them after the event. We do not design any other sector's regulation in this way. When designing

aircraft, we do not wait until after the plane has crashed to worry about any of the safety features. This should be the same.

During Report stage in the Lords, peers voted overwhelmingly in support of the safety-by-design approach. They also understood that when it comes to the design of something, harm includes building in aspects that are addictive and manipulative, which have been key to some of the very tragic suicides of children who have interacted with AI chatbots. What do the Government have against building safety by design into the very purpose of AI chatbots?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Lady makes her case very clearly, and we can agree that we need to design out those kinds of issues. The challenges are in what we do and how we do it—those are the challenges we had with this particular group of amendments. Obviously there is wider work being done on violence against women and girls and how the Online Safety Act is to be rolled forward, and that work is really important, but we are talking about this particular group of Lords amendments on chatbots and the challenges with them. That is why, through amendment (a) in lieu, we commit to reporting by the end of the year on our progress to develop regulations.

We are clear that regulation is a more effective and proportionate tool than the criminal law for addressing risks from AI chatbots and setting industry best practice. Incorporating currently unregulated chatbots into the scope of the Online Safety Act will ensure that such regulation applies extraterritorially, which is crucial when dealing with international companies.

The Government's approach is also broader in scope than the content of amendments 360 and 368 to 372. Those amendments would not capture image generators creating non-consensual graphic images of women or online AI chatbot toys such as Gabbo. The Government's amendment in lieu does capture such services and allows them to be clearly brought under online safety regulations.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): The Science, Innovation and Technology Committee has heard extensive and at times horrific evidence of the harms that AI chatbots can do, such as encouragement to suicide. I welcome Lords amendment 367, which gives the Government the power to amend the Online Safety Act, and I accept that the Government are seeking to reject amendment 368, tabled by the noble Baroness Kidron, to ban chatbots based on their content, but does the Minister accept that the harms of AI chatbots are evident, significant and hugely concerning, and that their regulation is unclear and consistent? Where chatbots are covered by the Online Safety Act, if those chatbots incorporate, for example, search functionality, enforcement is slow and ponderous or non-existent. Will the Minister commit to working with DSIT to take action on AI chatbots before the end of the year?

Sarah Jones: I welcome the work that my hon. Friend's Committee has done and will continue to do in this space. It is very important that we have good analysis of what the problems are that we need to solve. She is absolutely right that the problems with AI chatbots are evident, significant and concerning, and that more work needs to be done in this space. If there is work that we

[Sarah Jones]

can do sooner rather than later, I am sure that my colleagues in DSIT will do that, and I commit to working with them to do what we can as quickly as we can.

Finally, hon. Members will recall that on Report, the House decided to disapply the criminal law relating to abortion in respect of women acting in relation to their own pregnancy. Their Lordships agreed amendment 361, which would provide for automatic pardons for women previously convicted or cautioned for an abortion offence in relation to their own pregnancies and for the deletion of certain details from court and police records.

I stress that the Government remain neutral on the substance of clause 191 and Lords amendment 361, but we have a duty to ensure that the law is operationally and legally workable. Accordingly, we have tabled amendments (a) and (e) to Lords amendment 361 to ensure that the deletion of details from relevant official records can operate as intended.

Catherine Fookes: I support Lords amendment 361 because some women, even after being found not guilty, have investigations that show up on their Disclosure and Barring Service checks, which impacts their life and future careers. That is the reality for a young woman named Becca, whose case I raised in the House a year ago. She was investigated at age 19 after giving birth to her son at 28 weeks, and she says that removing the investigation from her records would help her to be able to move on and live a proper family life. Does the Minister agree that this change will help to bring justice for women like Becca?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the challenge that Becca has faced, and I congratulate her on the work that she has done in bringing that to the House. The Government are neutral on this part of the Bill, as is right and proper. What we seek to do with our amendments is ensure that it is legally workable. That is our role in this space.

I hope that I have demonstrated that we have sought to engage constructively with the non-Government amendments carried in the Lords.

3.30 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I want to raise the systemic issue of honour-based abuse. The perpetrator is usually not just one person; they are a family, a group or a network of people who believe that an individual has or may bring dishonour or shame to the family or community. My hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) has tabled a simple amendment to Lords amendment 300 to insert the word “persons”, which would address the issue. I stand here on behalf of my constituent Fawziyah Javid, who was an incredible woman and member of our community; she was also a victim of domestic homicide and honour-based abuse. My hon. Friend’s amendment shows that honour-based abuse runs deep within communities. I have worked with Karma Nirvana in my constituency on that. Does the Minister agree that honour-based abuse is an issue not just for one person, but for many people, and that that should be acknowledged?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that, as well as my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft, who I suspect will speak to it later. I agree that in many cases honour-based abuse is perpetrated not by a single individual but by an extended family or other group of persons. The challenge we have with the amendment is that the definition in the Bill adopts the usual legislative conventions whereby references to the singular include the plural unless otherwise indicated. Therefore, the statutory definition already applies where abuse is perpetrated by more than one person. However, we do want to develop the statutory guidance so that that is completely clear for everybody.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): My hon. Friend will remember our discussion, and I hope that she can help me. Lord Macdonald of River Glaven KC was appointed to lead an independent review of laws on public order and hate crime. The review was also to consider the laws around protest, and we were hopeful that we would have that. I am not aware that the review has concluded, so perhaps my hon. Friend can tell us. If it has not concluded, why are we legislating before that?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend, who I know feels strongly about this issue, as do many others—I very much respect that position. I met him a few months ago, when the review had just started. The review has yet to conclude, but it will do so in the coming months. The work that Lord Macdonald is undertaking is quite substantial, and I know, having received updates on what he is doing and who he is talking to, that it is wide and is taking a bit longer than expected, but that is in order to get it right.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) will know that the cumulative disruption amendment was announced by the Home Secretary after the Heaton Park attack. Perhaps we will come to this more in closing the debate, but I think there is a lack of understanding in some quarters—I do not mean my hon. Friend—about the nature of that amendment. To be clear, sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act 1986 empower senior police officers to impose conditions on processions and on public assemblies respectively. They can impose conditions only under certain criteria to prevent serious public disorder, serious damage to property or serious disruption. We are not changing sections 12 or 14. At the moment, the police can consider cumulative disruption when looking at whether a protest should have conditions imposed on it.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her response to my letter on cumulative disruption, signed by 50 MPs, which would give the police powers to limit strikes and industrial action. Your letter states:

“I have no desire to infringe on—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I am on my feet, so please be seated. “Your letter states”? I do not think I have corresponded with the hon. Member. Continue.

Kim Johnson: Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Does the Minister accept that there is a danger that a future Government might be less benevolent towards workers' struggles and could exploit those powers? Will she please explain to the House why we have not been given the right to debate, discuss and vote on amendment 312?

Sarah Jones: Let me just finish explaining what we are doing and then I will come on to picketing.

If there is a risk of serious public disorder, senior police officers can impose conditions. At the moment, they can consider cumulative disruption as one of the aspects they take into account when deciding whether to impose conditions. To be clear, imposing conditions means things like moving where a march is going, limiting the hours that it can work under or limiting the number of people. They can already take into account cumulative disruption, but we are changing that so that they must take that into account—they must think about it. That does not change the guardrails of sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act; it just says that at the moment they can consider cumulative disruption, but in future they will consider it. That is the amendment.

On this Government's belief in the right to strike and to protest, of course that is sacrosanct and nothing has changed in our view on that. We do not believe that this legislation will stop the right to picket. I know that lots of Members will have views on that and will not be satisfied, but we will always defend the right to strike, and we have absolutely no desire to infringe lawful picketing at all.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): Is the Minister aware of the deep alarm, both on the Back Benches and outside Parliament, at what amounts to a further draconian attack by the Government on the right to peaceful protest, which is a civil liberty, and about the fact that the Government are trying to push the measure through without a proper vote for MPs, as they did when they made the huge error of proscribing Palestine Action?

Sarah Jones: I do not agree with my hon. Friend. This was announced by the Home Secretary after the Heaton Park attack, when lots of protests took place immediately after the attack. The cumulative disruption and the impact that had was there for all to see. We have no desire to reduce people's right to protest, and nor would we ever. There is a lot of misinformation about this change in the law, implying that we are in some way increasing the bans on protest. To be clear, the rules on banning protests are very strong, and bans can be introduced only in very significant circumstances. Indeed, we have no rules to ban assembly, so the idea that we are banning protest is just wrong.

We are responding to communities who have recently been feeling the pain of repeated protests, sometimes outside faith organisations—synagogues, in particular. In those cases, we believe that the police should look at the impact of cumulative disruption when they, and not the Government, are deciding whether to impose conditions on those marches.

Ms Creasy: Many of us recognise the picture of pain that the Minister is painting, especially following the terrorist attack, but good legislation requires debate, scrutiny and specification. One of the concerns that many of us have is the lack of definition of “cumulative”.

Will she set out now, on the record, what the Government intend by the concept of “cumulative”, so that people can understand how this proposed test would be met?

Sarah Jones: I am pleased that we are debating this issue today, which is what we should be doing here, and I am sure that hon. Members will be talking about it more in the several hours that we have to debate these issues. This already exists in law, in that the police are able to look at cumulative disruption when considering whether to impose conditions. We are not redefining “cumulative” at all, or changing the parameters of sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act; we are simply saying that when the police are looking at whether to impose conditions, they must look—rather than they can look—at cumulative disruption. That is a small change that will make a big difference to people who are currently scared and intimidated by persistent protests, outside mosques and Jewish places of worship in particular.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I should conclude. I hope that I have demonstrated that we have sought to engage constructively. As I have said, I urge the House to support all the changes that we are suggesting together today with the Government amendments brought from the Lords.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I thank colleagues in the other place for the work that they have done on strengthening this Bill. The changes made there go some way towards what we should all be aiming for: safer communities, stronger laws and real protections for the public. In Committee, we saw the Government repeatedly reject important amendments from Opposition Members, on fly-tipping, pornography and increasing sentences for knife crime. The Bill could also have provided a real opportunity to tackle the scourge of off-road bikes, to support this country's tradesmen with real action on tool theft, and to remove yet more knives from our streets by increasing stop and search. Although the Government failed to take up some of those opportunities, I am delighted to see that they have U-turned on some of the measures that Labour MPs previously voted against. That might be a familiar pattern, but it is still right to welcome the fact that they have recognised the value of some of those proposals.

On fly-tipping, for example, giving courts the power to issue penalty points to offenders is a straightforward, common-sense step. If someone uses a vehicle to dump waste and blight our communities, it is entirely right that their ability to drive should be affected. Likewise, even though I would have liked the Government to accept the more significant penalty proposed in Lords amendment 15, it is a welcome step that they have recognised the seriousness of the crime when there is an additional element of intent to use unlawful violence, which rightly should have a greater penalty when compared with possession-only offences. It is right that these measures have progressed, even though a great deal of unfortunate wrangling and rejection occurred before they were incorporated into the Bill.

On that note, I will turn to the proposals that the Government have chosen not to accept from our colleagues across the way. I ask Members of this House to give serious consideration to measures that enhance the powers of the police forces and improve their ability to keep our communities safe. For instance, as I have

[*Matt Vickers*]

mentioned, Members do not need to be reminded of the scourge of fly-tipping, as we all recognise the adverse impact it can have on our neighbourhoods. On Sunday I saw an appalling incident in my constituency. A huge volume of waste had been dumped near Sadberge, with appalling consequences for our environment, for wildlife and for anybody who wants to enjoy the countryside.

Amendment 6 would ensure that the guidance issued on the enforcement of offences under section 33 makes it clear that, when a person is convicted of a relevant offence, they will be liable for the costs incurred through loss or damage resulting from that offence. As the Government are already setting out guidance in the legislation, why would they not ensure that this guidance was unequivocal that when a person is convicted of fly-tipping, they—not the victims—are responsible for the costs incurred as a result of their offence? Furthermore, amendment 11 would further enable the police to seize vehicles.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Member makes an important point. Given the role of criminal organisations in fly-tipping, the costs can be in the hundreds of thousands of pounds to landowners, who are the innocent victims of this crime. If the Government are serious about dealing with fly-tipping, they have to ensure that the sanctions are a deterrent.

Matt Vickers: I could not agree more. We see a selfish and mindless small minority of people who incur huge costs that fall on taxpayers across the country and do huge damage to our communities. It is right that the sanctions should match that. On an issue where there is universal acceptance of the need to do more, we should ensure that there are no unnecessary restrictions on our authorities in cracking down on these offences.

3.45 pm

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Fly-tipping is very important, but can I refer my hon. Friend to a matter of life and death? As a result of Lords amendment 361 and the amendments to it, somebody who illegally procures a late-term abortion will receive a free pardon. I refer my hon. Friend to Mr Justice Cooke, who said in the Sarah Catt case that Catt had robbed the baby of the life it was about to have and that the seriousness of the crime lay between manslaughter and murder. At sentencing, the judge told Catt that she clearly thought the man with whom she was having an affair was the father and she had shown no remorse. Is it not a terrible indictment of our society that a human life can be taken when it is about to be born, at 39 weeks, and that there should be a free pardon in such a serious case?

Matt Vickers: I share my right hon. Friend's concerns—I think many people across the country share them—not only about the issue, however strongly people might feel about it, but about the way that it was added to this Bill after Committee stage, meaning that some of the scrutiny that might otherwise have happened did not, and no evidence on it was given at the evidence sessions. It was slipped into the Bill, and I do not think that there was adequate scrutiny of it. Lots of people across the country

share that concern. Such a seismic change in the relationship between the state and individuals should have had more scrutiny in this place.

On fly-tipping, I believe that removing the instrument of this crime is an effective tool, and it could extend beyond the legislative framework set out by the Government in the waste crime action plan.

However, the measures brought forward in the other place are not limited merely to the issue of fly-tipping. There are important proposals relating to non-crime hate incidents. In Lords amendment 334, colleagues in the other place wisely took the step of ending the investigation and recording of non-crime hate incidents and ensuring that any future incident recording guidance has

“due regard to the right to freedom of expression.”

That is a sensible, necessary measure, as the Government's proposal appears to be a rebranding of the existing scheme with a more restrictive triage system. Reports would still be logged, personal data would still be recorded and disclosure rules would remain unchanged. Officers and staff would still be tied up monitoring incidents that do not meet the criminal threshold at a cost of time and resources. As Lord Hogan-Howe told the Lords,

“we need to move on from the recording of non-crime hate incidents by removing them altogether from police systems.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 January 2026; Vol. 852, c. 173.]

I am afraid that unless we agree to the amendment, we risk returning to this issue in the future. It is estimated that 660 hours of police time have been spent on non-crime hate incidents. We can change that and see that time invested back into policing our communities.

On antisocial behaviour and illicit retailers, we hear repeatedly from businesses and local communities about rogue premises causing persistent problems on our high streets. If we are serious about supporting the police to do their job, we must ensure that they have the powers they need to tackle not just crime but the wider public nuisance and disorder that too often accompany it.

A range of organisations, including the Chartered Trading Standards Institute, have been clear that stronger powers are needed to deal with rogue retailers. While the current legal framework does provide tools, in practice they are too often insufficient. The time limits attached to closure notices and orders simply do not go far enough. Instead, we see a revolving door: offenders wait out short closure periods, reopen under a different name and continue their activities, sometimes shifting location before enforcement agencies have the chance to complete proper investigations. That is the crux of the problem: the system does not enable action that sticks.

In the meantime, the impact is clear. Our high streets suffer as legitimate businesses lose trade, confidence declines, and responsible retailers who follow the rules and invest in their communities are left competing against those who operate with impunity. There is also a wider impact on our communities, particularly on young people. Premises linked to that kind of activity can become focal points for antisocial behaviour, drawing in vulnerable individuals and exposing them to harm. If we want safer streets and stronger communities, we cannot allow that cycle to continue. Lords amendment 333 offers a practical solution: it would extend the timeframe for enforcement, giving agencies the ability

to take action that is thorough, proportionate and, crucially, effective. It is about ensuring that when action is taken, it delivers real results, not just temporary disruption.

To uphold public safety, we must update the law to reflect the current nature of the crimes our society faces. Lords amendment 311 reflects the worrying growth in the number of protest groups that engage in serious criminal activity to further their aims. However, being organisations, they are often shielded from the full force of the law, as was set out in the other House. The designation in the amendment is not terrorist proscription. It aims to restrict membership, promotion, fundraising, organising and material support, with proportionate penalties that are less significant than those that proscribed terrorist groups attract. Although I understand that the Government believe the proposal to be premature given their ongoing review, they have acted for understandable reasons on cumulative disruption. Why should that not be extended to this provision to ensure that there are restrictions on organisations whose purpose is to break the law?

On extreme ideologies, the Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Foreign Secretary have been clear that the Conservative party would work with the Government to proscribe the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. It is apparent to many Members across the House, and to our counterparts in the EU, that the threat posed by the IRGC is real. However, despite their comments in opposition, the Government have not introduced such measures.

Andy McDonald: The hon. Gentleman is talking about the proscription of the IRGC. Will he explain to the House why the Tory party did not do that in their 14 years in government?

Matt Vickers: The then Opposition told us that they had really strong views about it. They are now in government but are not doing anything about it. The hon. Gentleman need not worry about another day or another week; he has the opportunity today to set the process in motion by voting for Lords amendment 359. It is not enough that Iran is covered by the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme—we must go further. The IRGC is not a theoretical concern. As my colleagues have repeatedly stressed to the Government, it has threatened those in our country and supported armed groups that have killed British and allied troops.

We welcome the Government's adoption of the amendment tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) and supported by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) to address the depiction of strangulation in pornography. I understand that, through discussions with Baroness Bertin on related subjects, the Government have undertaken to separately progress further measures to tackle pornography featuring 18-plus step-incest—in which one party is the family member of another—and the mimicking of children aged 16-plus, as well as on age verification in pornography. I would be grateful if the Minister clarified those matters further.

I put on record my party's opposition to Lords amendment 301, which unnecessarily expands the definition of "aggravated offences" to include certain characteristics,

even though existing law already covers most of those factors at sentencing, and provides extensive hate crime protections. The change has been introduced late in the legislative process, with minimal scrutiny, raising concerns about transparency. The Law Commission has warned in expert advice that including sex as a protected characteristic in that setting could be ineffective and even counterproductive, as it may complicate prosecutions and create hierarchies of victims. Overall, the amendment appears more symbolic than practical, adding complexity without clear benefit to crime reduction.

The Government have before them amendments that would strengthen our legal system and better protect the public and the police, but we cannot ignore the reality on the ground. Officer numbers have fallen while demand continues to rise, and the Bill will add to that pressure. That is why it matters that, when the police act, they can use the full weight of the law. Without the right powers, higher expectations mean little. Where disorder takes hold, it damages communities and undermines confidence, as we have seen in places like Clapham common.

While parts of the Bill are welcome, there are still gaps. The Lords amendments to which I have spoken would strengthen enforcement and support officers. If we are serious about safer streets, removing them risks falling short of what the public expect.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I rise to speak in support of Lords amendment 361 and Government amendments to it. I was horrified to learn of the increasing number of cases in recent years of women facing criminal investigations and prosecutions on suspicion of illegal abortion offences. The abject cruelty that more than 100 desperate women have been forced to endure under a 165-year-old law is barbaric and completely unnecessary. That is why I tabled an amendment to the Bill last year to stop this, which was emphatically supported in this Chamber in June. The House of Lords recently supported that change as well. As a Parliament, we took that decision because we listened to the advice of professionals and the evidence gathered over a long period of time from a number of places and we chose to stand up for women.

Alongside the women affected, I am very pleased that once the Bill becomes law, no more women in England and Wales will be subject to the threat of criminal prosecution on suspicion of ending their own pregnancy, but I would welcome clarification from the Minister regarding current investigations. Parliament has been resoundingly clear in its support for removing women from the criminal law related to abortion. Can the Minister confirm that once the Bill becomes law, the expectation is that all current investigations and prosecutions under these offences should be dropped? I would welcome a commitment that she will write to write to police forces in England and Wales, because they clearly have not been listening to the will of Parliament—we are aware of at least three further women having been investigated for ending their own pregnancies since the Commons vote in June.

As well as firmly supporting the decriminalisation of women in cases of abortion, the House of Lords passed an amendment to protect the women already harmed by these outdated laws. I pay tribute to Baroness Thornton, Lord Hunt of Kings Heath, Baroness Watkins of Tavistock

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

and Baroness Miller of Chilthorne Domer for tabling this cross-party amendment. Lords amendment 361 and the Government amendments to it would pardon women found guilty of ending their own pregnancy and expunge the records of investigations, arrests and charges of women under abortion law, whether or not they were found guilty.

That is important. Current law means that abortion offences are classed as serious and violent crimes, so even without a conviction, the fact that a woman has been arrested and interviewed under these offences remains on her Disclosure and Barring Service check for life. That actively harms her job prospects and ability to travel to certain jurisdictions, and it leaves her with a permanent record on police computer systems or, in the case of conviction, a permanent criminal record that she ended her own pregnancy outside the law. Colleagues will remember that the women forced to endure criminal investigations under these offences are overwhelmingly already vulnerable, and are often victims of acute abuse and exploitation. The retention of these convictions and records causes them ongoing harm under a law that Parliament has been clear has no place in modern society.

This includes women whose experiences I spoke of in my speech in this place last year—women like Nicola Packer, who, after experiencing complications in her abortion treatment, was arrested and held for 36 hours in custody, and endured nearly five years of investigation and prosecution. She was found not guilty at trial, but the investigation, arrest and charge remain on her record. It includes women like Laura, a young mother and university student who was criminalised for an abortion using illicit medication forced on her by an abusive partner. She was in a physically, sexually and emotionally abusive relationship, and her partner told her not to go to a doctor. When she was arrested, he threatened to kill her if she told anyone he was involved. She was jailed for two years, and this conviction remains on her criminal record.

Women who have faced investigation or conviction should not have to continue living with the consequences of this outdated legislation—laws that Parliament has finally and rightly decided should no longer apply to women. That is why clause 361 is so needed. While remaining neutral on the issue, the Government have made changes to clause 361 to ensure workability, and I emphatically support them. They take a similar approach to the changes introduced by the Bill for pardons for convictions and cautions for loitering or soliciting when under 18.

4 pm

The trauma endured by every woman who has been subjected to a criminal investigation for a suspected illegal abortion will never fully leave them. Those women sought medical care in moments of crisis, after traumatic abortion complications, miscarriage, stillbirth or premature labour, only to be met with suspicion and punishment. Women have been targeted, imprisoned, dragged from hospital beds to police cells, publicly shamed and separated from their existing children. Those experiences have altered their lives forever. As much as

I wish it were possible, erasing those experiences is far beyond the power of any of us, but we can make it easier for them.

We, as legislators, have taken the decision to ensure that no more women endure such barbaric treatment for ending their own pregnancy. The women already harmed by that should not be left behind. Automatic pardons for convictions or cautions, and expunging the records of arrests and investigations, will make things a whole lot better for those women by letting them get on with their lives, participating fully in society again, seeking the jobs and careers they have always wanted, without having to repeatedly disclose or rehash their ordeal, and travelling to places where they wish to go.

Parliament has been clear that no woman should be criminalised for abortion—that matter has been settled. It is now imperative that the women already affected are protected from the enduring cruel legacy of the law, once it is disappplied to women. I implore colleagues to support clause 361 and the Government amendments to it.

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

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): As the Liberal Democrats made clear at earlier stages, there are parts of the Bill that we can support and parts that we strongly oppose. We welcome a number of the new measures brought forward today. None the less, it is a pity that the Government have overlooked opportunities to take action in some crucial areas, from cracking down on rural crime to supporting a real return to proper neighbourhood policing.

In addition, we are deeply disturbed by the use of the Bill to further erode the protest rights of British people. These are hard-won freedoms that were won by the suffragettes, trade unionists and others over many years, but the previous Government and this one are recklessly taking them away for short-term political expedience, so we strongly oppose those measures. That is happening not just because of the measures in the Bill before us today; it is happening regularly under this Government. We must all consider that at some length in this House.

However, I am pleased that the House will today consider two amendments tabled by Liberal Democrats in the other place. Amendment 2 will ensure that private companies are not incentivised to issue as many fixed penalty notices as possible, so more serious antisocial behaviour is prioritised instead. The Government's amendment in lieu does not go far enough. It substitutes the clear ban on fining for profit with non- statutory guidance. We must remove this perverse incentive with a ban, not guidance that will inevitably be open to challenge.

Amendment 342, another Liberal Democrat amendment tabled in the other place, will change how youth diversion orders are issued, ensuring courts are given a full account of any alternative interventions that have been tried or considered, why those interventions failed and what consultation took place with the child, as well as relevant agencies. Multi-agency input will help courts better understand why other interventions have failed, leading to higher success rates and time efficiency. Crucially, this amendment will mean better outcomes for young

people who would otherwise become embroiled in terrorist activity. We call on Members from across the House to support these measures.

The Liberal Democrats are also supporting several other amendments. We support Government amendments 1 and 4 regarding respect orders, which were concessions secured by our Liberal Democrat colleague Lord Clement-Jones. Respect orders will grant police extended powers to tackle antisocial behaviour, with police chiefs given the power to issue orders without oversight. Lords amendments 1 and 4 require the Secretary of State to make appropriate consultations before issuing or revising those orders.

We are backing several further measures that take action on violence against women and girls. We support Lords amendment 294, a concession thanks to the work of our Liberal Democrat colleague Baroness Brinton, which would replace the power to issue stalking guidance by the Secretary of State with a duty to do so. That follows similar provisions in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which places a duty on the Secretary of State to issue guidance.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): There was a discussion earlier about the register of non-consensual intimate images, which is set out in Lords amendment 259. I want to share with the House the experience of one of my constituents, who was subject to the creation of a non-consensual abuse image by her husband while unconscious, having been the victim of spiking. Zoe Watts has chosen very bravely to speak with the media to help to secure legal change and public education, and she points out that there is a disturbing rise in pornography that depicts sex with somebody who is sleeping. Does my hon. Friend share my view that the depiction of non-consensual intimacy in sleep can encourage spiking and sexual abuse and should be banned?

Max Wilkinson: Zoe's case goes to show that we need to go so much further to protect women, and the depiction of that kind of activity clearly might provoke unintended consequences that none of us in this House want to see. Spiking remains a big problem on high streets and in pubs and bars up and down this country.

With a view to strengthening online protections, we will support Lords amendments 258 and 259, relating to the non-consensual generation and sharing of intimate images. It is crucial that the law catches up to the reality of abuse being faced by women like Zoe every day. We will support Lords amendment 301 to extend the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to include protections against hostility motivated by a range of characteristics, including sex and disability. The Liberal Democrats will support Conservative Lords amendment 15, which would increase the maximum penalty for possession of a weapon with intent to use unlawful violence against another person to 10 years, in line with the recommendations from Jonathan Hall KC.

To effectively tackle criminal gangs, we must ensure that the legal system can effectively cut off their revenue sources. The current closure notice periods for shops selling counterfeit goods are too short, and criminal gangs are too often able to survive the economic hit, impacting the prosperity of our high streets. That is why we support Lords amendment 333, which would extent

the period in which the police and the magistrates courts may make closure notices to seven days and closure orders to 12 months.

We are supportive of the suggestion in Lords amendment 311, proposed by Cross-Bench peers, that an alternative is needed to proscription. That has been made particularly clear by what has happened with Palestine Action. However, we are cautious about voting for such a change while the outcomes of the independent review of public order and hate crime legislation are not yet known.

Finally, Liberal Democrats are vehemently opposed to the Government's Lords amendment to give the police unprecedented powers to further restrict the right to protest. That follows a pattern started by the previous Conservative Government, who hacked away again and again at the historical right to protest enjoyed by British people. It is an absolute travesty that that has carried on under Labour. The right to protest is a vital component of our democracy, and Liberal Democrats will fight to defend it.

I urge Members on all sides of the House to put aside their personal feelings about certain ongoing protests and seriously consider what the consequences of this change would mean for our right to challenge those who exercise power over us. Members on the Government Benches might be content with that approach while they are in charge, but Labour MPs must ask what might happen under a future Government who might not adhere to liberal democratic principles.

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): The right to protest is a basic democratic freedom that was won over centuries of British history. It is not a right that was granted, but one that was hard-won by suffragettes, trade unionists, anti-fascists and many others. Today we are focusing only on the Lords amendments, but I place on record that this Bill is a serious and substantial assault on our democratic freedoms. Indeed, before the Bill was introduced to this House, the Policing and Crime Act 2017, the Public Order Act 2023, and many other anti-protest Bills passed under the last Government had already expanded police powers. Those Bills were widely criticised by legal experts and civil society organisations and faced widespread opposition from Members from across the House. This makes the shambolic process by which these proposals have been brought before the House even more disturbing.

The Bill proposes giving the police even more powers, including to decide where, when, and even whether a protest takes place. At this very late stage, the other place has now proposed amendment 312, which could lead to protests being not just restricted, but banned outright. That should alarm anyone who cares about democracy, because it should not need pointing out that the whole point of protests is that they are supposed to have a cumulative impact. Should the suffragettes or the Chartists have given up after just one attempt? The UN's special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association has recently outlined how far out of step this extraordinary expansion of state power is with international norms.

This Bill and Lords amendment 312 exist in the context of one of the largest and most sustained protest movements in modern British political history. The Home Secretary has not obscured the fact that these

[Apsana Begum]

proposals are a direct response to the demonstrations for Palestine. Indeed, I have been proud to protest alongside hundreds and thousands of constituents in over 30 major national demonstrations demanding an end to the genocide in Gaza—collective actions to stand up for humanity in the face of the gravest acts of inhumanity. In this context, it is absurd that under these proposals, holding repeated protests could justify far-reaching restrictions and even outright bans.

Where does this lead? Trade unions are asking whether picketing during an industrial dispute would make them vulnerable to heavy-handed interventions. I understand that the Government are supporting Lords amendment 312; I oppose it entirely, and will instead be supporting a motion in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) to disagree with amendment 312. This assault on the right to protest could lead us down an extremely worrying path, where Governments can become totalitarian and are able to silence whomever they choose.

British democracy has been defined by dissent, and social progression has been achieved by diverse groups mobilising for women's rights, for LGBTQ+ equality, for workers' rights, and for solidarity across those causes. I reiterate my opposition to clauses 156 and 158, which deal with wearing or using items to conceal identity at protests. There has not been a fundamental assessment or full clarity about how making

"wearing or otherwise using an item that conceals"

a person's

"identity or another person's identity"

an offence, as the Bill states, will work in practice. For example, how will it work for Muslim women who observe hijab or niqab? I understand that a defence has been worked in for those concealing their identity at protests for religious purposes, but it is a defence in law, to be proven only after an arrest and during onerous court proceedings. These clauses will only extend the ways in which black, Asian and minority ethnic individuals are over-represented at every stage of the criminal justice system.

If we believe in democratic values, we must defend the space for protest—loudly and with determination—against attempts to shrink it further. At a time when public trust in political institutions is already incredibly fragile, the Government's decision to weaken one of the few tools people have to hold power to account is, in my view, irresponsible. This Bill draws another line in the sand between those who benefit from the political establishment and those who wish to challenge it. I am with the protesters, who have my solidarity, because I know which side of history I want to be on.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I rise today to speak to the Lords amendments to the Crime and Policing Bill. I have spoken previously on this piece of legislation, but today I want to focus specifically on Lords amendments 6, 10 and 11, and urge Ministers to accept them. They are on topics on which we Opposition Members have been pushing for action: fly-tipping and littering. Those issues come up in not just my inbox, but the inboxes of Members from all parts of this House, and they affect our residents day in, day out. For those

of us in the west midlands, on the edge of Birmingham, where there are bin strikes, thanks to the Labour-run council, fly-tipping is an even greater scourge these days. As I say, this is not the first time I have spoken on these topics; I spoke about them on Second Reading, too.

4.15 pm

I will briefly set out why I am speaking on these topics, and I will urge the Minister to support the pragmatic, practical, and much-needed measures in the amendments. Fly-tipping blights our streets, our countryside and our green spaces. The House knows that I am incredibly passionate about it. It hurts wildlife, undermines pride in our communities and leaves residents feeling helpless.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): In rural areas, farmers are often blighted, and end up landed with the costs of significant, often industrial and criminal fly-tipping. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that is deeply unfair, and that the Government should accept the amendments, which would help take the burden away from the victims of these crimes?

Wendy Morton: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. So often when I travel around the constituency, I see gateways where people have fly-tipped, and I have seen piles of fridges and mattresses. It is industrial fly-tipping, and it is disgraceful and disgusting.

Fly-tipping costs around £1 billion to deal with each year. That is £1 billion that could be going to other things, rather than being wasted on clearing up people's mess. I see that in my constituency, but I want to acknowledge the brilliant work done by so many local volunteer groups to tackle the blight on our doorsteps. I also acknowledge the work of Conservative-run Walsall council, which has taken a zero-tolerance approach, investing in enforcement, expanding CCTV, issuing fines and working with the police to seize vehicles linked to fly-tipping.

Sammy Wilson: Does the right hon. Lady accept that in many instances, action is not taken because of the fear of violence? Much of this tipping is done by criminal gangs, who will stop at nothing because it is a very profitable industry. Organisations such as the Environment Agency, and even sometimes local councils and the police, do not take the action that is required, leading to the accumulation of huge amounts of waste.

Wendy Morton: The right hon. Gentleman is so right. People might ask why I, as a Member of Parliament, am talking about something as simple as litter and fly-tipping, but this criminal activity is costing the taxpayer, costing wildlife and costing our communities. We need strong action—on enforcement and deterrence—to stop this scourge. Walsall, as I have explained, is treating fly-tipping as the crime that it is. The council is gathering evidence and prosecuting offenders, and then the fines can be reinvested in enforcement. All of that together sends a clear message that if people treat our streets as a litter bin, there will be consequences.

That is why I recommend, push, promote and welcome the amendments that would give penalty points to those convicted of fly-tipping offences. We must be clear that if someone uses a vehicle to commit this crime, there will be real consequences. Amendments that would

allow vehicles to be seized are a welcome further measure. If we remove the means by which this crime is committed, we strike at the heart of the problem. It is no longer enough to tinker around the edges; we need strong action. Enforcement is key, but so is deterrence. That is why I have long argued for stronger action on littering from vehicles, including putting penalty points on people's driving licences. If people know that there are real consequences, behaviour will change, because ultimately this is about respect—respect for our communities, for our environment, and for the people who take pride in the place where they live. They are the people who make this country a great place to live, and for their sakes, I urge the Minister to listen, to engage, to take action, and to strengthen the Bill, so that actions once again have real consequences.

Let me end with a slogan from Keep Britain Tidy, which some Members may remember: “Don't be a Tossler”. I say to the Government: don't toss this matter to one side. Take some firm action, please.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Let us make sure that language is always parliamentary. I call Andy McDonald.

Hon. Members: Follow that!

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): Follow that, indeed!

Let me begin by making it clear that I welcome the Bill and the many measures that the Government have introduced. There is much here that will strengthen policing, protect communities, and respond to genuine public concern about crime and safety. However, Lords amendment 312 causes me real concern, because protest is not some peripheral irritation in our democracy. It is not an inconvenience to be managed. It is, in truth, part of the lifeblood of the labour movement, and of every movement that has ever expanded rights, protections or dignity in this country. From the earliest trade unionists to the Chartists to those who organised in the streets when they had no voice in this Chamber, progress in this country has never been handed down; it has been demanded, organised, and often disrupted into being—yes, disrupted. Protest exists precisely because Governments of the day, of all political colours, have too often sought to restrict the expression of public opinion when it has become uncomfortable. We should be honest about that.

Public organising—protest—is how people express their view, but expressing a view is not the same as being heard, and it is certainly not the same as achieving change. Change comes when that expression is repeated, sustained, and cumulative—when it builds pressure over time until it cannot be ignored. That was as true for the suffragettes as it was for those in the anti-apartheid movement. Neither succeeded because they protested once, politely, and then went home. They succeeded because disruption accumulated, because pressure mounted, and because their cause could not be quietly set aside. That is the democratic tradition we inherit, and it is one that we should be extremely cautious about constraining—which brings me to Lords amendment 312.

Whatever its intentions, the amendment represents a continuation of, not a departure from, a trajectory set by the last Government. We have in recent years seen a steady expansion of public order powers, through the

Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 and the Public Order Act 2023. At each stage, concerns were raised—by Members on both sides of the House, by those in the other place and by civil liberties organisations—that the balance between public order and the right to protest was being tilted too far, and we are now being asked to accept a further step in that same direction.

It was not so many weeks ago that Gina Romero, the United Nations special rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association, was in this Parliament, expressing horror about the fact that the United Kingdom Government were at the leading edge of these provisions. The rest of the world is looking. Other countries are waiting to see how this plays out in our country, because they intend to copy and paste and do the self-same thing in their jurisdictions. It is perhaps fortunate that Viktor Orbán has gone, because I am pretty convinced that he would be looking to these measures, among others.

Lords amendment 312 does something very specific: it revives, in substance, provisions that were previously rejected. Hon. Members will recall that during the passage of the Public Order Act 2023, the then Government sought, through Lords amendments 48 and 49, to require the police to take account of cumulative disruption when imposing conditions on protests under sections 12 and 14 of the Public Order Act 1986. Those provisions were defeated in the House of Lords, with opposition from Labour, Liberal Democrat and Cross-Bench peers, yet even before the ink was dry on those proceedings and the 2023 Act had received Royal Assent, the then Government sought to achieve the same outcome through secondary legislation: the Public Order Act 1986 (Serious Disruption to the Life of the Community) Regulations 2023. Those regulations did three things of note: they lowered the threshold of disruption to “more than minor”, introduced the concept of “cumulative disruption”, and expanded police discretion to consider multiple events collectively.

And what happened? The regulations were quashed by the courts in the National Council for Civil Liberties v. the Secretary of State for the Home Department in 2023. They were quashed because the process by which they were brought forward was found to be unlawful. To be fair, the Government have learned from that episode, and Lords amendment 312 is more cautious. It embeds the concept of cumulative disruption in primary legislation, and avoids reopening the broader and highly contentious definition of “serious disruption”, reflecting an incremental approach shaped by judicial intervention and parliamentary resistance. I recognise that, but recognising that the drafting is more careful does not answer the central question: should we be doing this at all? We are being asked to take a concept that was rejected in this House and the other place, and which was unsuccessfully imposed through regulations that were struck down by the courts, and to reintroduce it. It is more carefully packaged but substantively similar.

There is a second concern, which is about the process, because this measure has not come to us in the ordinary way. It has not been introduced as a Government clause in this House, which would make it subject to full debate, amendment and Division; it has been inserted by the Lords. I say gently but firmly that that mirrors the approach that many of us criticised when it was

[*Andy McDonald*]

adopted by the previous Government. If we believe that something is important enough to legislate on—particularly something that touches on fundamental rights—it is important enough to be properly scrutinised in this Chamber.

In considering the proposals, we should reflect on very recent events. It has been reported that in the case involving Ben Jamal and Chris Nineham, which I understand is now subject to appeal, the defence argued that at the protest in question, the police relied on powers relating to cumulative disruption that were derived from the 2023 regulations, which were later quashed by the Court of Appeal in the *National Council for Civil Liberties v. the Secretary of State for the Home Department*. If that account is borne out, it raises serious questions. It means that even without a clear statutory footing, such expansive interpretations are already influencing operational decisions, which underlines the risk that legislating for cumulative disruption may not clarify the law, but instead entrench uncertainty and overreach at the expense of the right to protest.

I say to Ministers that much in this Bill commands support, and there is no need to jeopardise that support by attaching to it a measure that raises serious civil liberties concerns and has not been properly tested in this House. The Government should withdraw Lords amendment 312. If they do not, Members should be clear that this is not a minor or technical issue to be nodded through. It may require the House to divide—if necessary, on a roll-up motion at the end of the proceedings—to ensure that our view is properly recorded and we defend the civil liberties that generations have so proudly fought for.

4.30 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I rise to speak mainly about Lords amendment 333 on illegal trading, but I share the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) and the hon. Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) about the illiberal nature of the crackdown on protests. I never thought I would be entering into a world in which old ladies sitting down in protest would in effect be proscribed as terrorists. We are moving into some kind of Kafkaesque world, and the provisions of this Bill worry me in the same way. However, as I wish to focus on illegal trading, that is what I will do.

I and the Liberal Democrats support Lords amendment 333, which would extend the length of closure notices. We campaigned during the general election for a return to proper community policing and to safer high streets and town centres, and ending the scourge of illegal trading must be part of that. Extending the period over which closure notices may be served by police inspectors or local authority chief executives under section 77 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 to seven days, as set out in Lords amendment 333, would be a move in the right direction. I therefore oppose the Government's motion to strike out that amendment.

Thanks to local publicans in my Taunton constituency who came forward with vital information, I raised illegal trading in Taunton with Somerset council and

the local police about a year ago. I would like to pay tribute to police officers like Andy, the trading standards officers and my Lib Dem Somerset councillor colleagues, such as Mike Rigby, overseeing the work that has led to a number of really high-profile closures. Taunton Market, Mr Taunton and Top Market have rightly been closed down, following just the kind of crackdown that was needed. I have a message for anyone else considering that kind of activity in Taunton and Wellington: "Illegal trading isn't welcome, you will be closed down and you will be prosecuted."

We need to go further, though. The Chartered Trading Standards Institute has pointed out that we need properly resourced trading standards services, which means tackling the local government funding crisis, particularly the social care funding crisis that is the main burden under which councils are struggling.

Somerset councillors to whom I have spoken about this also want civil penalties against landlords who knowingly let their premises be used for illegal trading, and that has also raised by the Chartered Trading Standards Institute. Those fines should be given to the council both to support trading standards work and to clean up the town centre environment. I believe that repeat offenders among landlords should forfeit their retail property to the council to allow its reuse or regeneration. Behind too many illegal shops are complicit landlords cashing in on the rent from illegal activity, and right now they face no consequences at all.

As well as supporting Lords amendment 333, the main change I am pressing for, following my visit with police officers around Taunton, is to address their frustration with the reality of tackling illegal sales at one end of the counter while trading continues at the other end of the counter in the shops they are tackling. I understand why the law requires that any closure notice must be followed up, under section 80 of the 2014 Act, with an application to the courts for a closure order. Frankly, however, that requirement is a hugely onerous demand on the time of hard-pressed officers, which too often discourages closure notices being served when they are needed.

I am therefore pressing for section 80 to be amended so that closure notices could be served on the authority of a superintendent or local authority chief executive and be effective for up to 14 days, but, crucially, without the requirement to apply to the courts. To ensure a just approach to retailers, exercising such a power would have to be dependent on evidence of unlawful or illegal trading, such as the sale of stolen goods. The Association of Convenience Stores found that 25% of retailers identified stolen goods being sold locally in their areas, including the under-age sale of alcohol, tobacco, vapes or counterfeit goods, such as cigarettes. Enabling a rapid response of this kind would also help to tackle phoenixing, whereby new ventures open a new company just a few doors down from their closed premises.

I am delighted at the action taken locally in Taunton. I support Lords amendment 333 and I do not really understand why the Government oppose it. Action could be taken and they should take it. Councils and police are too often operating with one hand tied behind their backs. There should be immediate closure where that is needed. Town centre businesses in Taunton and

Wellington should not be forced to compete with criminal activity, and I will continue to push the case for stronger powers to stamp that out.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I would like to recognise the work the Government have already undertaken to improve our high streets, including measures announced in the Budget last year: the taskforce to tackle organised crime groups; additional funding made available to trading standards, customs and excise, and His Majesty's Revenue and Customs; and support for community policing, ensuring that there is a community police officer in every neighbourhood across the country. Those are all welcome and important, and it is right that we acknowledge that context in which this debate sits. I would also like to congratulate the Minister for Policing and Crime. She works incredibly hard. Today, she is working a double shift and we appreciate it.

I rise to speak to Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 333, which sought to extend closure orders to 12 months. That has been the subject of some discussion today. I appreciate that the Government understand and recognise the importance and necessity of closure orders, to the point that they have tabled this amendment in lieu. I have to say to the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) that I do not see that as the Government opposing, but rather nudging gently towards the right direction. They are acknowledging the need for closure orders, while recognising the sensitivity that comes with them: the impact they can have in residential areas—this is not just about commercial premises—and on our high streets. In particular, I think about the potential addition of boarded-up, empty homes for 12-month periods and the same for commercial properties on our high streets. That will be a concern and I therefore recognise the need for the Government to consult, but the Minister will know that this draws concern from me and other colleagues who are keen to tackle the scourge of dodgy shops in their communities—and to do so quickly.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): My hon. Friend has been a doughty champion on the issue of dodgy shops. I would go as far to call her a guru on dodgy shops, if she will accept that accolade. Carlisle, like her constituency, is blighted by minimarts, vape shops and so on. I am attracted to Lords amendment 333, but superficially so. I think it is right that we get this correct. Does she agree with me that passing Lords amendment 333 would mark a significant shift in the law? It is important we get this right and consult, and what the Government are doing is extending the power, but with a guarantee to consult.

Melanie Onn: My hon. Friend is right. It is an acknowledgement that action needs to be taken. That is reflected in other areas of action that the Government are already committed to and those we are likely to see further down the track, which I will come to later.

I think we are right to raise the length of the consultation and say that, while we may appreciate the necessity of the Government wanting to consult when the shift up to 12 months is so significant, the consultation period should not be unduly or unnecessarily lengthy.

Matt Vickers: Does the hon. Lady agree that any such consultation should include closure notices, as well as closure orders?

Melanie Onn: The extension to closure notices relates to much shorter time periods, and the periods for notices provided do not therefore necessarily need to fall into the scope of having a consultation—in fact, I would rather avoid having things in consultation unnecessarily over including things in consultation.

We want to drive the changes that communities expect to see, but this consultation has the potential to undermine the seriousness with which the Government take this issue. I wonder whether there is therefore an opportunity for the Government to say that they are aiming for the consultation and the response to coincide with the high streets strategy that we are expecting later this year, hopefully in the summer—whenever summer, in a parliamentary term, actually comes to fruition.

The campaign to stop dodgy shops is not just about not liking the appearance or the proliferation of these businesses, but covers much wider consequences, from money laundering to the sale of illegal goods; there were even suggestions in a recent BBC investigation of these shops harbouring child sexual exploitation activities. Indeed, a gentleman in my constituency called Shaun Tinmuth was sold an illegal vape that exploded in his home, causing thousands of pounds-worth of damage and putting his life and the lives of his family in significant peril. Just last month, we saw national rail infrastructure damaged as a result of a vape shop fire in Glasgow, with a beautiful grade II building seriously damaged. These businesses endanger lives, bring criminal activity to the heart of our towns and fracture community cohesion.

This is happening now. We are seeing damage, threats to life and costs to the public purse because the measures that currently exist are too slow to intervene, because of a lack of the right resources or because these matters are not considered to be a priority by some local authorities or police authorities. We have to ensure that police and local authorities have sufficient resources within their arsenal to provide a deterrent in the very strongest terms to these fake businesses and to make it absolutely clear to any OCG that is behind these commercial outfits that their model will not be tolerated, that they are not wanted and that the strongest available action will be used in such cases.

That is why the Government should not use the consultation as an opportunity not to continue to press ahead. I know that the Secretary of State is being given powers to easily implement this, should the consultation outcome take us in that direction—I really do not want the Government to miss the opportunity to give serious weight to the consequences. I want to ensure the success of the high streets strategy when it comes in the summer, and I really do not think there is any point in investing in our town centres if legitimate businesses are undercut by those operating outside the law or if residents feel unsafe in the very spaces that we are trying to regenerate.

I urge the Government to publish the consultation as soon as possible and to aim to conclude it in support of and around the timeframe of the high streets strategy, in addition to publishing the terms of reference and membership of the OCG high streets cross-departmental group for the purposes of transparency and contribution, and to ensure that every intervention—whether on policing, regeneration or business support—is aligned with the goal of allowing our high streets to breathe again.

Zarah Sultana (Coventry South) (Your Party): I rise in support of the motion tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) to disagree with Lords amendment 312.

Today we are being asked to wave through one of the most draconian assaults on democratic freedoms in modern times, and let us be clear who is doing it: not the Tories—they are not even here—but the Labour party. This Labour Government are attacking the right to protest, attacking trial by jury, proscribing a non-violent direct action group, and handing NHS patient data to Palantir—a company that has helped US Immigration and Customs Enforcement tear migrant families apart and that generates kill lists for the Israeli military—and now they are doing this. This is a Government who are increasingly authoritarian day by day. When people take to the streets to fight back and expose this Government's complicity in genocide, their answer is to ban them.

4.45 pm

The most draconian proposal being debated today—Lords amendment 312—would require the police to consider the “cumulative disruption” of repeated protests when deciding whether to impose restrictions. The “area” that the amendment refers to is undefined; it could mean a single street or the whole of central London. The cause is irrelevant; different groups and different issues can all be treated as one. And there is no time limit; what happened months ago could be used to shut down protests today.

The UN special rapporteur on freedom of assembly warned MPs that she has never encountered legislation like this anywhere in the world and that it could serve as a blueprint for authoritarian Governments globally. Let that sink in.

It is clear that the Palestine solidarity movement that has mobilised hundreds of thousands of people across this country is the Government's principal target, but these far-reaching powers are an attack on trade unions too. Sustained picketing could be characterised as cumulative disruption, and the TUC has warned that these measures seriously endanger democracy. In Coventry, GMB Amazon workers staged over 30 days of industrial action—the first Amazon strike in British history—fighting for a living wage. In Birmingham, Unite bin workers have been on strike since January 2025 against a Labour council that is trying to cut their pay by £8,000. Under this amendment, that kind of sustained, repeated industrial action—the only leverage that workers actually have—would become grounds for restriction.

I say to every Labour Member who has taken trade union money and trade union votes, do your job and defend them. The Labour party is supposedly the party of workers. The truth is that it is Reform with a red rosette.

Let me describe the pattern of repression that this amendment joins. Palestine Action, a non-violent direct action group, was unlawfully proscribed by this Labour Government using counter-terrorism legislation. The High Court threw that out. What did this Labour Government do? They lodged an appeal and sent the police back on to the streets. Last week, over 500 people were arrested in London for holding placards that read, “I oppose genocide. I support Palestine Action.” The Met has still not explained why it reversed its own

policy after that ruling. Since last year, more than 3,000 people have been arrested for holding a placard—not a knife, not a weapon, but a placard.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am going to exercise the privilege of this House to place something on the public record that the mainstream press has chosen to ignore. Six Palestine Action activists face retrial after being acquitted in February following a year in prison. If convicted, they and 18 others will be sentenced as terrorists, but the jury will not be told that. The jury could convict them on criminal damage charges with no idea that terrorism sentences will follow. Not a single terrorism charge has been brought forward. The proscription has been ruled unlawful, and the defendants themselves have been banned from telling the jury that they acted to stop genocide under threat of contempt charges. This is what a stitch-up looks like, and it is part of the same pattern: a Labour Government that will do whatever it takes to silence dissent, protect Israeli death factories and escape accountability.

To conclude, every advance in our history—whether it was votes for women, workers' rights, LGBT rights, or racial justice—was won through sustained, repeated, disruptive protest. The logic of “cumulative disruption” would have crushed every one of those movements. I remind Labour Members opposite that their constituents sent them here to defend and strengthen their democratic rights, not erode them. Vote to disagree with Lord amendment 312 and vote against the roll-up motion.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): When people talk about feeling safe where they live, they are talking not about spreadsheets or crime statistics, but about whether they feel okay walking home at night, whether their local shops can open their doors without worrying about theft or abuse, and whether, when something does go wrong, the law actually backs them up. That is why the Crime and Policing Bill really matters.

I am pleased to welcome the Bill, because it tackles the issues that my constituents raise time and again: antisocial behaviour, abuse of retail workers, the need for visible neighbourhood policing and stronger action on serious harm, including violence against women and girls. They make up one of the most significant packages on crime and policing in decades. This Bill is about restoring public confidence and making our streets safer.

I will speak to Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 333, relating to antisocial behaviour and closure powers. In Leigh and Atherton, as in many towns, so-called dodgy shops have become an all too familiar feature of struggling high streets. Illicit premises selling illegal goods, undercutting lawful businesses and operating in plain sight undermine confidence and damage communities, as we have already heard, but what is striking is not the lack of effort from enforcement bodies—far from it—but the limits of the current system. Again and again, action is taken, evidence is gathered and closure orders are secured, only for the same premises to reopen shortly afterwards under a new name. That revolving door problem makes lasting change incredibly difficult.

As we have heard, local authorities, trading standards and police forces often spend months building cases and navigating court processes, yet the maximum closure period remains just three months. For those determined

to break the law, that is simply not a sufficient deterrent. Legitimate businesses are left trying to compete fairly while criminals carry on. Communities see it happening and are rightly frustrated, while confidence in enforcement and in the fairness of the system starts to slip.

This issue cannot be solved in isolation. If we are serious about restoring our high streets, we need a joined-up approach that stops illicit operators from taking root in the first place. The Government are moving in the right direction, with Pride in Place funding, strengthened trading standards, the Tobacco and Vapes Bill and the forthcoming high streets strategy all forming important pieces of the puzzle. Government amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 333 is another: it gives the Secretary of State the power through regulations to amend the maximum duration of closure orders, with the flexibility to treat different types of premises differently. That pragmatic step will allow consultation and evidence-led change. However, that flexibility must not become hesitation.

I would welcome clarity from the Government on the timeline for consultation, because enforcement that does not stick is not enforcement at all. Our high streets cannot afford that delay. Will the Minister confirm that the amendment sits within a wider ongoing programme of work bringing together enforcement, regulation and stronger powers where needed so that this is not the end of the conversation but the start of a robust approach? Our high streets deserve nothing less. With that reassurance, the amendment will be a necessary step in restoring credibility to enforcement and signalling that the Government are serious about bringing confidence, fairness and pride back to our high streets.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I will speak to Lords amendment 312 on cumulative disruption. I am deeply alarmed by the amendment, which would require senior police officers to take into account any so-called cumulative impacts of frequent protests on local areas when considering whether to impose conditions on public processions and assemblies. In short, the Government are giving the police unprecedented powers to restrict or prohibit protests that they expect to be too disruptive. That is an unacceptable attack on our democracy. These powers represent a significant expansion of state authority and risk undermining long-standing democratic freedoms. They also set a dangerous precedent for the suppression of dissent and inhibit people's legitimate right to peaceful protest.

With the rise of the right in this country, that expansion of power leaves the potential for future Governments to misuse them to suppress and stamp out all forms of protest, strikes and demonstrations. Our fundamental right to peaceful protest, which has existed for many years, must be safeguarded against any attempt to constrict it.

Kim Johnson: Although I support many elements of this Bill, I cannot support Lords amendment 312. The Bill has come back to the Commons without the proper scrutiny it requires and, despite repeated requests, Ministers have failed to provide that. The Bill returns to this House with a troubling number of late changes made in the Lords that severely limit our ability to examine major amendments, especially those that impact the fundamental right to protest—a right that has already been significantly eroded in recent years due to a number of pieces of draconian legislation.

I rise in support of my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) in his motion to reject amendment 312, which is supported by 30 MPs. We have pushed hard for a vote today on the proposals, which will have a far-reaching, draconian impact on our civil liberties. I am disappointed that the motion will not be reached, demonstrating a fundamental failure of the democratic process.

Lords amendment 312 would give police new powers to restrict protests on the basis of so-called cumulative disruption, but what does that actually mean? It is about giving them the discretion to limit or fully ban a demonstration based on the combined impact of multiple protests over time. The move is the latest in a series of anti-protest measures introduced by successive Governments in recent years, and I have to say that, as a Labour MP, I am very disappointed with the draconian anti-protest proposals being pushed by this Government.

Sammy Wilson: What does the hon. Lady say to the people who become the target of those continual protests? The protesters recognise that there is a vulnerable area, a vulnerable community, part of a city or a piece of the country's infrastructure, such that, when they protest there on a regular basis, they cause maximum disruption to the lives of the people who live there. What does she say to those people? Should they not have protection?

Kim Johnson: I have to say that I disagree with the right hon. Member.

Although today's proposals have not come in under the radar through secondary legislation, as the Tory Government tried before they were ultimately defeated in court, amendment 312 has sneakily come in through the back door from the Lords, leaving MPs with no opportunity for scrutiny, debate or vote.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that the vague wording could lead a police force to ban, for example, a Pride protest three months after a farmers' protest? There is no clarity as to whether a protest is damaging; it is just that the protest is cumulative.

Kim Johnson: The hon. Member makes a valid point, and those are some of the issues that have been raised by civil liberties organisations and disputed by the Minister in the House this afternoon. The situation means that many colleagues who are here today will rely on the Government's reassurances that the proposals strike a fair balance between permitting protests and preventing disruption, without being given the time to consider what that really means. I therefore ask them to heed my words closely.

The suffragettes protested for decades for women to win the right to vote. It took years of disruption and fighting a patriarchal system for them to win the historic gains from which we all benefit today. Who would condemn their action, or argue that their protests should have been made less impactful, and their struggle for women's liberation harder and longer? Looking back on the suffragettes' fight, it is inconceivable that we would support a restriction on their struggle on the basis of "cumulative disruption". It was exactly that process of sustained pressure that won women the vote.

[Kim Johnson]

The same applies to the fight to bring down the evil apartheid regime, during which I was proud to cut my political teeth as a young activist in Liverpool. There, we occupied council buildings and universities, raised money and organised boycotts of goods, sports and culture. We marched and held street stalls and mass demonstrations until that evil regime fell—another victory of the powerless over the powerful, made possible by sustained action and protest. Without sustained protest, we would not have the hard-won employment rights that so many of us benefit from today.

5 pm

If Lords amendment 312 goes unopposed, it will have an impact on many protests, including picket lines for workers striking to defend their pay, terms and conditions, and the hugely popular peaceful anti-genocide marches for Palestine. The police have already been given significant powers to restrict these protests, and we have seen in recent months the legal uncertainty and the overreach of the state. Today's amendment risks entrenching that even further.

Protest is not a privilege that the police can limit on a whim; it is a right. Expanding anti-protest powers will not stop people protesting against injustice. It will just lead to more of the scenes that we saw this weekend, when over 500 people were arrested for peacefully holding cardboard placards. As we have heard, the High Court has identified the action taken by this Government as illegal. It is not just an assault on our civil liberties but a massive waste of overstretched police resources.

Protest is part of the lifeblood of the labour movement, as it has been of every movement that has expanded rights, protections and dignity, and I implore colleagues across the House today to reject the vast expansion of anti-protest powers and to reject Lords amendment 312. I ask the Minister to explain why this House has not been afforded the parliamentary right to scrutinise this draconian piece of legislation, and what consideration has been given to a future Government that might be less benevolent towards our fundamental rights. If the Government are confident about this amendment, please put it to the vote.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I shall speak to Lords amendments 6 and 333, regarding fly-tipping and vape shop closures respectively. On the face of it, those are very different issues, but they share a common thread, which is that communities are being undermined by people who think that rules do not apply to them, and the victims are being left to shoulder the burden. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for rural business and the rural powerhouse, and as the MP for Horsham, which is a largely rural area, I hear constantly about rural crime, including theft, livestock worrying and machinery break-ins, but one topic keeps coming up, and that is fly-tipping.

The Country Land and Business Association reports that a single incident can routinely cost a farmer over £10,000 to clear. How bizarre is that? Let us imagine ourselves in the position of the farmer. A criminal dumps a lorryload of waste on our field. We call the authorities and we have to foot the bill. That is offensive

to anyone's sense of natural justice. In my own area, I give credit to Horsham district council for working constructively with farmers to deal with dumping incidents, but even the best councils have to operate within a law that is highly dysfunctional as it stands.

The National Farmers Union, the Countryside Alliance, the Environmental Services Association and Suez Recycling and Recovery all say the same thing: waste crime is spiralling. An astonishing one fifth of England's waste—that is 38 million tonnes—is thought to be being disposed of illegally. This is a big issue, and successive Governments have failed to rise to the challenge. The cost to the economy is estimated to be between £1 billion and £2 billion a year. The cost to individual landowners is even higher, from their point of view.

Lords amendment 6 would go some way to mitigating this situation. It would make clearing fly-tipped waste a duty of the local authority, not the landowner. It would ensure that the criminal—the tipper—paid, rather than the victim. It would strengthen collaboration between police, councils and the Environment Agency so that offenders could not slip between jurisdictions. In turn, councils would need to be funded by Government for their increased role in enforcement and to protect them against unrecoverable costs. Clearly, this would be an extra spending pressure on the Government, but perhaps that would serve to focus their mind on a problem that has been scandalously overlooked for many years.

Rural crime more broadly needs more focus. In my farmer surveys and surgeries, I hear that farmers are struggling with crimes such as sheep worrying, which has resulted in dead lambs, injured ewes and even the loss of an alpaca. Too often operators on the 101 line simply do not understand why this matters. We need better training, better data collection and a better grasp of rural realities.

The same logic applies to Lords amendment 333 on vape shops and closure notices: enforcement must be effective and swift. Under the current rules, a closure notice can shut an illegal shop for only 48 hours. Many police and crime commissioners have said that that is simply not long enough to prepare their case. Some shops open up again almost immediately, continuing to sell illegal vapes or trading as fronts for criminal gangs.

As it stands, illegal traders are undermining the health of the entire high street. Lords amendment 333 offers a practical fix. It increases closure notices from 48 hours to seven days, giving police and councils the crucial time to build a proper case. It allows courts to impose closure orders for up to 12 months instead of the current three months, and makes them renewable. It gives local authorities more realistic powers to act against shops that they already know are selling illicit vapes or targeting children.

Public faith in the justice system is being undermined because people feel that justice is either too slow or that the authorities lack sufficient powers to deal with modern crime. Sadly, the criminals are innovating much more swiftly than the justice system. The two amendments have a common principle at their heart: victims should not pay for crimes committed against them, and the authorities must be equipped to act decisively when they know that wrongdoing is taking place. The amendments would go some way to help with that, so I urge the Government to support them.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I know that feeling safe is very important to my constituents in North Warwickshire and Bedworth, and that is why the Bill is so important for so many people. Today I am immensely proud to welcome the Government's amendment to equalise hate crime law—Lords amendment 301. I proposed a similar amendment in the House of Commons, and I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball) and for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) for their support, along with that of over 100 colleagues across the House.

I welcome the Government's introduction of a new offence of misogynistic hate. I got into politics to fight section 28 and the hate it created. Section 28 attacked the right for people like me to live openly. It stigmatised lesbian, gay and bisexual people. It pushed us out of public life and made us fair game for attack. I got into politics to fight that cruel law and everything it represented. Today I am proud to continue that fight for all LGBT people, for disabled people and for victims of misogyny.

Our politics is becoming increasingly hateful and divisive, and the impacts are heartbreaking. Less than half of LGBT people feel safe holding their partner's hand in public. As many as 70% of disability hate crimes go unreported. Girlguiding UK revealed that one in 10 girls have missed school to avoid sexual harassment. Hatred towards women and girls, disabled people and LGBT people threatens our entire society. It creates fear—fear to go outside, fear to speak up, fear to be seen. It silences people. It makes all of us afraid.

Lords amendment 301 now shows that whether it is due to someone's race, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity, or indeed their sex or disability, Britain is a country that will not tolerate hate, that all hatred is equal and that all those who commit vile acts of hatred will face the same grave consequences. Because of this amendment, victims of hate will have more time to report crimes. For victims who may not feel safe reporting hate crime instantly, that is a lifeline. Perpetrators will get tougher sentence and higher maximum penalties. Aggravated offences are often pursued in the Crown court, where better victim support is available, including the ability to keep them apart from defendants.

I know that some people thrive on the politics of hate. Today, I am proud that the Labour Government have stood firmly against hate in all its forms. We will halve violence against women and girls in a decade, we will fight homophobia and transphobia, and we will confront ableism and hate against disabled people. I welcome, in addition to the tougher action on hate crime, the measures on antisocial behaviour, fly-tipping, knife crime, illegal trading, intimate image abuse, violent pornography and the exploitation of children. This Government are clearly standing with victims, creating safer communities and safer streets. I commend the Bill to the House.

Sammy Wilson: I support the amendments on fly-tipping, although some of them do not go far enough. The extent of that crime varies, from the small scale, with people throwing waste on to others' land, to the scale seen at Hoads wood, about which the APPG for woods and trees heard evidence. The fly-tipping there was so extensive that parts of the wood were cut down. Dumping was undertaken over a six-month period, and the clear-up bill is estimated to be about £15 million. Fly-tipping is

so extensive, and, as has been pointed out, the victims are forced to pay for it. The Lords amendments will at least help to impose some penalties on those who engage in that activity.

I support Lords amendment 35 on the sale of knives in Northern Ireland. Given the discussion that we had about the Southport inquiry yesterday, we know that there needs to be greater control of the sale of knives to people who would use them for evil purposes.

Lords amendment 357 was moved in the other place by the former leader of my party, Baroness Foster of Aghadrumsee, who of course has a great deal of experience of the Northern Ireland context. Those of us who live in Northern Ireland see on a monthly basis how terrorism is glorified—not by dark individuals lurking in the background, but even by Government Ministers and indeed the First Minister in Northern Ireland. The whole point of glorifying terrorism is to ensure that, even when terrorists are under pressure militarily, their evil message—the poison that they wish to inject into society—can still be perpetuated and spread, whether through physical violence or by using people and getting people to support them.

I say to the House that that is not just an issue for Northern Ireland, which experienced years of terrorism and still has the legacy of that terrorism. This issue increasingly affects Great Britain. We see it on the streets, almost on a monthly basis. We see marches glorifying terrorism and intimidating certain sections of the population. Many people in GB, especially in the Jewish community, now feel that they cannot even walk the streets.

This should worry everyone in the House: surveys have shown that one in five people in GB believe that political violence is justified in certain circumstances. How has that situation arisen? It has arisen because we allow the glorification of terrorism. "The cause is just. The people who do it are heroes. They make great sacrifices. They have no alternative"—those are the kinds of arguments I hear in Northern Ireland all the time, but I also hear them now from some of those who promote terrorism in GB.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The right hon. Member makes a very valid point. Does he agree that defeating terrorism is about not just the physical defeat of terrorism but ensuring that, through its glorification, the narrative of terrorism is not allowed to radicalise other people? Does that not point to the inadequacy of the Terrorism Act 2006? Section 1 of that Act has contained a provision against the glorification of terrorism for the last 20 years. We have not had one prosecution under it in Northern Ireland, yet we have had endless glorification of terrorism. Does that not put the focus on why Lords amendment 357 is necessary—to make it easier to secure prosecution when faced with self-evident glorification of terrorism?

5.15 pm

Sammy Wilson: The hon. and learned Member is absolutely right. The whole point of the amendment is to ensure that there is not the ability to keep on promoting the terrorist message. We do not just need a physical defeat of terrorism but an ideological one. They make their arguments to ensure that if they have to pause

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their campaign or do not achieve all their objectives, the poison is injected into the next generation, who will have justification for carrying on what they want them to do, to achieve their goal.

Increasingly, the narrative of politics in GB is being infiltrated by sectarian arguments and sectarian division. All of us should be worried that the law is inadequate to deal with those who have evil intent. I know that some will argue, “But people have to be allowed to say what they want. We live in a democracy. We’ve got to have freedom of speech.” That is fine, but when that freedom of speech is abused and the law prevents us from stopping that, we should be concerned. I met with Jewish students recently. Some 49% of Jewish students have heard either directly or in their presence the glorification of Hamas terrorism and what was done on 11 October. We have to bear in mind that this is prevalent in our society. It is prevalent in Northern Ireland.

This is not just about promoting the terrorist message. It is also about the impact it has on the victims of terrorism and the anger it causes when people in public positions are allowed to stand up and praise the actions of those who killed their loved ones and maimed members of their family, arguing, “I’m proud of the people who did it. I honour the people who did it. The people who did it had no alternative.” Apart from the impact on the victims, it also sends a message to those who are listening that maybe this was not a bad thing anyway. If the situation arises in the future, will those young people be easily recruited to commit the same acts?

In the Minister’s response to me, she argued—I hope that I have got this right—that the amendment will prevent legitimate debate on historical events, but reading the amendment shows that nothing can be further from the truth. The amendment says that the offence would occur if the comments relate

“to one or more organisations which are at the time of the statement proscribed”.

Therefore it does not prevent people from saying that something happened in the past or that an event is historical and a debate can be around it. Instead, it says that the offence would occur only if a statement is made in respect of organisations that are currently deemed to be dangerous organisations and are proscribed.

Secondly, the amendment says that the offence would occur if the comment

“glorifies the commission or preparation (whether in the past, in the future or generally) of such acts or offences”.

So the Minister’s argument against the amendment is not correct. The amendment does not open the floodgates to preventing discussion about issues that might be controversial and that people may take objection to. It is very specific.

I urge the House to support the amendment, not just because of the continual hurt experienced by people in Northern Ireland on an almost monthly basis, where commemorations of murderers are held and public figures go and give support to them, but in the interests of society right across the United Kingdom, where we can see that terrorists and terrorist-supporting organisations are using public platforms to glorify terrorism. That has an impact on the victims, but it also has an impact on young people who are vulnerable, easily manipulated and can be persuaded that somehow or other terrorism is something that is normal.

Jess Asato (Lowestoft) (Lab): I welcome the Bill before us today. It contains a multitude of crucial measures to tackle issues from non-consensual intimate images to retail worker assault, child criminal exploitation and knife crime. I thank the Ministers for Policing and Crime, for Safeguarding and Violence Against Women and Girls and for Victims and Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls, their teams and the whole Government for their work on the Bill. I particularly express my gratitude to the Government for accepting the principle of amendments to the Bill that I first tabled last year, which have been ably taken up more recently by Baroness Bertin in the other place.

Government amendments to Lords amendments 263, 264 and 265 rightly accept that online pornography is a key driver of violence against women and girls, child sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation. We know that online pornography is driven by a profit-maximising algorithm that encourages addiction. Like any other addiction, it can spiral. Addicts find themselves having to move towards increasingly extreme content, including illegal content, to get the same fix, or they find that offline, in real-world actions, and we know the impact that that has.

Pornography is not just entertainment; it has become a form of education. It trains brains to link endorphin and dopamine production to violent, degrading and, in some cases, paedophilic-adjacent content. It promotes the idea that pain for women is pleasure for men. It instils the notion that to be close to a woman is to dominate or degrade her. From Wayne Couzens to Dominique Pelicot, we know how the consumption of online sexualised violence can turn into offline violence.

I therefore welcome clauses 105 and 106. They build on my proposed new clause 102, tabled on Report, and will criminalise the possession or publication of strangulation or suffocation in pornography. This is vital given that 36% of women under the age of 34 have been strangled during sex, and strangulation is now the second most common cause of stroke in young women.

I also welcome the Government amendments in lieu before us that build on mine and Baroness Bertin’s amendments to ban pornographic content that features step-incest or performers role-playing as children. Content such as that, which sexualises children, with very young-looking performers dressed in school uniforms, holding lollipops and stuffed toys, very clearly promotes a sexual interest in children. Two pieces of research from 2024 found that between 43% and 63% of those who have committed offences relating to child sexual abuse material began by habitually watching so-called “barely legal” content.

It is right that through the Government’s amendment in lieu to Lords amendment 265, this gateway to paedophilia is swung firmly shut. We know that CSAM consumption and the further child sexual abuse that it can so often encourage largely originate from exposure to online content that is happened across incidentally, rather than with purpose. Offences for online child sexual abuse increased by 26% in 2024.

Content that depicts step-incest—for example, with a stepfather and stepdaughter—likewise eroticises and encourages the sexual abuse of children and those for whom we have or should have a caring responsibility. Sadly, half of all sexual abuse cases against children are perpetrated by a step-parent or family member. Given

that we are increasingly living in an age of blended families, permitting the depiction of this abuse is particularly pernicious.

Pornography also has an impact on those who appear in it, and we know that women are all too often coerced or trafficked into the industry. I therefore welcome the Government amendment in lieu of Lords amendment 264, which builds on my amendment and that of Baroness Gabby Bertin to grant the Government the power to require pornography sites to proactively verify the age and consent of those featured on it, rather than just waiting for content to be reported.

The amendment will crucially grant powers to allow performers to withdraw their consent retroactively so that they are not forever trapped into a life in the pornography industry by pictures and videos from perhaps even decades prior. It is of the utmost importance that the Government stick to their timetable to deliver that and work at pace across Departments and with experts from the sector to deliver on it. I am incredibly grateful to UK Feminista, Barnardo's, CEASE and the APPG on commercial sexual exploitation for their tireless work on these issues and to Ministers who have worked constructively with me and many Members across this House to ensure that we get these vital changes in the Bill.

I am also grateful to the Government for engaging similarly constructively with me on my amendment to Lords amendment 300, which relates to the proposed statutory definition of so-called honour-based abuse. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel), I was honoured last year to host a screening of the powerful Channel 4 documentary "The Push", alongside the mother of Fawziyah Javed, who was failed through a series of missed opportunities by statutory bodies to identify her as a victim of honour-based abuse. She was pushed off Arthur's Seat by her husband, killing her and her unborn child. That is why it is very welcome that this Bill introduces a definition of honour-based abuse. It represents an important step forward and a great win for all the victims and organisations who have campaigned for this for many years.

Nevertheless, I and organisations that work in this space, such as Karma Nirvana, are concerned that the definition as it stands falls short of fully capturing honour-based abuse. The Lords amendment references only a "person", whereas we know that honour-based abuse is often perpetrated by multiple people as part of a family or community—a feature that distinguishes it from other forms of domestic abuse. I have therefore proposed the addition of "or persons" to Lords amendment 300 in order to reflect that. It is a tiny change, and an amendment sought by Baroness Sugg in the other place. I recognise some may argue that it is already covered by the Interpretation Act, but having spent many years in the domestic abuse sector I know that overstretched and under-resourced multi-agency professionals, particularly the police, may interpret legislation literally and act only within the explicit wording to be set out in Lords amendment 300.

Some have also argued that the use of "persons" would be contrary to the usage and interpretations in other criminal law contexts, yet there are many examples of offences that relate to things such as organised crime, gangs and riot that reference "persons", including in the Serious Crime Act 2015 and the legislation before us.

A definition of honour-based abuse is the culmination of years of campaigning. I remember working with many people who are still in this House on getting it included in the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, which sadly it was not. I invite the Minister to clarify, in her speech, that the Government intend the amendment to cover multiple perpetrators as well as a sole perpetrator. I would appreciate her and her colleagues' continued commitment to working with organisations such as Karma Nirvana to ensure that the statutory guidance accurately reflects the true nature of honour-based abuse. Also, there must be funding for training for multi-agency professionals, which will undoubtedly be required if the definition stays as it is.

5.30 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I wholeheartedly support the amendment that my hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) has tabled to Lords amendment 300. Those of us who have dealt with honour cases recognise the overall family involvement, and there needs to be recognition that we are talking about persons, not a person.

I have listened to a large number of speeches that have done a tremendous job of setting out the principles behind the motion to disagree with Lords amendment 312, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald), which I support. I do not want to talk about the principles; I want to talk about the practicalities, because I am worried that it is when the Government rush to legislate around a particular incident, and do not provide adequate time for debate and individual votes, that Parliament makes significant mistakes. That has been demonstrated in the past.

The Minister referenced the Manchester events, which were absolutely tragic, and the demonstrations that took place then. However, she also mentioned that the powers to deal with such events—to prevent and restrict demonstrations that are causing such distress—already exist. She also mentioned that the cumulative impact is a factor that police officers need to take into account; the change made by the Bill is simply that it will say that police will be required to take the cumulative impact into account. That seems like a simple, small step forward, but I think it will cause immense problems. In particular, it will place a burden on the police, but it will also introduce an element of subjective judgment by a number of senior police officers.

I will give examples from our history. In the 1980s, I was involved in the City of London branch of the anti-apartheid movement, and for two years, we held a permanent demonstration outside South Africa House. I remember being there, singing Christmas carols, on Christmas day. It was disruptive, and people were arrested for individual offences, but that was the whole point. We were there because we said that we would not leave until Nelson Mandela was released. At that time, we were condemned in this House for supporting a terrorist, and for supporting a terrorist organisation called the African National Congress. These days, if we held up the banners that we held up then, we would probably be arrested. The other example I give is from 1985, I think. I was involved in the organisation of the people's march for jobs. A group of unemployed workers marched from the north all the way to London, and my job was

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to prepare for their arrival in London, but in every town and city, they were met with a demonstration. On many occasions, those demonstrations were disruptive—that is cumulative.

For me, the other issue is that unfortunately, I think this change is largely targeted at the Palestine Solidarity Campaign demonstrations in London. I have been involved in some of the processes of negotiation with the police on each of those demonstrations—I have been on virtually every one, over two years. I have been advising the organisations involved when they are going into the negotiations, as well as during those negotiations. So that Members understand, what happens is that a date is identified months in advance. As that date gets nearer, discussions take place with the police, and severe restrictions are placed on the route and the timing of the march. The issue of synagogues has come up; I do not think there has ever been a synagogue within half a mile of one of those marches, but the demonstrators themselves have said, “We’ll adjust the times, so that it does not in any way interfere with any service.” Those are the negotiations that go on. It is a thorough process.

However—I do not say this lightly—as a result of my experience of the whole process, I have lost confidence in the judgment of the senior Metropolitan police officers. I say that because I was involved in some of the discussions on the demonstrations in which Ben Jamal and Chris Nineham were arrested. I found then that the use of the restrictions was deliberately provocative. What has been said in court since then has been disingenuous, because I was there on the spot, and I saw what happened. In fact, the next day, I was pulled into the police station and interviewed as a result of the events that day. I have lost that confidence, because we were assured that the Metropolitan Police Commissioner and his senior team would consult with the wider communities in advance of planning for these demonstrations, so that views could be taken on board, particularly the views of the Jewish community. “Consultation with the Jewish community” has largely been interpreted as consultation with the Board of Deputies. The Board of Deputies represents a certain section of the Jewish community. In fact, it has split. Last year, 37 members expressed their concern about how the Board of Deputies was expressing its position on Gaza.

During the demonstrations, I start the march with the Jewish bloc. I have marching beside me Stephen Kapos, the Holocaust survivor who became quite a famous architect. The organisations in the Jewish bloc have never been consulted about the march. The Haredi community, which is the largest Jewish community, particularly in London—the orthodox Jewish community—has never been consulted about these demonstrations. I am sorry, but I have lost confidence in the assurances that we have been given that there are wider consultations with the community.

In the past few weeks, I have lost so much confidence in the judgment of Metropolitan police senior officers. Every year for decades, we have had a march in London for the Palestinians on the anniversary of Nakba, to commemorate the Palestinians being forcibly removed from their own land. Nakba means catastrophe. There is a march in London every year around 16 March. This year, it was going to go ahead as normal. Planning and

discussions were taking place, and then the police said, “No, you can’t go on your normal route.” Why is that? Because the police had allocated it to Tommy Robinson. We saw what happened last year in London on Tommy Robinson’s march. There was violence, and there were attacks on police and individuals, yet the Palestinian demonstration was displaced for this far-right group—thugs, in many instances. That demonstrated to me the bias among Metropolitan police senior officers. In many ways, it demonstrates how they could start interpreting the concept of cumulative impact in this legislation, which will go through today.

With every move towards restricting peaceful protest in any way, there is a risk. We have seen in the past, on a number of occasions, that if we deny people the right to peaceful protest, they will riot. There is a risk that, through this legislation, we undermine our historic, real commitment to democratic, peaceful protest. That right has achieved so much in our country; we have achieved so much through the reforms that have been demanded. This legislation puts in peril those rights, and in addition, through it, we could be acting provocatively, undermining the peaceful protest that we want to see. That could result in the potential for riot. That is why we needed more time to debate and discuss the issue, and why we needed a right to vote on the motion to disagree. That is not going to happen tonight, and I think we will regret it in the long term.

Andy McDonald: Does my right hon. Friend share my concern that although Lord Macdonald of River Glaven has been commissioned to carry out a review of the complex public order architecture, we are taking a measure in this arena without the benefit of that review’s findings? Is that not putting the cart before the horse?

John McDonnell: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. He made the point earlier, and I think it is completely rational and understandable.

What adds to my anxiety is that in the normal run of things, a serious matter such as this would be introduced in the House of Commons, and there would be a proper Commons debate, after which the matter would go off to the Lords, and then come back to us. I feel that we are being bounced into this today, and I did not expect that of my Government on an issue of this sort, because it is so important, and because it will have major consequences for us in the future—and particularly for our movement, which was based on protest from the very beginning. We seem to be undermining our historic tradition, and our commitment to a role that we have played historically and will almost inevitably need to play in the future.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): There is much in the Bill that is serious and worthy of support. The measures to tackle shop theft, protect retail workers, strengthen the response to exploitation and abuse and deal with knife crime are all important. However, Lords amendment 312 raises a very different prospect. It is not really about violent disorder or intimidation. It is about making it easier to restrict repeated protest. It would require the police, when deciding whether to impose conditions on a protest, to take into account what the Bill calls “cumulative disruption”. That means not just the disruption caused by the protest, but disruption said

to arise from other protests in the same area that were held, are being held, or are intended to be held. The organiser does not have to be the same; the cause does not even have to be the same.

That should concern every Member of this House, because effective protest is very often cumulative, and democratic campaigning is nearly always repetitive. The campaigners come back again and again. That is true of the trade union movement, true of the suffragettes, and true of the civil rights tradition more broadly. The cumulative nature of protest is not a flaw in our democracy. It is often the means by which democracy speaks, and that is why amendment 312 is so dangerous in principle. It takes something that has always been central to democratic struggle—persistence—and starts to treat it as a problem to be managed down. It turns the repeated exercise of democratic freedom into a reason for state restriction. Once the House accepts that logic, we move on to very difficult ground indeed.

Laws like this are never drafted only for the Government of the day. They remain on the statute book. They pass into other hands. We would be naive not to ask how a future hard-right Government might use a power like this. As the TUC has warned, broad “cumulative disruption” tests could all too easily be used against trade union demonstrations, against long-running industrial disputes, against repeated pickets, rallies and marches, and against the kind of organised working-class protest that has been central to the Labour movement and to the winning of rights in this country. That is not alarmism. It is exactly why Parliament should be careful about creating broad powers that can later be wielded by Ministers and authorities with far less respect for civil liberties.

Peaceful protest is not an inconvenience to be tolerated only once. It is a democratic right, and one of the clearest tests of whether we truly believe in that right is whether we still defend it when it is persistent, visible and effective. That was true of the Chartists demanding political reform, the match girls and dockers fighting for dignity at work, the anti-apartheid movement that refused to give up, and the suffragettes who were crucial in securing the vote for women.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The hon. Lady is making an important speech on the right to protest, but does she accept that many members of the Jewish community feel intimidated by regular marches by the pro-Palestinian brigade, who demonstrate loudly and not always peacefully in the same area, week after week? How does she believe that that community can be protected from such intimidation?

5.45 pm

Mary Kelly Foy: I agree that some protests can feel intimidating. On the Palestine protests, people have never protested outside synagogues, and they do not protest outside mosques. Given the proper police protections that already exist, there is no reason for the Jewish community to feel intimidated. But the fact is that this goes far beyond the Jewish community, for all the reasons that I have outlined.

It was said in the past that we should not protest again and again for women’s right to vote, or for trade unions to win their rights against unscrupulous

employers. In their name, and in the name of the whole Labour movement, Lords amendment 312 ought to be rejected.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): There are many important proposals before us today, and I congratulate the Minister on bringing them forward. I wholeheartedly support the Government’s efforts to tackle antisocial behaviour, offensive weapons, fly-tipping, the exploitation of children, and appalling sexual offences. However, Lords amendment 312, which was introduced in the other place, dangerously infringes on civil liberties.

It is incumbent on all Members to jealously guard the rights of our constituents, and any restriction of their civil liberties should only be accepted by this House on the basis of overwhelming evidence that such proposals would strengthen, rather than undermine, the health of our democracy. On this occasion, however, we have had next to no evidence whatsoever, because these significant changes were only introduced after the original passage of the Bill through this House, which is ultimately a pretty sorry way to treat representative parliamentary democracy.

Lords amendment 312 is out of step with the best traditions of this country and of the Labour party, which has always existed to redress the balance of power in favour of ordinary people. The Chartists, the suffragettes, the organisers of the Kinder Scout trespass, those who stood against fascism at Cable Street, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Jarrow crusade—these were protest movements and campaigns of direct action that were supported and led by giants of our party, and which we should celebrate, not disown. They were advancing Labour’s historic mission to wrest power from the established status quo, so that ordinary people have a real say over their lives. Lords amendment 312 contradicts that impulse, and risks shifting the balance of power in our society towards the vested interests that we ought to take on.

The corrosive influence of the rich and powerful runs through every corner of our politics. It muddies policymaking and leaves our constituents asking whether decisions are made in their interests, or in those of the last donor who paid £2,000 a head at a lobbyist curry night. If tweaks are to be made to defend our democracy and prevent disruption to the life of our communities, that would be a far more apt target than the civil liberties of our constituents. Today, Lords amendment 312 is opposed across the Labour movement and civil society by many organisations that share the progressive instincts that should be guiding this Labour Government. That is hardly surprising, given the way this legislation is drafted. It is vague, with no definition of what is meant by

“serious disruption to the life of the community”.

It is widely drawn, with no necessary link between the events considered to be cumulatively disruptive. It does not define the area in question or the timeframe, and it has the blindingly obvious potential to be abused.

The proposals could easily be used to restrict protests simply because they are considered inconvenient due to their persistence, and not because of their content or messages. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) pointed out, this may place substantial political pressure on the decision making of senior police officers. I want to

[Chris Hinchliff]

address the concerns raised by several hon. Members in this debate about the intimidation of specific minority groups. I do understand those concerns and they are legitimate, but the legislation is not drafted tightly enough to address that problem. It is far too vague and far too broad to coherently address that point, and it is not what we will achieve by passing this amendment.

Finally, since we are discussing notions of cumulative impact, whatever the stated intentions today, when these plans are considered alongside the recent restrictions on the right to protest against animal testing, a legally contested proscription and other legislation that I assume means that any of my constituents disobeying these plans would not have the right to a trial by their peers, assertions by the Government that they hold the right to protest sacrosanct are wearing so thin as to be clearly transparent. The case for Lords amendment 312 has not been made, we should not be asked to vote for it en bloc alongside other important but entirely separate changes, and I urge Ministers to drop these plans for good.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Members who have participated in the debate should be making their way back to the Chamber, because the Minister will be on her feet shortly. I expect those on the Front Benches will be communicating that message to their Back Benchers.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): I shall keep my remarks brief. I welcome the vast majority of this Bill, but given the serious implications for our fundamental rights, Lords amendment 312 on cumulative disruption should be given adequate time to be properly scrutinised and debated. This amendment could be used by future far-right Governments to in effect stamp out protests and even trade union pickets altogether. As we all know, Reform UK would repeal the Employment Rights Act 2025, but I doubt it would repeal what Lords amendment 312 will allow. I strongly support my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) in his motion to disagree with the Lords amendment. Sustained peaceful protest is central to the achievement of democratic change.

Madam Deputy Speaker: That was very brief indeed, when the hon. Member had such a huge amount of time. I call the Minister.

Sarah Jones: I welcome the broad agreement across the House with, I think, the great majority of the Lords amendments, particularly those brought forward by the Government. Those amendments further strengthen the powers of the police, prosecutors and partner agencies to tackle violence against women and girls, online harms and hate crimes. We have sought to engage constructively with the non-Government amendments carried in the Lords. As I set out in my opening speech, in many instances we support the intent behind these amendments and our concerns are about their workability, not the underlying objectives. In that spirit, let me turn directly to some of the points raised in the debate.

The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), seeks to disagree with Lords amendment 301. Let me be clear: this is not a

move by the Government to police lawful speech, and these provisions do not criminalise the expression of lawful opinions. Extending the aggravated offences does not create any new offence. This amendment extends an existing aggravated offences framework, which operates in relation to race and religion, to cover additional characteristics—namely, sexual orientation, transgender identity, disability and sex.

This framework applies only where specific criminal offences—offences of violence, public order, criminal damage, harassment or stalking—have already been committed and where hostility is proven to the criminal standard. This is not about creating new “speech crimes”; it is about ensuring that where criminal conduct has taken place, and that conduct is driven by hostility towards a protected characteristic, the law can properly recognise the additional harm caused.

That is an important distinction. Freedom of expression, legitimate debate and strongly held views remain protected, but where someone commits an existing criminal offence and does so because of hostility towards a person's identity, it is right that the criminal law should be able to reflect that seriousness through higher maximum penalties. The hon. Member for Stockton West is simply wrong if he thinks that the same end can be achieved through sentencing guidelines. It is about equality of protection, not the policing of lawful speech.

I will now come to measures debated on the epidemic of everyday crime. Lords amendment 333, on closure powers, was raised by a number of hon. Members. I want to pay tribute to the dodgy shops campaign being run by my hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) and for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt). I agree wholeheartedly with their aims. If we do not tackle dodgy shops, it is very hard to do the wider work of bringing back our high streets. I completely share the concerns raised about the rise of illegality affecting so many of our high streets. It is for exactly that reason that the Home Office has established the cross-Government high streets illegality taskforce, which will be backed by £10 million a year for the next three years—£30 million in total. The taskforce is already working at pace to develop a strategic long-term policy response to money laundering and associated illegality on our high streets, including other forms of economic crime, tax evasion and illegal working, and to tackle the systemic vulnerabilities that criminals exploit. The initiative was announced in the 2025 Budget and, as I said, is supported by significant funding.

Strengthening the closure powers available to local partners in tackling criminal behaviour on the high street is part of that mix. Our amendment in lieu accepts that and will enable us to go ahead and do it. The push from my hon. Friends is to do that at pace. We will of course work as fast as we can on the consultation on closure orders that we have agreed to do. I hear the message loud and clear that we need to go fast, but the purpose of the consultation is to ensure that we get this right—that we make the distinction between private and public property, and the complications that might come from that.

Matt Vickers: The Chartered Trading Standards Institute and many of the agencies responsible for dealing with this issue talk about the need to extend—or potentially extend, depending on how tonight goes—not only orders,

but notices. That is the 48-hour window, or seven days if we go with this amendment, so that papers can be put in place and the dodgy shops, as the Minister put it, do not have the ability to reopen before the order can be put in place. This does not seem to appear in the amendment in lieu. Will she be looking at notices, as well as orders?

Sarah Jones: We are already, on the face of the Bill, extending the time to up to 72 hours. The point of the notice is to enable the time to get to court and apply for a closure. We are providing the extra time to do just that. We are also extending the powers to registered social landlords, so that they can also be part of that. We are already taking action. Of course, we will always keep these things under review. We will always consider what is said to us—even from the Opposition Front Benches—but the amendment today deals just with closure orders, and we have committed to consult on that.

Matt Vickers: The alternative Lords amendment—the pushback from the Lords—relates to notices and orders. The reason there is a problem with the 72 hours for notices is that, because of court sittings and how that all falls, we end up not getting the order in place, and these shops, which the agencies have jumped through the hoops to close down, get to reopen. I do not think the Chartered Trading Standards Institute or many of the agencies dealing with that would agree with the 72 hours. I ask the Minister to go further still and to perhaps look at the seven days being put forward by the Lords.

6 pm

Sarah Jones: Through our taskforce, which is funded with £30 million, we will look at a whole range of opportunities on what we can do. I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that the reason we have a situation where people are money laundering and using illegal shops in many different ways on our high streets is because the previous Government failed to do anything about this growing problem, but we have introduced money and action to tackle it. We will also be tackling the huge challenge we have with our high streets more widely, which was left to us by the previous Government, by introducing a high streets strategy, which we will bring out in the summer.

We are also dealing with the fact that neighbourhood policing collapsed under the previous Government, which has meant that the epidemic of everyday crime is not being tackled as it should be—

Matt Vickers: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Jones: I will not give way again on this point. We have already delivered 3,000 additional officers and police community support officers on to our streets and into our neighbourhoods—an 18% increase in neighbourhood policing since we came to power.

Wendy Morton: Does the Minister not accept, however, that when the Conservatives left government, we left 3,000 more police officers in post than when we came into government?

Sarah Jones: I do not know how many times we have to rehearse this: the previous Government cut police numbers by 20,000 and decimated neighbourhood policing. They then had a sudden change of heart and said that

they would replace those 20,000 police officers, who were recruited with such haste that several forces, including the Met, have sadly—

Matt Vickers: Will the Minister give way?

Sarah Jones: I am just in the middle of a sentence. Several forces have sadly recruited people without the proper vetting processes that should have happened. By the time the previous Government left office, they had recruited the 20,000, but how many of them are sitting behind desks? Twelve-thousand of them are. If the right hon. Lady thinks that is where those officers should be, that is fine, but we believe that our officers should be in our neighbourhoods, which is what we are ensuring.

We are also getting rid of the burden of bureaucracy, built up under the previous Government, that wastes so much police time. In the next couple of years we will free up the equivalent of 3,000 full-time police officers just through use of new technology, AI and new processes will bring this ancient system, which lots of police officers are still working under, into the modern age.

Wendy Morton: The hon. Lady seems to have missed my point completely, even though it was quite simple. Does she not accept that when the Conservatives left office, there were 3,000 more police officers than when we took office? Does she not also accept that her Government and her police and crime commissioners, such as Simon Foster, are actually cutting police stations as well as officer numbers?

Sarah Jones: I accept that there were more officers—not by population, but in terms of actual numbers—when the Conservatives left office than when they took office. *[Interruption.]* But let me ask the House about something else that happened: by how much did shoplifting rise in the last two years of the Conservative Government? It rose by 60%—

Matt Vickers: It's higher now!

Sarah Jones: The rise is much slower and the charge rate has gone up by 21%. Clearly, action is more important than numbers, and this Government are taking action. That is why, for example, the shoplifting charge rate has increased by 21%.

Many Members have spoken about fly-tipping. I absolutely accept the strength of feeling on fly-tipping. I think it is repulsive, and most of our communities are affected by it. Whether it is the large fly-tipping in our rural communities that is driven by serious organised crime or the everyday fly-tipping that we see in our cities, we need to do more to tackle it. The Government have published the waste crime action plan, which will make a substantial difference to how we approach waste crime, including the Government paying for the removal of the most egregious sites. In parts of the country we have seen reports in the press of huge waste sites.

We are also committed to forcing fly-tippers to clean up their mess. Under this Bill, people who use their vehicle to fly-tip will potentially get nine points on their licence. That goes further than what the Opposition had previously suggested. So we are acting, as we should. We did not agree with the Lords amendment that proposed that local authorities should have to clear all sites, including private sites, because of the very significant

[Sarah Jones]

costs that would be required to undertake that. We do not think that can be put on to local authorities just like that. But I assure hon. Members across the House that we are taking significant action on fly-tipping and we will continue to do so.

Matt Vickers: Can the Minister tell me why the Government are opposing the Lords amendment that would allow police officers to seize the vehicles of the vile criminals who fly-tip in communities across the country?

Sarah Jones: There are already powers for the seizure of vehicles, and that is already happening, including in my area. Vehicles can be seized and crushed, and I think we should be doing more of that, not less, when it comes to antisocial behaviour.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who spoke about Lords amendment 361 and our amendment to make it legally sound. As I said, the Government do not have a view on this, because it is an issue to do with abortion, and it would not be correct to take a view on that. She asked when it would come into effect, and I can tell her that it will apply as soon as the Bill receives Royal Assent. Obviously, decisions on particular cases up until that point are for local police, but I heard what my hon. Friend said.

I want to touch on the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) about aggravated offences. Building on what I said to the Opposition spokesperson—

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): He is a shadow Minister.

Sarah Jones: Yes, he is a shadow Minister—I am very happy to give him his correct title.

Britain is a country that will not tolerate hate, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth said. She spoke about aggravated offences relating to disability, trans and sex, and bringing those into line with the existing aggravated offences. That will support victims, and not just in terms of potential sentencing and justice; it will mean that victims can access more support, which I very much welcome, and I am glad that she does too.

Turning to the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and the issue of the glorification of terrorism—oh, I see he is not in his place; I will come back to that issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lowestoft (Jess Asato) has been doing so much work on a number of different areas, not least all of the Lords amendments that relate to porn. She gave a really powerful speech about how pain for women is increasingly perceived as equalling pleasure for men, and she spoke of the need to tackle that in many different ways, because sexualised violence online can become violence in real life. I am glad that she welcomed the step-incest amendments, which are absolutely right, as well as those on people trying to look like children, which she called “barely legal content”. I heard her message about proactively verifying age and consent and about bringing in the timetable to deliver that as soon as we can.

My hon. Friend also talked about honour-based abuse. We understand and agree with her, as well as other hon. Members who raised the importance of realising that often it is not a single crime but involves a whole group of people. We need to ensure that is clear in all the training done on identifying and responding to this form of abuse. Therefore, alongside the statutory guidance, we are developing additional free learning modules for professionals who work with victims and perpetrators of honour-based abuse. That includes a general module as well as dedicated modules on multi-agency responses. Together, those modules will strengthen statutory professionals’ ability to recognise the signs and to manage cases appropriately and safely in practice. I hope that is reassuring to my hon. Friend.

I turn to Lords amendment 312, which many hon. Members spoke to. There are a number of things to say on our cumulative disruption amendment. First, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald), who talked powerfully about his position, which I respect. I agree that protest and the right to protest is part of the lifeblood of the Labour movement, and that progress is rarely—if ever—handed down without first having been campaigned for. I understand his concern, and the concern of everyone in the House, that we balance the right to protest with the impact of protest. We have had many debates on that in this place over the past few years.

The Home Secretary asked Lord Macdonald to review public order legislation and hate crime legislation, because we have had lots of different pieces of legislation and there is a need to take a holistic look at that to see whether it is right. Lord Macdonald has not reported yet; he will do so within a few months, and we very much look forward to what he has to say. I hope that when he does report we can consider his recommendations in this place and discuss all his findings together.

Andy McDonald: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. Given what she has just said, would it not have been wiser to await the outcome of the review, so that we could have seen Lord Macdonald’s view of the entire scene before taking yet further legislative measures that will move the dial even further? Would that not have been the right course of action?

Sarah Jones: I completely understand my hon. Friend’s point, which we have discussed before. As he knows, the announcement that the amendment would be made was given by the Home Secretary after the Heaton Park attack and the protest that followed. It has not come from nowhere; it has been debated and suggested by policing colleagues for some time. The Government’s view was that this Bill is a vehicle we could use to introduce this legislation, and that we should take the opportunity to do so. I know that he disagrees with that decision, but we made it because we feel this is a necessary step, given the situation in which we find ourselves.

I want to be really clear again about what the amendment does and does not do. Marches can only be banned in very, very specific circumstances, as happened with the al-Quds march recently—the first time a march had been banned since 2012. The amendment will make no difference to that whatsoever. It will make no difference to what march can and cannot be banned. An assembly

cannot be banned at all, as there is no legislative basis for that, so again, the amendment will make no difference at all.

It already is the case, and it has been since 1986 when the Public Order Act was introduced, that the police can consider cumulative disruption when they look at imposing conditions on a protest. A condition could be the time that the protest is allowed to take place, the route that the protest can go down or the number of people allowed on that protest. Since 1986, the police have had the ability to consider cumulative disruption when they look at whether they should impose conditions. The amendment means that they have to look at and consider the impact of cumulative disruption when they look at imposing conditions.

Apsana Begum: I note what the Minister has just said—she said the same to our hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy)—that she derives the assessment of cumulative disruption from the Public Order Act 1986, in that the police must, rather than can, consider cumulative disruption. However, the definition of “cumulative” does not exist in the law as it stands; indeed, the bulk of the text of amendment 312 creates a definition of “cumulative disruption”. Will the Minister clarify where else in the law does that definition already exist, because it is not in the Public Order Act?

Sarah Jones: My point was that the basis of cumulative disruption has been in the law from the Public Order Act 1986. In terms of the definition, the police use their discretion on the definition—that is absolutely the case—and they have done so since 1986, when they were able to consider that.

I will say a couple of things on that basis. The police have to balance the rights of freedom of assembly and speech that are enshrined in the European convention on human rights—they have to do that. When they are considering what they do with protests, they have to balance and consider those rights, and if they are going to impose conditions, that has to be done under specific areas, which might be serious public disorder, serious damage to property or serious disruption to the life of the community. When and if this Bill is passed and we move forward, I will commit to working with the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs’ Council to make sure that the guidance is as clear as it can be. However, the definition of cumulative disruption is just its natural meaning, and the police have had that power since 1986.

Andy McDonald: May I trouble the Minister one more time?

Sarah Jones: Yes.

Andy McDonald: Just on that, if she is going to consult with the College of Policing and others, where is the role for this House to have its voice in that discussion? There are many people here who would like to positively input into that discussion.

Sarah Jones: The role of this House is to debate, which is exactly what we are doing now. I listened, for example, to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who talked about his experience with the Metropolitan police in recent times and his sense that he had lost confidence with the

way that they were making decisions on protests. I hear all those things and am happy to have more conversations. I am sure that the police would be happy to as well.

I will just say—this does not have an impact on anything that I think about what the law should be on protests—that there has been a 600% increase in the number of protests over the last couple of years. There has been a huge increase in the number of people protesting and the physical ability of the police to just deal with that in terms of resources is not insubstantial. They spend a huge amount of time on this, as we all know, and our neighbourhood officers are often abstracted. That is right and proper—I am not suggesting otherwise—but it is a challenge for the police, particularly in the big urban parts of our country, to have to manage the impact of these protests.

To repeat, the cumulative disruption amendment does not change the guardrails of the powers to impose conditions. It does not change anything about the need to balance the right to protest in the European convention on human rights with the Public Order Act. None of those things will change. What is changing is that we are saying that the police will consider cumulative disruption, rather than that they can consider cumulative disruption.

John McDonnell: I think it would be really helpful if the Minister brought the guidance before the House at some stage, once it is completed, so that we could have some clarity about it. There will be protests in the future. A third runway at Heathrow has been threatened again, and there will be a cumulative impact of protests in my constituency. I want to know if I will have to hand myself in at some point in time as a result of that.

Sarah Jones: I cannot tell whether my right hon. Friend will have to hand himself in at some point in time. I think probably not, but I can remember debating that particular issue when the previous Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, said that he was going to lie down in front of bulldozers. We have debated these issues on protests many, many times. Guidance does not normally come to this House for approval. That would not be appropriate. I need to stress that the police take the definition as it is, in terms of its natural meaning, but I take the point. The point is that we need to ensure that we get these things right, and I will work with the College of Policing and the National Police Chiefs’ Council on getting this right. I would also ask the House that, when Lord Macdonald has looked at this plethora of emerging legislation, we should consider that and look at what he recommends. Of course, if he recommends that we accept changes to the law, we will debate those things in the proper way in this House if we introduce that legislation.

Chris Hinchliff: Can I just seek clarity from the Minister? If Lord Macdonald comes forward with recommendations to go back in the opposite direction, will the Government then consider those and remove the restrictions they are currently proposing?

Sarah Jones: We do not know what Lord Macdonald is going to recommend. He has terms of reference that we have agreed, which are to look at public order

[Sarah Jones]

legislation and hate crime legislation and to consider whether it is fit for purpose or whether it needs amending. Of course, we will consider carefully whatever he brings forward and we will act according to what we think is right. He is a man of great note who has done a lot of things in his past—he is a former Director of Public Prosecutions—and we will of course listen to whatever he says.

Max Wilkinson: The Minister seems to be arguing that there is not very much to see here, and that the difference is between “can” and “must”. Is there evidence that when police are having problems policing protests at the moment, they are not assessing the cumulative impact and the problems that that causes?

Sarah Jones: Yes, and that is why we are introducing this amendment; we want to provide clarity that it should be considered. We have a community—in particular, the Jewish community—who are suffering and afraid, and they have spoken to us and to many people many times about the impact of cumulative protests outside places of worship and other places. We are responding to that. This is one change in the grand scheme of public order legislation, but it is a very important one for that community.

Max Wilkinson: I thank the Minister for being generous with her time. Earlier, she said that the right to protest was sacrosanct in this country. My understanding of the definition of “sacrosanct” is that it describes something that is too important to be trifled with. In making this argument, the Government are suggesting that the right to protest should be trifled with, and that the police must do more to restrict the right to protest, aren't they?

Sarah Jones: This Government believe in the fundamental right to protest. We will never change our view on that. It does have to be balanced with the responsibility to look after our communities. This Government are seeking to get that balance right. We are making a change to the cumulative disruption legislation through this Bill, which we brought forward in the Lords, and several Members asked about that. Of course, normally legislation is introduced here, but amendments are introduced in the Lords by Government and have been by this Government—it is not uncommon. We have had an opportunity to debate the issue today, and I have listened carefully to all the speeches that hon. Members have made.

Apsana Begum: I thank the Minister for giving way once again. Because it is Lords amendments, I want to get full clarity on the definition of cumulative. She mentioned the natural definition of cumulative. If I may borrow the example given by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who actually was interviewed under caution for laying flowers for dead children just over a year ago, would it be seen as unnatural or natural if he were to lay down in front of Heathrow runway? What would happen? Is it the expectation that the police would determine what is cumulative, as the Minister said it would be the natural definition?

Sarah Jones: As I have said, the police have had the power to consider cumulative disruption since 1986. If right-wing protesters were protesting every day outside a mosque, that would be my definition of cumulative disruption. The police balance every day the powers they are given from the laws we pass. We are increasing the training that our public order police officers get. We are ensuring that they have access to the right training and resources because that was a problem identified under the previous Government. We are trying to clarify through this piece of legislation that cumulative disruption is an important factor and should be considered when the police consider whether to impose restrictions on protesters. To repeat, we are not banning protests; it is about the imposition of restrictions, and that is all.

The other place has properly asked this elected House to think again about a number of issues. Let us send a clear message back to their lordships: we have listened and agreed a number of further changes to the Bill, but after some 14 months of debate, it is now time for this Bill to complete its passage, so we can get on with the task of implementing the Bill and making all our communities safer.

Amendment (a) made to Lords amendment 263.

Amendments (b) to (g) made to Lords amendment 263.

Lords amendment 263, as amended, agreed to.

Amendments (a) to (e) made to Lords amendment 361.

Lords amendment 361, as amended, agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived.

Clause 4

FIXED PENALTY NOTICES

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

The House divided: Ayes 307, Noes 176.

Division No. 467]

[6.29 pm]

AYES

Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten

Benn, rh Hilary
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
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
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah

Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa

Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahan, Jim
 McNally, Frank
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Moon, Perran
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha

Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Patrick, Matthew
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Robertson, Dave
 Roca, Tim
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Seward, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick

Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mark Ferguson and
Imogen Walker

NOES

Adam, Shockat
 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
 Berry, Siân
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartledge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny

Chope, Sir Christopher
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Cocking, Lewis
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinanage, Dame Caroline
 Duffield, Rosie
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah
 Glen, rh John
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lopez, Julia
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan

Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pochin, Sarah
 Raja, Shivani
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Slade, Vikki
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Hannah
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira

Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
David Simmonds and
Mr Andrew Snowden

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 2 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (c) made in lieu of Lords amendment 2.

[The lists for Division Nos. 468 to 476 are published at the end of tomorrow's debates.]

Clause 9

GUIDANCE ON FLY-TIPPING ENFORCEMENT IN ENGLAND

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

The House divided: Ayes 299, Noes 169.

[Division No. 468, 6.44 pm]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 6 disagreed to.

Lords amendment 10 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) and (b) made in lieu of Lords amendment 10.

After Clause 9

SEIZURE OF VEHICLES IN CONNECTION WITH A FLY-TIPPING OFFENCE

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 11.—(Sarah Jones.)

The House divided: Ayes 291, Noes 174.

[Division No. 469, 6.58 pm]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 11 disagreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Before we continue, I advise the House that there is a technical fault with the pass reader system for voting. It is still working, but it is slow to start at the beginning of each Division. The Clerks are looking into it, but I ask Members to wait for the readers to activate before trying to vote.

7.14 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, this day).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83F).

Lords amendment 12 disagreed to.

Lords amendment 15 disagreed to.

Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 15.

Lords amendment 256 disagreed to.

Lords amendment 257 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) and (b) made in lieu of Lords amendments 256 and 257.

Lords amendment 258 disagreed to.

Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 258.

Lords amendment 259 disagreed to.

Lords amendment 260 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (d) made in lieu of Lords amendments 259 and 260.

Lords amendment 264 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (f) made in lieu of Lords amendment 264.

Lords amendment 265 disagreed to.

Government amendments (a) to (c) made in lieu of Lords amendment 265.

After Clause 122

DESIGNATION AND RESTRICTION OF EXTREME CRIMINAL PROTEST GROUPS

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 311.—(Sarah Jones.)

The House divided: Ayes 300, Noes 101.

[Division No. 470, 7.20 pm]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 311 disagreed to.

After Clause 144

DURATION OF CLOSURE NOTICES AND ORDERS: EXTENSION

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 333.—(Sarah Jones.)

The House proceeded to a Division.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I must inform Members that unfortunately the pass readers in the Lobbies are not working. Clerks will shortly take their place at the Division desks in the Lobby to record Members' names on paper. Members who have already voted will have had their names recorded.

We are ready to resume the Division. Members who have not yet voted should pass through the Lobby to give their names to the Clerks. If a Member has already been through the Lobby in this Division, their vote has been counted and they should not pass through the Lobby again. If Members are in any doubt about whether their name has been recorded, they should email the Public Bill Office.

The House having divided: Ayes 301, Noes 157.

[Division No. 471, 7.31 pm]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 333 disagreed to.

After Clause 144

DURATION OF CLOSURE NOTICES AND ORDERS: EXTENSION

Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 333.

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 334.—(Sarah Jones.)

The House divided: Ayes 356, Noes 90.

[Division No. 472, 7.53 pm]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendments 334 and 339 disagreed to.

Clause 167

POWER TO MAKE YOUTH DIVERSION ORDERS

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 342.—(Sarah Jones.)

The House divided: Ayes 281, Noes 70.

[Division No. 473, 8.13 pm]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 342 disagreed to.

Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendment 342.

After Clause 185

GLORIFICATION OF TERRORISM: REMOVAL OF EMULATION REQUIREMENT

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 357.—(Sarah Jones.)

The House divided: Ayes 278, Noes 73.

[Division No. 474, 8.28 pm]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 357 disagreed to.

After Clause 190

PROSCRIPTION STATUS OF IRAN-RELATED ENTITIES: REVIEW

Motion made, and Question put, That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 359.—(Sarah Jones.)

The House divided: Ayes 277, Noes 158.

[Division No. 475, 8.43 pm]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 359 disagreed to.

Lords amendments 360 and 368 to 372 disagreed to.

Government amendment (a) made in lieu of Lords amendments 360 and 368 to 372.

Lords amendments 439 and 505 disagreed to.

Clause 1

RESPECT ORDERS

Motion made, and Question put, That this House agrees with Lords amendments 1, 3 to 5, 7 to 9, 13 and 14, 16 to 255, 261 and 262, 266 to 310, 312 to 332, 335 to 338, 340 and 341, 343 to 356, 358, 362 to 367, 373 to 438, 440 to 504 and 506 to 532.

The House divided: Ayes 247, Noes 21.

[Division No. 476, 9 pm]

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendments 1, 3 to 5, 7 to 9, 13 and 14, 16 to 255, 261 and 262, 266 to 310, 312 to 332, 335 to 338, 340 and 341, 343 to 356, 358, 362 to 367, 373 to 438, 440 to 504 and 506 to 532 agreed to, with Commons financial privileges waived in respect of Lords amendments 335, 366 and 367.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83H(2)), That a Committee be appointed to draw up Reasons to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing with their amendments 6, 11, 12, 311, 334, 339, 357, 359, 439 and 505;

That Sarah Jones, Stephen Morgan, Adam Thompson, Matt Bishop, Alex McIntyre, Matt Vickers and Clive Jones be members of the Committee;

That Sarah Jones be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—
(*Lilian Greenwood.*)

Question agreed to.

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

PETITION

Road Safety in Old Woking

9.13 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): Many of my Woking constituents have concerns about the speed and volume of traffic on Old Woking High Street, particularly near St Peter's church. Those concerns have been increased significantly after a car went through a property on that high street. No one was seriously hurt, but a young family with a new baby received medical treatment, and had to be moved out and placed in temporary housing.

The petition states:

"The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to provide effective measures in place to slow vehicles or manage the flow of traffic in Old Woking."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Woking,

Declares that there are serious concerns about the speed and volume of traffic on Old Woking High Street, particularly near St Peter's Church, with cars colliding into horses, and causing extensive damage; further declares that a woman who recently gave birth required medical attention due to the trauma of one such incident, and the family has now been moved into temporary accommodation - this incident has deeply affected the community; notes that there have been four other incidents in the past couple of years, all linked to speeding or loss of control on this same stretch of road; further notes that the combination of heavy traffic and excessive speed poses a persistent danger, yet there are currently no effective measures in place to slow vehicles or manage the flow of traffic.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take immediate action to provide effective measures in place to slow vehicles or manage the flow of traffic in Old Woking.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003184]

Dualling of the A21

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Lilian Greenwood.*)

9.14 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to have secured this Adjournment debate on the dualling of the A21 in my constituency. I thank the House authorities for giving me this opportunity, because the condition of the A21—the key strategic route serving the constituency of Bexhill and Battle—is incredibly important.

The A21 is not a just local road; it is the principal strategic road network connection between East Sussex's coastal communities and London, the M25, international airports and the wider national economy. It is the backbone of access to employment, freight, tourism and business investment across the Bexhill-Hastings corridor, yet today, the A21 is failing to perform that strategic role. Its lack of capacity, safety and resilience, particularly south of Pembury, has become a structural barrier to growth, opportunity and reliable access to work for the communities along the route and for the towns of Bexhill and Hastings, which lie at its southern end.

South of Pembury, the A21 is still predominantly single-carriageway, yet it carries long-distance traffic volumes entirely unsuited to the road's original design. Large sections are characterised by tight bends, multiple junctions and direct access from homes and farms. The contrast between the dualled and undualled sections creates an inconsistent route standard that undermines reliability, increases risk and erodes confidence in the network for both residents and businesses.

Several villages in my constituency, including Flimwell, Hurst Green and Whatlington, sit directly on the A21. Around 1,500 residents live with a strategic trunk road carrying around 20,000 vehicles a day, including a high proportion of HGVs, exposing them to constant noise, pollution and risk. Their communities are effectively divided by a busy trunk road. That has profound consequences for daily life. It affects whether children can walk safely to school, whether older residents feel confident crossing the road and whether communities function as places to live, rather than corridors to pass through.

Hurst Green is a particularly acute example at the moment. The village primary school is located directly on the A21. Getting children to and from school presents a daily safety challenge that no community should have to accept. Parents and carers have no safe drop-off or pick-up areas and are forced to stop on a national trunk road. Pavements are narrow, often obstructed and completely unprotected from fast-moving traffic. Walking or cycling—activities we rightly want to encourage—are simply not viable options for many families. I have walked this route myself at peak times. Standing inches from a continuous stream of HGVs, vans and cars makes the risk immediately obvious and is very intimidating. This is not an abstract policy issue; it is the lived experience of families every single day.

As the Roads Minister will no doubt be aware, rural single-carriageway A roads carry a disproportionately high share of fatal and serious collisions. More than half of all deaths on A roads occur on single carriageways, despite them carrying significantly less traffic overall. Last weekend, a serious incident on the A21 at Robertsbridge,

which is single-carriageway, resulted in the tragic loss of life and serious injuries. While investigations are ongoing, my thoughts and heartfelt sympathies are with the families and loved ones at this incredibly difficult time. The road remained closed for over 24 hours to allow emergency services to carry out necessary investigations and repairs.

Since 2020, National Highways has been delivering a £20 million safety package on the A21, reflecting persistent structural risks on this stretch of road. Those measures are welcome and necessary, but they also demonstrate that we are repeatedly treating symptoms rather than addressing the underlying cause. Recent interventions, including the ongoing installation of traffic lights at the A21-A265 junction in Hurst Green, have highlighted the daily impact of this route on local communities. They have brought into sharp focus not only the sheer volume of traffic on the A21 but the severe consequences when that traffic is brought to a standstill.

Residents were deeply concerned about the manner in which they were consulted on that installation, which was not sufficient, given that this is a major change for residents who will experience it on a daily basis. Some of them were not even written to until the week before, and there was not a serious attempt to engage with them on the final plans. There had been earlier efforts to engage more broadly on what might be done, but we know that our constituents are busy and have other things going on in their lives, so they tend to engage most profoundly when presented with the final plans setting out, "This is what we are minded to do." In this case, the contractors were already in place and the plans were already decided and paid for, which of course raises a lot of scepticism about National Highways' ability to have responded to residents' concerns.

The A21 is acutely vulnerable to disruption, as we are seeing in Hurst Green during the construction period. Collisions, flooding and landslip events regularly lead to full or partial closures. When that happens, there are no suitable alternative routes. Traffic diverts on to narrow country lanes, damaging rural roads, delaying emergency services and cutting off villages for hours at a time. I have direct experience of that. When there has been some sort of incident ahead when driving down the A21 to my constituency, I have naively listened to the advice given by Google Maps to divert off the A21, along with the many other people who are encouraged to do the same; I have been stuck for 30 minutes because that has happened at both ends of the road, and it has taken the good grace of residents living on that road to come out and manage the traffic to unblock the stoppage. As climate-related events become more frequent, this lack of resilience represents a growing risk, not just to road users but to the wider local economy. Businesses cannot plan around a route that fails unpredictably, and workers cannot rely on it for consistent access to employment.

Nowhere are the consequences of poor connectivity more evident than in Bexhill and Hastings. Bexhill contains significant pockets of deprivation, with lower than average wages and productivity—I know the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) will raise similar issues experienced in her constituency. Across the Bexhill–Hastings corridor, productivity levels remain around 20% below the south-east average. Importantly, deprivation in this area is not due to a lack of ambition or potential. Bexhill and Hastings have

benefited from regeneration initiatives and local growth programmes, but without a reliable strategic road connection, their impact is fundamentally constrained. Piecemeal local schemes cannot overcome a broken strategic link.

Unreliable journey times limit labour market catchments, reduce business productivity and deter inward investment. Employers struggle to recruit when commute times are unpredictable. Investors hesitate when access to the wider south-east corridor is uncertain. The A21 sits at the centre of that challenge. This is ultimately an issue about opportunity. For many residents in Bexhill, the ability to access work, training or better-paid employment depends on the A21. When that route is unreliable, opportunities narrow and inequalities deepen.

There is clear evidence that strategic upgrades deliver lasting benefits. The dualling of the A21 between Tonbridge and Pembury resulted in major reductions in serious collisions, improved journey reliability and a strong economic return. That outcome is consistent with national evidence about the benefits of dualling high-volume single-carriageway A roads. Further dualling south of Pembury would deliver sustained safety improvements, improve reliability for commuters and businesses, reduce vulnerability to incidents and climate-related disruption, and improve the health and wellbeing of all those living in the villages directly placed along the A21.

If we are serious about tackling deprivation, expanding opportunity and restoring confidence in coastal communities, we must address the structural barriers that hold them back. We have already seen how local strategic road investment can transform opportunity. The Queensway Gateway road transformed access to the A21 from Bexhill and Hastings, reducing severances and improving reliability. Crucially, it made regeneration and employment sites viable by replacing an unreliable approach route with a modern strategic corridor. Investor confidence increased because access was no longer a risk.

The Bexhill–Hastings link road provides even clearer evidence. By delivering a second strategic connection between the two towns and a stronger link to the A21, it removed long-standing capacity constraints. That intervention directly unlocked over 1,000 homes and significant land for employment in north-east Bexhill that could not otherwise have been released. In both cases, public investment in strategic connectivity unlocked substantial private investment and long-term economic gains. The lesson is clear: strategic roads unlock growth and marginal fixes simply ration constraint.

For communities along the A21, this is not simply a transport issue; it is about productivity, opportunity, and fair access to work and services. I urge the Minister to recognise the A21's role as the principal gateway to some of the most economically disadvantaged communities in the south-east and to move beyond short-term mitigation. Specifically, will he commit to advancing the strategic case for dualling the A21 south of Pembury, including village bypasses? Will he support further design and development work so that the scheme is genuinely ready for delivery? Finally, will he set out how this corridor can be considered within the next road investment strategy?

My residents are clear: they live with the A21 and they bear with the A21, but it is not the version of a road network that is delivering for them. I have explained

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

all the reasons why dualling the A21 will make a profound difference to the opportunities of so many people in my constituency and in neighbouring constituencies. Anyone who has lived alongside that road, in the way that residents have to at the moment, will know that the current situation is not sustainable and cannot be the long-term fix or the solution that makes a real difference. I ask the Minister to think carefully, consider my questions and give hope to all those in my constituency who do not want this issue to be off the agenda or the radar, even if we recognise that the dualling is not something that will happen overnight.

9.24 pm

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) for securing this important debate about improving the A21. This is an issue that we work on together and with colleagues who represent constituencies along the road, which runs from London down to Hastings and through his constituency.

We all want to see improvements. Like the hon. Gentleman, I support the dualling of the A21 and further improvements to the road. We have both spent so many hours stuck on the A21 commuting between Westminster and our constituencies. As the Minister will be aware, because there is a single-lane system after Pembury, when an accident happens on the A21, people can be stuck for an extremely long time and everything comes to a standstill. That is a really serious issue for our constituents.

The hon. Gentleman talked about how improving our transport links will improve opportunities. Hastings and Rye ranks in the bottom 10 constituencies in the whole country for social mobility, and our poor transport connections are cited by the Sutton Trust as one of the reasons for that, so this is really key.

A lot of work has been happening in recent years to make the A21 safer. I pay tribute to the former Member for Bexhill and Battle for his time in the Department for Transport and for securing some of that funding, which has been continued under this Government. The A21 has definitely become safer in recent years; I know that I have seen a marked improvement, particularly at night, and many constituents have said the same. It used to be one of the most dangerous roads in the country, and I think it still holds a very serious record in the number of fatal road accidents, but it is getting better and is clearly getting safer.

Despite raising this issue, which is mentioned repeatedly by constituents, with National Highways, it is not getting any better, and my constituents and I have experienced it many times: the way in which National Highways handles overnight road closures on the A21 is unacceptable. It does not give any warning or put signs up in advance to tell people that the road is closed. In the pitch black at 10 pm, people are confronted with a road closure and one sign sending them down a series of dark country lanes, with no further signs after that. That puts them in an extremely difficult position in the dark. It is not safe, and actually makes our road safety record go the opposite way, with all the improvements that we are closing the road overnight for. We need to see National Highways get much better at overnight road closures and the

notice that it gives. It is not good enough, and I would be really grateful if the Minister could raise that with National Highways.

The other thing I will raise is the Queensway Gateway Road. It has finally been finished and opened, but we have had much pain in Hastings during the works that have been run by East Sussex county council. It was a shambles from start to finish; it was meant to take a month, and it lasted over a year. We have just found out that there was a £5 million overspend on the roadworks, costing local businesses millions and leaving residents stuck in gridlock for hours when trying to get to work or school.

I am calling for an independent investigation into this issue. Conservative-run East Sussex county council and the contractors it used, such as Balfour Beatty, have serious questions to answer about how they could plan a project so badly that it ran on for a year and overspent by £5 million—taxpayers' money. I would be grateful if the Minister could look into that as well.

9.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) for securing this important debate and for his continued advocacy alongside the work of the A21 reference group on what I know is an important issue for the communities they represent. I welcome the opportunity this evening to set out the Government's position on the A21, its strategic importance and how it has been considered in our longer-term approach to investment in the strategic road network.

The A21 is a key route in the strategic road network, performing a vital role in connecting coastal communities in East Sussex and larger towns in Kent to the M25 and the wider national network. The road supports a wide range of journeys, such as commuters travelling to work, businesses moving goods and services, tourists visiting the coastal towns of Bexhill and Hastings, and people making everyday local trips. When the road falls short in terms of capacity and reliability, particularly on its single-carriageway sections, this can have a real impact on economic opportunities, journey times and quality of life.

Turning specifically to the southern section of the A21, National Highways recognises performance concerns, particularly around safety. It has invested over £20 million since 2021 to improve safety between Sevenoaks and Hastings. I recognise, however, that the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle wants further investment. As the House will be aware, on 26 March, the Government published the third road investment strategy, committing a total of £27 billion to operate, maintain and improve England's strategic road network over the next five years. That investment will ensure that the network remains safe and reliable while supporting economic growth and improving journeys for users across the country. RIS3 places a greater focus than ever before on the maintenance and renewal of our existing network, with a smaller number of enhancement schemes. Improvements to routes such as the A21 need to be considered in that wider context.

RIS3 will deliver tangible improvements through safer and smoother journeys for road users and through targeted programmes tackling key pinch points on the

network. For the A21—as the hon. Member will be aware—one of the main pinch points can be found at the Kippings Cross roundabout, where the dual-carriageway section meets the single-carriageway section. That junction is being considered for improvement as part of one of the new national programmes in RIS3, and I encourage hon. Members to engage with National Highways over the months ahead as this work progresses and the schemes within the programme are prioritised for delivery.

As for dualling the remaining single-carriageway stretches of the A21, there are no plans to do so at the present time. It does not form part of the plans set out in RIS3, and it is not one of the schemes included in the pipeline of schemes for construction in the early 2030s. Dualling the A21 would carry a significant cost, and the delivery of such a scheme would be really challenging, given the local topography and the number of settlements that the route passes through. It would also have significant environmental impacts—I know that there are sites of significant environmental interest in the area, including ancient woodland—and would require, I think, at least three or four bypasses around villages.

Dr Mullan: First, will the Minister advise me on what to do if something is not even in the long pipeline? What does an MP have to do to get it put into the long pipeline? Secondly, if the Minister is not considering dualling, perhaps the next best thing in some of the villages that are particularly hard hit would be bypasses, so are there any plans separate from dualling—plans for some bypassing, even of the single lane? Land has been bought to do that in the past, and then it gets sold back and those plans are not delivered. Is there some light at the end of the tunnel in the form of some potential bypassing?

Simon Lightwood: This is not to say that dualling will never happen, and it is entirely right for the hon. Member and other hon. Members to continue to advocate and build the case for such major improvements. Where there is strong cross-party support from across the region, that sends a clear signal for potential future investment, and I encourage hon. Members to continue to engage with National Highways and other regional partners on what more can be done to improve the performance of the route for the communities it serves.

To touch on some other points, my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) talked about other forms of transport connecting communities, and I know that she has made representations in favour

of improving the speed and frequency of trains between Hastings and London. While that sits outside of my remit as the Minister for roads and buses, I obviously encourage her to continue pushing for those upgrades. I cannot commit to dualling the A21 at this stage, but I can make the commitment that National Highways will continue working with the hon. Gentleman and the A21 reference group to ensure that safety is prioritised on this route.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye spoke about overnight closures, and I commit to raising that personally with National Highways to see what we can do to improve those circumstances.

Dr Mullan: Even if the Government cannot commit to the funding, developing a business case and options in an updated form would not commit anybody to doing it or to saying that there will be funding, but it would be a starting point. On that point, can the Minister be a bit more helpful by saying that he thinks that National Highways should at least have an updated plan for delivering this proposal, if and when the funding appears?

Simon Lightwood: As I said, there are no current plans considering dualling, but National Highways routinely considers the performance of the strategic road network as part of its route strategies process. The hon. Gentleman has my assurance that the current performance and potential future investment needs of the A21 will continue to be assessed in that context to inform future road investment strategies. I have no doubt that he will continue to lobby and to engage with National Highways, along with the A21 reference group. As I have said, I will take away the issue of overnight closures.

In closing, I reiterate that the Government recognise the strategic importance of the A21 and the strength of feeling of Members and the communities affected by its current performance. While difficult decisions must be taken about investment priorities, we remain committed to working constructively with National Highways to deliver benefits for road users, and I welcome the continued engagement of Members in building that case. The concerns raised in this debate will be carefully considered as we look ahead to future investment opportunities on the strategic road network.

Question put and agreed to.

9.35 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 14 April 2026

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

Hidden Credit Liabilities: Role of the FCA

9.30 am

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered hidden credit liabilities and the role of the Financial Conduct Authority.

I will explain the genesis of this debate, Sir Roger. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on investment fraud and fairer financial services. The group was established some years ago as a result of hon. Members being approached by constituents who had experienced scandals in the delivery of financial services and the failure of regulatory bodies to address their concerns. It was chaired effectively by the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), who has now gone on to greater things as the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. I thank him for enabling this debate to take place.

The scandal that has come before our APPG is the use of hidden credit lines, which has caused such serious harm to so many small and medium-sized enterprises, and caused personal disasters for many individuals and their families. We have drawn on the evidence presented to us by constituents, specialist advisers and the reports of BankConfidential, a specialist whistleblowing service for banking staff. Put simply, the story commences with a large number of SMEs approaching their banks for a loan and some of the banks then attaching to the loan a derivative such as an interest swap, supposedly to protect the loan against the risk of interest rate changes, and establishing a hidden credit line.

Lorraine Morris, an expert and specialist derivative lawyer, gave evidence to us on what she found:

“My research confirms that, far from mitigating risk, these instruments were deliberately engineered to transfer significant, undisclosed, and uncapped risk directly onto the customer. The mechanism was the concealed creation of a credit-line liability, booked against the customer’s assets from day one. This contingent obligation was not a notional figure; it was a hard liability that directly impacted the customer’s credit grade”.

Generally, when such a loan is taken, there is an agreed loan-to-value covenant. According to Ms Morris, the application of the derivative and credit line mechanisms impacted on those covenants and

“pushed viable businesses into a state of artificial distress. The sale of products as ‘protection’ when their fundamental structure achieves the opposite is a profound and fraudulent misrepresentation.

It is a profound tragedy that these banking frauds have pushed individuals to the brink, resulting in devastating loss of life, ill-health and destruction of families. As a legal advocate for justice, I believe this affront to human dignity demands not only our deepest sorrow, but a relentless and unwavering pursuit of accountability.”

That is what we are about today.

To understand the behaviours of the banks more fully, we drew on the evidence provided by Ian Tyler, a former senior banking executive who has used derivatives

since the 1980s to manage interest rate risk for some of the UK’s largest banks. I will quote Ian at some length. He explained:

“The fundamental truth that has been buried by the banks and the FCA is that when a bank executes an interest rate derivative, such as an interest rate swap, it is required by prudential regulation to mark a counterparty credit risk limit to cover the Potential Future Exposure. This credit limit is a hard credit limit as the exposure generates a risk weighted asset that requires the bank to hold capital in support.

All hard credit limits are typically included in a bank’s Loan to Value security covenant calculation and so the moment a customer executes a derivative their LTV % increases and this weakens their credit standing. This situation was made materially worse in...2008 when in response to the failure of Lehman Brothers, policy makers reduced Bank Rate to 0.5%. This...led to a material increase in the credit line marked for the derivative as both the Current Exposure and the Potential Future Exposure increased, pushing many SMEs into the position where their LTV % was in breach of their security covenant.

However, as the bank had invariably not told the customer about the derivative credit line, in clear breach of conduct regulation, the bank often forced a technical breach of loan covenant through some other mechanism and then transferred the business to their so-called Business Recovery Unit where most businesses were subsequently put into administration.”

Many in the Public Gallery would testify to that.

What was the motivation of the banks? Hidden credit liabilities generated huge up-front revenues, bonuses and commissions. Worse, when the financial crisis hit, they became a mechanism for destroying viable businesses, some already in breach of lending covenants on day one, because of the undisclosed liability that had been taken on. The potential financial upside was so significant that whistleblowers revealed that staff at the state-controlled NatWest Group were encouraged to send victory emails when they successfully brought down a business that could then be feasted upon, with the bank sometimes buying distressed assets directly from the victims of such frauds.

There are too many examples of that, and some of those affected are with us in the Public Gallery. Alongside the banks’ predatory behaviour, there has also been a catastrophic regulatory failure, associated with a deliberate policy by the Financial Conduct Authority and, before that the Financial Services Authority, of siding with the banks and often with Treasury policy under successive Governments, rather than the innocent business owners who were being fleeced at the time.

The FCA has repeatedly and deliberately failed to act. I will give one example of participants’ experience from our all-party group. In November 2022, Lord Prem Sikka, Steve Middleton of BankConfidential and banking derivatives expert Ian Tyler, whom I have quoted, met the FCA to explain the hidden credit liability scandal in detail. They related what *The Times* assistant business editor James Hurley described across four articles as financial and accounting fraud, including theft from Ulster Bank fixed-rate loan customers, and all the hard evidence was shared. In our view, the FCA should have immediately launched an inquiry at that stage. Instead, it let the NatWest Group mark its own homework. When the bank concluded it had done nothing wrong, the FCA took no meaningful action, even deploying the astonishing argument that the fraud that had occurred was not criminal fraud.

[John McDonnell]

The FCA's unfitness for purpose is not a new observation for many of us here. On 1 February 2016, Conservative MP Guto Bebb led a Commons debate on the motion,

"That this House believes that the Financial Conduct Authority in its current form is not fit for purpose".

Nothing meaningful came out of that debate or has happened since. In many people's eyes, that has left the FCA still not fit for purpose, with Parliament having failed in its duty to fix it.

Where was the Treasury in all of that? The Treasury turned a blind eye and its motivation was simple. It needed the banks to do whatever was necessary to shore up their balance sheets after the global financial crisis, having already made the taxpayer bail them out. As I mentioned, where that has occurred the financial and emotional consequences for victims have been devastating in the extreme. The scale of the carnage has been horrific, with widespread forced insolvencies; suicides and early deaths; thousands of repossessions; and broken families. Many business people were made to believe that they had failed through their own fault, when in reality tens of thousands of businesses were deliberately targeted for insolvency.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member on securing this debate. As he referred to earlier, the conditions that pertained in 2008 and the financial crash have resulted in banks making massive changes, but the banks should not be allowed—or encouraged by the FCA in some instances, as he has outlined—to punish viable businesses rather than promoting those viable businesses and trying to pursue faulty loans, which is what they should be doing.

John McDonnell: That theme runs through many of the reports that we have had from constituents about the failure of the FCA to protect them—to ensure that regulation was implemented to protect them. There were also elements of almost turning a blind eye and collusion, and that is the reason for the anger that people feel.

Let me press on because the figures that we have heard in the past need to be challenged. As I said, many people thought that they had failed themselves, but in reality tens of thousands of businesses were deliberately targeted. Internal reports confirm that not 16,000, as claimed by the FCA, but 3 million customers were placed in NatWest's non-core division, effectively a waiting room before being pushed into the notorious global restructuring group, or Lloyds' equivalent business support unit.

There are so many examples, but I will give just one. Steve and Joan Finch spoke movingly at our summit last November. They took out what was meant to be a simple fixed-rate loan from Lloyds bank to buy Bredbury Hall hotel. Alongside that loan, the bank added the credit liabilities of a derivative, a swap, with a starting hidden credit liability of £1 million, rising to £3 million. Those undisclosed arrangements generated £179,000 in secret up-front commissions. A further £1 million was taken in fees when the bank processed the case through its so-called business support unit, widely criticised as an asset-stripping mechanism.

The business ended up there because undisclosed credit liabilities created a loan-to-value risk of 136%, against a permitted maximum of 70%. Despite being a thriving business, Bredbury Hall was manoeuvred into administration. Stephen Finch was bankrupted and the family had to raise £600,000 to pay off vulture fund Cerberus, to which the loan had been sold, to save their home.

Suspicious of what had happened, the Finches contacted Greater Manchester police with evidence of all three offences that had been committed under the Fraud Act 2006. The police took the matter seriously and investigated, but when they asked the FCA for technical assistance, the FCA refused, so last June the police closed the case, citing three reasons: lack of FCA assistance, insufficient resources for a complex investigation, and concern that examining the case would oblige them to investigate numerous similar ones.

There are so many other cases. One of the cases I have dealt with involved reading the last letter of a man who committed suicide in the hope that his insurance would pay out to save his family home. Many whistleblowers have courageously come forward. In fact, that is what led to the creation of BankConfidential. I will cite just one example: Mark Wright, a former Royal Bank of Scotland manager. One of our former colleagues, Norman Lamb, supported him. Mark provided internal evidence of the bank deliberately defaulting customers to improve capital ratios and targeting customers for debanking and insolvency. He even named the person who taught trainees how to forge customer signatures on bank documents. Mark experienced incredible levels of personal stress, and I congratulate him on his courage in coming forward, but the FCA failed to act.

The failure of the system to reform or to deliver justice and compensation to victims has been the outstanding theme of our discussions and debates as an all-party group. Numerous schemes, inquiries and reports were meant to deliver meaningful reform and provide victims of banking misconduct with access to justice and redress. We have had the Foskett panel, the Swift review of interest rate hedging products, the Cranston review, the Tomlinson report, the Project Lord Turnbull report by Sally Masterton, the parliamentary commission on banking standards and various Treasury Committee inquiries. The truth is that they have had little effect: victims remain out of pocket and meaningful reform still has not happened.

The result is that trust in the system has now been shattered. The FCA's Financial Lives survey shows that less than half the public trust the financial sector and its regulatory framework. That is a damning indictment, and it is problematic particularly among SMEs, where we need business confidence to stimulate growth in our wider economy.

Let me conclude. The all-party group, having consulted so many experts, victims and constituents, has come to the conclusion that the only way forward is some form of royal commission or equivalent inquiry to address the deep structural flaws in the system and the widespread injustices that remain unresolved. We need to establish what happened and who was responsible; otherwise, there is a real risk of history repeating itself, and we cannot stand by and allow that to happen.

In the short term, we are demanding at least a specific inquiry into hidden credit and the role of the FCA. That inquiry must be fully independent, well resourced

and—if it is to have confidence in it—judge led, and it must be granted statutory provision under the Inquiries Act 2005.

This all arose because many of us, as individual MPs, were approached by constituents who have suffered. We must remember that it is ordinary people who have been the victims of this tragedy, and some of them are with us in the Public Gallery. They have kept the flame of hope for justice alive, and I urge them to maintain their efforts and to continue to inspire us with their righteous indignation and justified anger. However, I do not want to be here in years to come—as we were in 2016—dealing with the same problems and with a system that is not fit for purpose, with more victims making representations to us. I hope today that the Government will accept there is a need for an independent inquiry, that we can present the evidence to it and that we can successfully reform the system to protect our financial services and, more importantly, the people—our constituents—who rely on them.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. I think six Members are standing. I will call the Front Benchers at 10.30 am. I will not impose a time limit at this stage, but around six minutes a head should ensure that everybody who wishes to be called is called.

9.47 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, it is a real pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I give special thanks to the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), who is a doughty champion for his constituents, and they are fortunate to have him as their MP—well done to him for all that he does in this House.

It gives me great pleasure to be a voice for the households and businesses in Northern Ireland that have, for too long, been navigating a financial landscape filled with hidden pitfalls and undisclosed liabilities. It is also a pleasure to see the Minister in her place. I have three asks of her, and I hope she will be able to accommodate me, and indeed others in the asks they have.

Although this is a UK-wide issue, the weight of hidden credit falls heavier across the Irish sea, in Northern Ireland. We are a region where 20% of all adults are struggling with over-indebtedness—the highest proportion in this kingdom. When we talk about hidden liabilities, we are talking not just about accounting entries or numbers, but about families in Belfast, Londonderry and Fermanagh who are discovering that the car finance they took out years ago was padded with secret commissions they never agreed to and had no knowledge of.

For our SMEs—the small and medium-sized businesses that are the absolute backbone of the Northern Ireland economy—the scars of the past run deep. Hon. Members may remember the Ulster Bank scandal. I remember it well, as will my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell). Derivative swaps were sold as protection, but instead acted as a noose around the necks of those who had taken them out. Those people found themselves constrained by what took place, and indeed they still are. Today, many of our small firms still find themselves trapped by complex credit lines and by break costs that were never clearly explained.

With that mist, darkness or cloud hanging over those agreements, people find themselves—even today—trying to sort them out and find a way forward. The Financial Conduct Authority has a clear mandate to protect consumers and ensure market integrity, but protection that comes a decade too late is not protection; it is a post mortem. Those people found themselves in agreements where they had no idea about the small print or what it would do to them. Even today, the payments are mind-boggling.

In Northern Ireland, more than 50 bank branches have closed in just three years—11 of them were in my constituency—so the impact has been very real. As physical, face-to-face banks disappear, the digital shadow of credit grows. We see a banking void, where vulnerable people are pushed towards unregulated, hidden lending because the high street banks have abandoned them. That cannot be right. I therefore look forward to the Minister's response. I am sure she grasps the issues, because there will be little or no difference between her constituency and mine.

We welcome the FCA's current redress schemes, but on behalf of our constituents, we demand more than just retrospective apologies. Apologies are words; actions are what really matter. I therefore have three asks of the Minister. First, we want transparency by default and no more discretionary commissions hidden in the small print of motor finance. Secondly, we want SME equality. Our businesses deserve the same protections as retail consumers when dealing with complex credit products. In my constituency, and indeed across Northern Ireland, small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of our economy; they are incredibly important. Thirdly—this is the big ask—we want regional sensitivity. The FCA must recognise that a one-size-fits-all approach does not work when Northern Ireland has the highest vulnerability rates in the United Kingdom. To add to that third point, I would ask the Minister to please engage with the relevant Minister and the banks in Northern Ireland—we need special consideration.

In conclusion, I say this to the Minister and the regulator: the people of Northern Ireland are not asking for handouts; they are asking for a fair game plan. It is time to pull back the curtain on these hidden liabilities and to ensure that the consumer duty is a reality in every town across Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England. It cannot be just a slogan in London; it has to be for everyone.

9.53 am

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Roger. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) for securing this debate on an issue that has long been overlooked. I want to take this opportunity to tell Members about James and Becky Glanville, who are in the Public Gallery today. They built a successful nursing home business, and their story shows how hidden credit liabilities attached to interest rate swaps destroyed a family enterprise.

The Glanvilles' experience is a stark and deeply troubling example of how hidden credit liabilities attached to interest rate hedging products have devastated viable businesses. What began as a successful, family-run nursing home enterprise, built with life savings and years of

[Neil Duncan-Jordan]

hard work, was ultimately destroyed by undisclosed risks embedded within complex financial products sold by NatWest, which was part of Royal Bank of Scotland Group at the time.

The family were never informed that these swaps carried significant liabilities, which would be treated as secured debt against their businesses, eroding borrowing capacity and triggering breaches of loan-to-value covenants as interest rates fell, as my right hon. Friend mentioned. The hidden exposures escalated dramatically, putting the companies under severe financial strain and ultimately pushing them into restructuring and insolvency processes. Despite clear regulatory requirements for transparency and informed consent, the risks were not disclosed. Subsequent treatment within restructuring units, including asset devaluation and agreements that allowed the bank to profit further from the family's losses, compounded the damage.

I will provide some background to the Glanvilles' case by way of context. The family started their nursing home business in 2002 with their lifetime savings and a mortgage of £744,000. By 2007, the business had grown and needed further borrowing. That is when NatWest insisted that they take out interest rate hedging products as a condition of the loans. The family entered two base rate swaps, but what the bank never told them was that the swaps carried large undisclosed contingent credit line obligations, which were treated as hard secured liabilities on the company's credit file and counted against the 70% loan-to-value covenant. The hidden credit lines ballooned as rates fell, triggering covenant breaches and damaging the business' credit standing.

Such products were classed by the Financial Services Authority, as it was then, as a complex financial instrument that should normally be purchased only by investment professionals, yet they were sold to inexperienced clients such as the Glanvilles as free, no premium protection against interest rate risk. The additional costs and credit risks had to be disclosed to comply with the FSA's conduct of business rules. Those rules stated that a firm can grant credit for such products if the customer has given prior consent in full knowledge of any resulting interest and fees. James and his family did not know of the risks or provide any written consent for them.

That raises the issue of the FCA's role, which has already been mentioned. The FCA's redress scheme failed to account for the impact of those hidden credit lines. By excluding that critical feature from the regulatory review, the system denied victims fair compensation and meaningful justice. The interest rate hedging products review was allegedly set up to compensate victims such as Mr Glanville and to put them back in the position they would have been in had the swaps not been sold in breach of the rules. All the banks signed an undertaking that the FSA rules would be complied with in the review, but instead the FSA and FCA agreed separate sales standards with the banks, which specifically excluded any mention of hidden credit liability and its effect. The regulator therefore effectively colluded with the banks to keep this undoubted fraud covered up and reduce compensation costs.

In 2019, Mr Glanville's legal team calculated that, with the losses on the properties that were sold under value, the consequential losses and the interest, the

family were owed £6.3 million. What they have received to date from the bank is absolutely nothing. As people know, the Glanville family case is not isolated; it reflects a wider systemic failure that affects thousands of SMEs. That underscores the urgent need for a full independent investigation into hidden credit liabilities and the associated regulatory failures, which must lead to the establishment of a fair and comprehensive redress scheme. Businesses and families that have suffered such a profound harm deserve accountability, transparency and ultimately justice. I hope the Minister will reflect on that in her response.

9.59 am

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) for securing this vital debate.

I have tried to support the Evans family, my constituents, since I first became an MP, carrying on the work of my predecessor Roger Williams, who was here until 2015. I have got to know Don, Rachel and Paul and their circumstances quite well, and Paul is here with us today. The Evans family have suffered as a result of shocking banking malpractice, and I hope and believe that we have a Minister here today with the professional expertise and intellect to understand what the banks did and put things right.

Don Evans led a family firm in every sense: his wife, two daughters, son, son-in-law and granddaughter all played a part. Springdew Ltd, a pharmaceuticals company, was the kind of firm that made its employees and the wider upper Swansea valley community part of an extended family. Customers included Procter & Gamble, Pfizer, Johnson & Johnson and GSK. In 2007, the business became GSK's supplier of the year.

Unknown to the Evans family, Springdew was originally put into a 10-year structured collar by Barclays Capital in early 2006 for a notional amount of £800,000, allegedly rolled into an interest rate swap with a notional value of £1.3 million, with Springdew paying the fixed rate of 5.6% for an excessively long period—15 years. The bank was highly motivated to make the term so long because it had secretly added a hidden margin of circa 60 basis points to the swap rate, bookable as a day one profit of circa £85,000. That interest rate swap was included in the 2012 interest rate hedging products remediation process. Barclays stated that the product had been mis-sold and a full tear-up was agreed, with the Evans family refunded moneys paid plus statutory interest.

However, the bank refused to engage with Springdew's claim for consequential losses, and the hidden credit line had damaged its credit standing, leading to transfer to Barclays' business support unit, where additional fees were charged. Its experience in the business support unit included manipulated interest rates, false reporting, a refusal to suspend payments, personal and pension funds being injected and forced equipment sales. The hidden credit line also meant that the bank was unwilling to provide additional lending to support growth. The bank has since refused to disclose key internal documents promised in the guide to the review in November 2012. As a company rather than an individual, Springdew has no legal right to a data subject access request, so reform there is desperately needed. If businesses cannot access

disclosure from the other side, they are fighting blindfolded. We also need to regulate business lending properly. The world of SME finance should not be the wild west.

The business had been flourishing, but the bank's behaviour brought all of that to an unnecessary end. The family invested a further £600,000 of their own money to keep the business afloat—money that is now with creditors. Springdew was the last major employer in the upper Swansea valley, providing much-needed jobs. I must stress that when businesses are destroyed through banking misconduct it is not just founders and shareholders who suffer, but employees and the wider community too.

The stress has had direct medical consequences. In 2011, Don suffered a perforated ulcer and was hospitalised for a week. In January 2024, a month after Springdew began liquidation, Don suffered a major stroke. He was discharged early on a Friday due to his wife's deteriorating condition; that same night she was hospitalised with pneumonia, an illness that can be brought on by sustained stress. The situation worsened when the family learned that she had cancer, which she had kept secret, not wanting to add to the family's burden. Although the financial consequences have been devastating, the greatest losses have been of health, of time and of life; one of Don's daughters also sadly passed away.

The Fraud Act 2006 defines three types of fraud: false representation, failure to disclose information and abuse of position. The Evans family believe that they have been the victims of all three. There was a brief glimmer of hope for justice when the Business Banking Resolution Service was established, but the guilty banks engineered ways to deem Springdew ineligible, as they did with the vast majority of claimants, with a staggering 76% of claimants being turned away. The family were then diverted to the Financial Ombudsman Service, which was an equally unsatisfying experience.

There are clear systemic failures in how financial injustices are handled. The Financial Conduct Authority's purpose is to regulate financial services, set standards and hold those that fail to meet those standards to account. Clearly, it has failed to help the Evans family and so many others. The FCA deliberately excluded key features of derivatives and consequential losses from its remediation exercise, and direct correspondence with chief executive officer Andrew Bailey and chair John Griffiths-Jones produced nothing meaningful. Springdew relied on a system it was told to trust. It was misdirected by official process, suffered catastrophic personal and financial harm, and followed the rules throughout.

My constituents have been victims of serious banking misconduct and have been terribly let down. As far back as 2014, Parliament made a commitment to the Evanses and others like them that their cases would be reviewed and that fair and reasonable redress would follow. That commitment has not been honoured. Justice is long overdue, and I urge the Minister to relook at the Evans case and the others raised today and commit to ensuring that those businesses will finally benefit from a redress scheme that will provide true compensation and fairness.

10.5 am

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the

Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on securing this very important debate and on his excellent speech to start it off.

I will illustrate the failings of the Financial Conduct Authority in dealing with complaints from businesses who were mis-sold products with high credit liabilities, by using the experience of one of my constituents, Chris, who is in the Public Gallery. In the late 1990s Chris decided to venture into the property market. He secured loans from Nationwide, Birmingham Midshires and other lenders and made a success of his business—so much so that by 2005, he had a property portfolio of 51 properties across north London.

In 2005, Chris decided to refinance the borrowing for his properties with the Royal Bank of Scotland. Chris was sold £3 million in interest rate swaps and £13.4 million in hedging products as part of the refinancing arrangement. Chris states he was not told about any credit risk or commission on the products sold to him, or about the large penalties to exit those credit facilities. In the interest rate hedging products review carried out by the NatWest Group, Chris was assessed as a non-sophisticated customer and has accepted that he had no previous experience of derivatives and relied entirely on RBS's information and advice.

Chris was told that the bank was fixing the interest rate to protect him from inevitable rate increases. No assessment was carried out to see whether the products were appropriate for his business; no risks were explained and he was never warned about the hidden credit liabilities and break costs that could run into hundreds of thousands—or, as he would later find out in his case, millions—of pounds.

In 2009, as interest rates collapsed on the interest rate swaps, the hidden credit liabilities ballooned, and Chris was now liable for between 20% and 25% of the loan value secured under the bank's standard commercial charges. That caused Chris huge financial difficulty in repaying the loans. He was also tied in because of the costs on the break clauses, which were also eye-wateringly high. The prohibitive break fees and high credit liabilities locked him in and prevented substantial refinancing, as no other bank would take him on without incurring additional liabilities.

As a result of Chris's financial situation, his property portfolios were transferred to RBS's global restructuring group, where exorbitant penalty charges and demands for revaluations made trading impossible for Chris. The GRG then took over the management of the properties, charging 10% plus monthly management fees. All 51 properties were eventually repossessed and sold at auction below their value, leaving substantial shortfalls. Chris was then pursued by RBS, which brought bankruptcy proceedings against him. As a result of the hidden credit liabilities that came with the interest rate swaps and fixed-rate loans sold to Chris, the business he spent 20 years building was destroyed in just three.

Chris is not alone in having had his business ruined as a result of hidden credit liabilities: hundreds of other small businesses suffered. As the House of Commons Library briefing for this debate states, the 2012 Financial Services Authority review concluded that lenders,

"did not adequately disclose to borrowers the cost of exiting an IRHP...failed to ascertain borrowers' understanding of risk...sold products which unsuitably 'over-hedged' borrowers (overexposed borrowers to risk)".

[*Bambos Charalambous*]

The 2012 FSA-operated redress scheme that followed, which differentiated between “sophisticated” and “non-sophisticated” customers, was criticised not only by the Treasury Committee but by John Swift, who was appointed by the Financial Conduct Authority in response to the Treasury Committee’s report. Despite that, the Financial Conduct Authority chose to ignore the findings of the review that it had commissioned. It refused to budge, saying that

“the decision to treat sophisticated and non-sophisticated customers differently in the case of IRHPs was justified”

while acknowledging that “there were shortfalls” in its decision-making processes, governance and recordkeeping. In its very thorough report on hidden credit lines, BankConfidential noted that

“the FCA announced publicly:

‘The FCA also found no evidence that RBS artificially distressed and transferred otherwise viable SME businesses to GRG to profit from their restructuring or insolvency.’...‘The independent review did not find that RBS had deliberately made businesses worse off so that it could profit from GRG selling them off’”.

My constituent would beg to differ.

The FCA should inspire confidence and act with integrity and robustness. The FCA’s decision making and perceived closeness to the banks undermines that. Its role in dealing with the aftermath of the hidden credit liabilities debacle has fallen well short of the standards we expect, so I urge the Minister to ask the FCA to look again at the redress scheme and allow excluded businesses to get the justice they deserve. I also ask the Minister to ensure that the FCA is a truly independent and transparent regulator, and that it restores the trust and confidence that we all expect from it.

10.12 am

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on securing such an important and timely debate.

Catherine and Nigel Jarvis are of the type of local business owners who become the lifeblood of their communities and local economies. Creative, hard-working and passionate about the Northumberland countryside, in 2007 they looked to buy a property deep in the heart of Hadrian’s Wall country. Their dream was to raise their young family there, while renting out some of the rooms as a bed and breakfast. They approached HSBC for a loan of £175,000 to put towards the family home and business proposition.

It should have been straightforward. As more than 40% of the house was always intended to be used as Catherine and Nigel’s main dwelling, under FCA rules their loan request to HSBC represented a standard home on which a normal residential mortgage should have been offered. An offer should have come from the regulated mortgage side of the bank, where all consumer protections under the mortgage conduct of business rules would apply. What happened instead trapped them in a relationship with HSBC for almost 20 years that has ruined their finances, their credit ratings, their health and their relationships. It has ruined their plans for the future and their dreams as small business owners and

has had an irreversible impact on the lives of their two children, who have grown up in the shadow of this trauma.

Instead of a residential mortgage, the couple were explicitly told that they had to agree to a commercial loan with a derivative product—in this case, an interest rate swap—as a condition, without which the Jarvises could not have bought their home. As every member of the public should be able to, they trusted the institution implicitly and proceeded. Even when the suggestion of a derivative product came as a surprise, they believed the bank had their best interests at heart. They were sold the swap on the understanding that it was insurance, protecting them from the risks of increasing interest rates with no up-front cost. The reality was that, on the very first day of the agreement, the product they were sold created hidden profit for the bank and an undisclosed credit line for the couple, acting effectively as a second, secret mortgage on their home. They began their SME journey with extra secured debt and a risk they knew nothing about.

When rates crashed in early 2009, the undisclosed “out of the money” position covered by the hidden credit line exploded that risk, damaging Catherine and Nigel’s internal credit grade and making the loan look far riskier to the bank. Eventually, they were threatened with foreclosure unless they agreed to move into the bank’s restructuring unit, even though Catherine and Nigel never missed a payment and had no knowledge of the additional risk now being used against them. Since 2007, they have poured everything they could into trying to untangle themselves from an agreement they never would have signed had its true scope been disclosed to them. That has cost them hundreds of thousands of pounds, with an untold cost to their mental and emotional wellbeing and physical health.

The then FSA’s conduct of business rules, which applied in 2007, stated that, before granting any credit or loan in connection with an investment business, such as the interest rate swap, the bank was required to make and record an assessment of the couple’s financial standing based on the information disclosed; take reasonable steps to ensure that arrangements for the loan or credit, and the amount concerned, were suitable for them; and obtain Catherine and Nigel’s prior written consent to the maximum amount of the loan or credit and to the amount or basis of any interest fees to be levied in connection with it. The bank did none of those things. In making the interest rate swap a condition of the loan it offered, it hid the credit risk from the couple and made applications for those credit facilities in their personal names without their knowledge or agreement.

The hidden credit line made the agreement toxic from the start. A key factor in the lack of justice for Catherine and Nigel has been the FCA’s handling of hidden credit lines as a specific factor. At the initial IRHP review scheme, the FCA told reviewers to treat the hidden credit line as an internal bank risk and ignore it in considering almost everything that Catherine and Nigel suffered—directly derailing their claim to redress.

The decision was made that the Jarvises’ losses were not foreseeable to the bank. In reality, their losses were not only foreseeable but expected, due to that hidden credit line. Hidden credit line practices and the profit motivations of banks have destroyed the lives and livelihoods of not only Catherine and Nigel but thousands

of families and businesses across the country. I strongly support the calls for an investigation into the specific issue of hidden credit liabilities. Without that, and without a proper inquiry into the FCA's own conduct on the matter, Catherine and Nigel, along with thousands of others, will continue to live without remedy for the financial destruction they have endured.

10.17 am

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) for securing the debate, for his expert exposition and for the work he has done on this issue over many years.

I will raise case of my constituency neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), as she is unable to do because of her Front-Bench position. The case concerns the retired couple Stephen and Gloria Lilley. Their family home, their son's home and Stephen's investment portfolio were all tied up as collateral for a commercial loan, without their knowledge or agreement, to provide security for the hidden credit liability on a swap the bank insisted they take out.

Mr and Mrs Lilley had paid off their mortgage and were looking forward to a peaceful retirement but, instead, HSBC persuaded them to raise £455,000 of commercial borrowing, secured first on their business premises. When there was not enough equity in the business premises to cover the undisclosed initial commission—internally classed as “added value”—and the hidden credit liabilities on the swap, the bank required their family home, their son's home and Stephen's share portfolio to be used as additional collateral: a total of £960,000.

The first charge on Stephen and Gloria's home created a regulated mortgage contract under the FSA's mortgage conduct of business rules. The bank was required to give clear explanations of all risks, including all-moneys charges and contingent liabilities, but despite repeated requests from their adviser for full disclosure of the credit line and the size of the liability, which was needed for consequential loss calculations, HSBC refused to provide the information. Its response was particularly blunt:

“With regard to the rest of the other queries raised...they are not pertinent to the review methodology nor the redress outcome.”

As personal guarantors, Mr and Mrs Lilley had an absolute right to know the full extent of the bank liabilities and risks they were personally guaranteeing. Had the credit line risk and the undisclosed up-front commission been properly disclosed, the resulting losses and damage to the business would have been entirely foreseeable. Yet the FCA, working in agreement with the banks, deliberately designed the sales standards used in the interest rate hedging products review to exclude any consideration of that damage or harm when assessing consequential losses, as the BankConfidential report confirms.

The stress was devastating. Both Stephen and Gloria have suffered heart attacks in recent years, which were directly linked to the financial worry caused by the mis-sale. Speaking in the House in December 2016, my right hon. Friend the Member for Redcar described how the couple had endured sleepless nights and felt powerless as the bank held their retirement security in its hands. When HSBC later admitted that the product

had been mis-sold, it offered only a limited swap-for-swap redress, providing an alternative cap product that still left the Lilleys substantially under-compensated. In fact, they received no consequential losses at all—just interest on what was classed as overpayments on the product. How can a product that destroyed a family's business and lives for over a decade lead to no recognised loss?

Across the entire IRHP review, the banks paid out £2.2 billion in total redress for around 20,000 acknowledged mis-sales. Yet only £46 million—just 2%—was paid for consequential losses, even though most victims ended up facing insolvency and personal bankruptcy. That was no accident: the non-disclosure of the hidden credit line risk was deliberately kept out of the review methodology so that the devastating downstream harm could be totally ignored. This is another textbook example of why there must now be a fully independent investigation, completely outside the control or oversight of the FCA, into all forms of hidden credit liabilities across every bank, and why a fair redress scheme must be established for every business and family ruined by this practice. No couple should have their family home put at risk or endure years of severe stress and ill health simply because a bank failed to disclose the true risks and costs of the products it sold them.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for Redcar can make all the correspondence—including letters demanding explanations on the regulated status of the home loan and the hidden credit line—available to the Minister and her team, in the hope that they may be of assistance to her in considering what remedial actions may be considered. Hopefully, the catalogue of gangster-like behaviours perpetrated by these banks can finally persuade the Minister and her colleagues to launch an independent, judge-led inquiry into an utter scandal that has bedevilled far too many businesses for far too long.

10.23 am

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) for securing this debate and for his fight for truth and justice over many years.

Many believe that this issue goes to the very heart of the Hillsborough law, or Public Office (Accountability) Bill, for which I am proud to be the parliamentary lead. My focus is on ensuring that the law delivers a true legacy for the 97 who died at Hillsborough and for all those who have suffered at the hands of a state that failed them. It may also form part of the solution to the issues we are discussing today, because this is about power without accountability, when institutions close ranks and ordinary people are left to fight alone. The Hillsborough law is about driving a cultural change in institutions that resist transparency, and that is precisely where the Financial Conduct Authority is falling short. Time and again, the FCA has failed to give straight answers to straight questions. This is not regulation; it is evasion. We have seen this culture before in Hillsborough, the Post Office Horizon scandal, the contaminated blood scandal and many others. This scandal may well join that damning list of state failure and cover-up.

The 2024 report by the all-party parliamentary group on investment fraud and fairer financial services should have raised alarm bells for the then Government. A former

[Ian Byrne]

FCA employee described it as having “the worst staff culture” of their 40-year career. We have heard that whistleblowers were sidelined, dissent suppressed and an official line enforced. This is not a regulator acting in the public interest—it is an organisation protecting itself. When regulators fail, people pay the price: water, energy, finance—the list goes on.

Let me turn to hidden credit liabilities. The APPG report highlights serious concerns about the FCA's handling of the mis-selling of interest rate hedging products to small businesses, including the failure to address hidden credit line risks and a pattern of evasion when challenged. Take the case of Andrew Candy. In 2008, he sought a simple fixed-rate loan. Instead, he was sold a complex product without being told by the seller at HSBC about hidden credit lines, margin calls or the risks involved. He was later hit with a £70,000 break cost that had never been disclosed. His business collapsed, and he sold his family home. What followed was 17 years of stress and injustice, with no proper accountability or resolution. That story is familiar to many sitting behind me in the Public Gallery.

Even attempts at compromise were met with further loss and distress. This is not just a banking failure; it is a regulatory failure due to a fear of standing up to the big banks. Shamefully, the FCA stood by and did nothing. Worse, there are concerns that it obscured the truth, including the existence of hidden credit lines, and colluded in the practices, as we have heard from hon. Members today.

Here lies the deeper issue: the FCA is a private company limited by guarantee. It has immunity from civil liability and can resist scrutiny in the courts. That cannot stand. If there is a gap through which the FCA can escape accountability, it is our duty to close it, because no regulator should be above the law, no institution beyond scrutiny and no citizen left to fight alone. Andrew Candy's case is not isolated, as we have heard. It is a warning of what happens when power operates in the shadows. As parliamentarians, we must shine a light, demand truth and stand with those who have been wronged.

I understand that amendments to the Hillsborough law are being considered to extend the duty of candour to regulators, including the FCA. The case for that will be compelling, certainly given what we have heard today, and is likely to command strong support in both this place and the Lords. If the Government take forward the call for an inquiry, as I hope they will and I fully support, the Hillsborough law could be a huge element in getting truth, accountability and justice. For people like Andrew Candy, it cannot come soon enough.

10.28 am

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): I would like to start with a story about greed from a previous life. When I was a young, stony-broke filmmaker, unable to afford the hotel costs of the Cannes film festival, I was staying many miles away in cheap digs and was therefore stone-cold sober for the entire undertaking. I watched as, under the gaze of Harvey Weinstein's hotel suite, Martin Scorsese and Leonardo DiCaprio spent \$1 million extending a jetty into the sea, on which they hosted the most lavish launch party ever for a film company. It was a manifestation of greed and profligacy.

The movie they were launching was “The Wolf of Wall Street”, and I do not think it is superlative to suggest that the scale of the scandal we are discussing today is of that same epic Hollywood standard. If this place will not take the action to secure the transparency and accountability that is needed, then hopefully the world of moviemaking will.

I am pleased to be representing the Liberal Democrats here today and picking up the mantle of a campaign that my predecessor, Sir Norman Lamb, started more than a decade ago. He was one of the first people in Parliament to speak up about this scandal and how it continued to affect constituents in North Norfolk. It is greatly frustrating that we are still having to push for action so many years on, but I know he will be pleased to see that Members are still keeping the Government's feet to the fire on this issue.

Hon. Members from all parties often come to this place to champion small businesses. We know that the economies of our constituencies are built on them, and they provide us with vital services on a daily basis. I know that both as a consumer and from my professional background in the business environment. People who run businesses carry on regardless. They are not greedy people; they simply want to make a living, and yet they have been exploited by others who want to make a killing. People's entire livelihoods and careers were put at risk because wealthy banks and bankers saw them as an easy cash cow to mis-sell products to.

BankConfidential believes that tens of thousands of small businesses have been affected, and tens of billions of pounds extracted from SMEs into the pockets of giant multinational banks that were using the profits to prop themselves up after the disastrous 2008 financial crisis, which, as we know, was made so catastrophic by profit-chasing in an under-regulated sector. Not content with being bailed out by the taxpayer, the banks chose to rinse SMEs in our communities, too. It is worth mentioning that BankConfidential has seen cases of NHS-linked organisations being subject to these practices as well, with capital used to finance and purchase GP surgeries or medical centres being lent with hidden credit lines, which also suffered when interest rates plummeted. It is unconscionable that banks may have gone as far as to rip off GPs and our NHS in their pursuit of profit.

It is deeply concerning that this appeared to be a well-rehearsed routine in which SMEs were taken down, in effect to fund the recapitalisation of banks after the financial crash. It is not just the businesses that suffered, but those in the sector who tried to speak up and speak out. My constituent Mark Wright's story is detailed in the APPG report, and his experience shows that the sector simply is not fit to handle whistleblowing effectively and fairly. He raised serious concerns about market abuse by his employer, affecting not just him but thousands of employees with savings and investments tied to the profitability and capitalisation of RBS. He tried to challenge senior management and speak out. He has seen his banking career tarnished and his health suffer, and he has spent more than a decade trying to secure justice. His complaint and case were severely mishandled by the FCA, and he has faced barrier after barrier in trying to get answers about his treatment and about the action that it will take on what he revealed.

The ordeals of Mark and others who have worked to expose scandals show that we need to greatly strengthen protection for whistleblowers in this country. So far, in my view, the Government have missed two opportunities to take action: as they stand, the Employment Rights Act 2025 and the Public Office (Accountability) Bill have left whistleblowers behind. Whistleblowing is not about someone having the undeserved right to denigrate their employer; it is not a defamation charter or the power to complain in public. It is about calling out things that are wrong and should not happen, but will continue to happen unless someone decides to be an upstander and not a bystander.

The Liberal Democrats would introduce an office of the whistleblower with stronger legal protections to enable people to challenge corporate behaviour without risk to themselves or their careers. We also need to replace the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998 with a stronger and far more effective piece of legislation. It is simply not fit for purpose and does not give those seeking whistleblower protection enough confidence. In recent years we have seen too many scandals that could have been avoided or reduced if people had had more ability and protection to call out bad practices and illegal behaviours. I am sure the Minister will not treat us to a sneak peek at the King's Speech and tell us that it will contain more whistleblower protections, but will she make the case to the Government for such protections to be enacted in the new Session?

The complexity of the financial machinations at play in this scandal should not make any less clear to people the wrongdoing that has happened and the damage that it has caused. People have lost livelihoods, those who have tried to speak out have lost careers and, as the report sadly identifies, lives have been lost.

I will end where I started. A wealthy man who I have known for some time for his integrity and generosity—the opposite attributes to greed—built a billion-pound business from nothing that was taken down entirely by the bank. I asked him what the key ingredient to success in business was, and he said luck—he is possibly the only entrepreneur ever to answer that question honestly. He was lucky enough to build his business back up, but we owe it to those who have not been so lucky to ensure that the hidden credit line scandal is shown the light of justice that it deserves.

10.34 am

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Thank you, Sir Roger, for chairing the debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on bringing this incredibly important subject up for discussion. At the heart of the debate are individual people—people who have lost their businesses, their livelihoods and, in some cases, their health and, indeed, their lives. Let me be crystal clear: where there has been malpractice, those affected should and must be supported and compensated. Every stakeholder in this issue, from the banks to the business owners—certainly the business owners—should agree with that.

I have a certain amount of experience of this. I was a member of the Treasury Committee from 2010 to 2016 and a member of the parliamentary commission on banking standards. We looked at the Financial Services Act 2012, which created the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority to replace the

previous regulator, the Financial Services Authority, which had been an abject failure. The FSA was created under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, which started the tripartite regime that singularly failed our economy and resulted in the financial crisis in 2008.

There is absolutely no question but that what we saw prior to the financial crisis, when we had that credit bubble, were some very bad practices. We looked into this again on the parliamentary commission on banking standards. The legislation that came out of that, the Financial Services (Banking Reform) Act 2013, was originally started due to the LIBOR scandal. None the less, we looked into the fundamental malpractices going on in banks, and what we saw, absolutely beyond a shadow of a doubt, was a mismatch in the balance of interests between shareholders, customers and staff that was massively in the favour of staff. That is what we found, and that fundamental malpractice by the financial services system is what those two Acts of Parliament were designed to resolve.

What we are looking at today is three important areas: those who were sold interest rate hedging products, which most of this debate has been about; those who were placed into RBS's global restructuring group; and those who were on fixed-rate loans in Northern Ireland. I want briefly to go through each. On the hedging products, it was common practice back in the 2000s for businesses to be sold variable rate loans, as well as interest rate hedging products, which were known as collars and caps. In principle, they are not inherently bad products in themselves, as they offered the borrower greater flexibility. If people are borrowing money at 6% and are capped at 8%, but the quid pro quo is that they are collared at 4%, that actually works for them, because it protects them from a spike in interest rates.

Of course, the problem was that we did not see a spike in interest rates; rather, we saw a massive collapse of interest rates during the financial crisis. Interest rates dropped from 575 basis points in 2007 to just 50 basis points in 2009, and that is where borrowers were left out. Of course, we have also seen mismanagement of Government—I am the first to admit that, under Liz Truss's Government, we saw interest rates spike at 15%. Collar and cap arrangements would have protected borrowers from that, so there is a benefit to them. However, I completely understand that we are looking here at where there has been malpractice behind these contracts.

It is incredibly important, though, to look at the problem with the Financial Services Authority, the precursor of the Financial Conduct Authority, which identified that lenders failed to ascertain borrowers' understanding of risk. That is why it was right that the nine banks involved compensated customers to the tune of £2.2 billion. I appreciate that we are talking about those who were not compensated, but there was a recognition that there was a problem.

On the global restructuring group, the Financial Conduct Authority identified a number of clear failings in customer service and poor interactions. I understand that NatWest bank has accepted that the conduct fell far below the standards expected and has paid out something in the region of £100 million in compensation. In the grand scheme of things, that is not a huge amount of money; none the less, it has accepted that. However, it seems

[Mark Garnier]

from the results of the regulatory reviews by the FCA, as well as the judicial proceedings, that it has not properly compensated people.

I should also point out that banks did a great deal to support businesses around the time of the financial crisis. That might sound counterintuitive to hon. Members, but one of the great discussions we had on the Treasury Committee was about the surprisingly small number of businesses that had gone bust. There was an argument at the time that banks were artificially supporting businesses while they had bad cash flow and damaged balance sheets, and that forcing companies into liquidation would crystallise the deficit of the loan on to the banks' balance sheets. There was an argument that they were doing the wrong thing by keeping alive what were then referred to as zombie businesses. This whole issue was incredibly complicated after the financial crisis, and there was an awful lot going on in various different parts of all this.

I want finally to turn to the fixed-rate loans, which are mostly the ones used by Ulster Bank in Northern Ireland, which again is a subsidiary of NatWest. The allegation is that the banks took out their own interest rate swaps, booking them in customers' names and adding a related credit bump. That is a serious allegation, suggesting that the bank staff recorded up-front profits for those swaps and earned personal commissions. The FCA was absolutely right to investigate it, but following its investigation, it said:

"We have seen no evidence that would lead us to conclude that further supervisory work and/or intervention with Ulster Bank/NatWest was required."

I recognise that many will disagree with that conclusion, but even so, it cannot be argued that the FCA did not look into it. This comes down to what we want the FCA to achieve. The hon. Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne) said that the FCA is not accountable, but actually, it is accountable to Parliament through the Treasury Committee, and it is the job of Members on the Committee to ensure that the FCA does the job that we want it to.

When we created the FCA in 2012, the idea was that there would be greater focus on consumer protection. The Financial Services Authority was set up to do the prudential regulation and the conduct regulation. The FCA was set up purely to do the financial conduct regulation, which is looking at how people are looked after. The Prudential Regulation Authority was then set up to do the nuts and bolts of the financial system—to make sure that we did not see a failing in the banking system rather like we had during the great financial crisis. I recognise that many colleagues will feel that process has not happened, particularly in the case we are talking about, but we have to accept that the FCA is an independent body. As I say, it is accountable to Parliament through the Treasury Committee, but it is an independent body.

In a similar debate in 2018, my right hon. Friend the Member for Salisbury (John Glen), when he was Economic Secretary to the Treasury, said:

"We can set the law, but we then must be bound by it and respect the judgment and independence of the FCA."—[*Official Report*, 18 January 2018; Vol. 634, c. 1127.]

To the extent of the law we created, he is absolutely right. In the same way that we respect the judgment of the Supreme Court, even if we disagree with it, we should respect the judgments of the Financial Conduct Authority. It is up to the Minister to come up with a solution, but does she agree with that, or has the FCA got this fundamentally wrong? If so, what line will the Government take? Will they deliver the judge-led judicial review that people are looking for? I hope she will be able to answer that.

In closing, I want to return to those who have been affected. SMEs make up 99% of all businesses in the UK, so it is not an exaggeration that they are the lifeblood of our economy. When they succeed, we all benefit. They need confidence that institutions and financial services are backing them and are there to serve them and to make their businesses work. This issue has damaged that trust, and many have experienced painful losses. We need to rebuild that trust. I am not sure whether a judge-led inquiry is the right step, but I am open to it. The decision on whether to undertake one, however, is ultimately for the Government. I look forward to the Minister's remarks.

10.43 am

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) for securing this debate and for further airing these issues. As he mentioned, there has been a long history of parliamentary interest in these issues, over at least 14 years. That is for good reason, for not only are we deeply committed to justice and do we abhor injustice in this country, but SMEs are the lifeblood of our economy. The events of the IHRP scandal were completely wrong and abhorrent.

From a personal point of view, I cannot deny how hard it is to hear and read about horrific personal circumstances, not least those of the Glanville family, referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan); the Evans family, referred to by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Norfolk (Steff Aquarone); and the Lilley family, referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald). As my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington referred to, in some instances there are hideous personal tragedies, as no doubt may have been experienced by some of the people who are sat behind him in the Public Gallery today.

To that end, I thank and acknowledge my hon. Friends the Members for Poole, for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous), for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne), and for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East, and the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick)—the latter knows I struggle sometimes to pronounce the name of his constituency; I hope he thinks I had a decent go—and the spokespeople from other parties for their contributions to the debate. They have shared experiences of those they represent and broader views, and in doing so, they have been clear about the deep sense of injustice and harm felt by many businesses that were affected by these issues—I know of the same in my own postbag.

Not least because of the correspondence I have had and what we have heard today, I recognise that some businesses remain deeply dissatisfied with the operation of the original redress scheme and that its conclusions continue to be strongly contested. Although there have been a number of reviews and pieces of litigation, as I will come to later, the main redress scheme for IRHP resulted in over £2 billion paid in total to thousands of affected businesses.

It was undeniably unsatisfactory that the overall response to these issues has been piecemeal and complex, and the process was very often slow and frustrating to deal with. However, I am told that the IRHP redress scheme was conceived as a means of providing redress within the legal and regulatory constraints of the time. That time was more than 10 years ago, and some instances of the subject matter that we are discussing today go back around 25 years.

Clearly, I was not part of the Treasury in 2012, nor were Labour in government—the party of the shadow Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), were in government for the last 14 years—so I want to set out the current Government's understanding of the framework within which decisions about the redress scheme were taken at the time. The constraints, in so far as they concern regulatory oversight, reflect the constitutional settlement that underpins the UK's regulatory system, with which I know hon. Members are familiar.

I would imagine that we would all wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green that regulators should at all times act with integrity and independence. Indeed, partly with that point in mind, I say that the Treasury does not have the power to direct the FCA to intervene in individual cases or to investigate matters that fell outside the regulatory perimeter that applied at the time—I am not sure that is what my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington is asking the Treasury to do at this point in any event.

The Treasury also does not have investigative or prosecuting powers of its own. I am sure hon. Members are aware that the independence of the FCA and the Financial Ombudsman Service is fundamental to our constitutional settlement. The separation between the Treasury and the wider regulatory authorities is not a technicality; it is, in theory, a safeguard for businesses and for consumers.

I acknowledge the argument that the Government should act independently of the regulator and the regulatory system and look again at this issue with fresh eyes using their own statutory powers. Given the many reviews of these issues, the independent and broad-based redress schemes over more than a decade, the successful prosecutions, convictions, judicial reviews, and other investigations, the question that the current Government must ask is whether steps to reopen these issues now will lead to better or different outcomes, and, importantly, more redress for those affected.

There are questions as to whether this Government would have made the same decisions if confronted with the same problems as the previous one—and if our decisions would have been different or indeed more or less effective. Without prejudice to the gaze of the shadow Economic Secretary to the Treasury, I am sure that most of us would like to think not only that might we have dealt with the situation rather better, but that in a best-case scenario regulation and supervision would

have been designed such that none of these issues would have arisen in the first place. That goes right to the root of why we are all here today, and indeed critical regulatory changes were made following this scandal. However, this Government inherited a set of decisions, conclusions, judicial findings, judgments and levels of compensation that were delivered some time ago.

Several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Strangford, a consistent champion of his constituents whose specific points I will come to shortly, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris), who articulated Catherine and Nigel's heartbreaking story very well, have spoken about hidden credit lines or contingent obligations. Those are clearly very serious allegations, and it is right that they are treated seriously. For the reasons I have set out, where issues relate to the conduct of regulatory firms, they are for the FCA to consider using its statutory powers, evidence base and judgment—with that judgment being independent, again for the reasons that I have set out.

In the light of the independence that we have been discussing, I should say that the FCA firmly refutes the claims made in the BankConfidential report—which I have here—about the nature and impact of the credit lines that we have been discussing. It also refutes the allegations of collusion and regulatory failure which have been referred to today.

With reference to the independence of the courts, in a series of cases, the courts have made findings in relation to disclosure, and Jonathan Swift KC referenced those findings as settled legal context, concluding that the FCA acted lawfully in defining the scope of the IRHP redress scheme. It is true that past regulatory reviews were conducted within the scope of the powers available to the regulator at that time and within the regulatory perimeter that Parliament had set. It is of critical importance that the wider regulatory framework has now changed.

However, before I come to that, I want to address the previous redress scheme in more detail. I recognise that many of those represented here remain deeply dissatisfied with how that scheme operated and that its conclusions continue to be strongly contested. I do not intend to in any sense minimise or underplay any of that frustration, which is clearly very strongly felt. While I understand that the process at the time regarding that redress scheme was slow and sometimes no doubt deeply frustrating, it was established with the intention of delivering redress within the legal and regulatory constraints that applied at that time. One such constraint related to tailored business loans. Most business lending fell outside the scope of the FCA and therefore beyond its powers to compel redress. We cannot extend regulation retrospectively. Indeed, even outwith these current issues, reopening past decisions would create significant legal uncertainty and risk that could affect the availability and cost of finance for SMEs today.

Although I appreciate it is known by those here, I should note that subsequent reviews, and ultimately the courts, considered whether the regulator had acted lawfully in setting the scope and perimeter of that scheme, and concluded that it did. I mention that because it is an important consideration in any assertion that it is for the current Government to seek to reopen these issues.

I referred to a different regulatory environment from that existing now. I will briefly explain why our regulatory landscape is now better. Since 2019, the vast majority of

[Lucy Rigby]

SMEs, around 99%, have been able to bring complaints to the Financial Ombudsman Service. That was a direct response to the gaps exposed by earlier scandals, including those we have talked about today. The ombudsman now provides a far wider safety net for small and medium-sized businesses than existed during the period under discussion.

In addition, the senior managers and certification regime has transformed accountability in financial services. Senior individuals can now be held personally responsible for the way that firms treat SME customers, whether activity is regulated or unregulated. That cultural shift, which stems from both of those, is profound. It did not exist during the years that Members have understandably focused on today.

Today's debate, like other parliamentary activity on the same topic over a long period, some of which I have reviewed for this debate, has highlighted the serious and clear injustices that some businesses suffered and the impact that had. The current Government obviously cannot undo the harm that has already occurred, more is the pity, but nor can we, or should we, override independent decisions taken by the courts within the legal framework that applied at the time.

I want to address this directly, hard as it may be to hear. I understand that my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington wishes me to commit today to opening a full judge-led public inquiry into these issues. I do not wish to downplay the seriousness of the matters we have discussed today, but the Government do not believe that a full public inquiry would, at this point be the right course for us to take. I say that with reference both to the long history of reviews, prosecutions, redress schemes and judicial reviews, which would all require unpicking to some degree, and importantly, to the changes to the regulatory landscape that were made subsequently, as a result of the gaps that this scandal exposed.

I want to be clear that the Government are instead focused on ensuring that the regulatory landscape is fit for purpose and on supporting SMEs to grow with confidence, improving their access to finance and ensuring that the financial services sector operates to high standards that command trust. We are backing that commitment with real action, with record support for the British Business Bank and reforms that strengthen accountability without undermining growth.

We are committed to robust regulation to international high standards, so that we have a strong financial services sector. Those ought not to be intentions but the bedrock of the financial services system. That is why access to redress for SMEs has been widened so significantly and why accountability at the top of financial firms is now personal and enforceable. It is also why the regulatory perimeter continues to be kept under careful review, deliberately and responsibly.

The hon. Member for Strangford referred to discretionary commission arrangements.

John McDonnell: There are only a few seconds left. I have heard the Minister's arguments. I fully agree on the independence of the FCA from Treasury, but that does not mean that we must accept the FCA as infallible. In other instances where separate organisations have made mistakes, the Government have intervened. I understand that the Minister is not convinced this morning, but will she meet the all-party parliamentary group on investment fraud and fairer financial services, so that we can take her through the report with our experts to convince her that there might be a different way forward from the one she is setting out this morning?

Lucy Rigby: My right hon. Friend has pre-empted my offer. To be direct, yes, I will come and meet his APPG to listen further. I hope I have successfully communicated this morning that the Government do believe—

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Carer's Allowance Overpayments

11 am

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): I will call Anna Dixon to move the motion and then I will call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate, the Minister and the Chair, although no such requests have been made. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up the debate.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of Carer's Allowance overpayments.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank Members for joining me here in Westminster Hall. I have committed my career to securing better care and support for older people and their family carers, and I continue that work here in Parliament as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on carers.

This year marks a significant milestone for carers: it has been 50 years since carer's allowance was first introduced. It was known originally as the invalid care allowance, and it was the first benefit to recognise the financial sacrifices of unpaid carers. It has made a huge difference, providing vital financial support to those who give 35 hours or more per week in unpaid care. I am proud that it was a Labour Government that introduced carer's allowance back in 1976, and I am just as proud that this Labour Government and Chancellor increased the earnings threshold from £151 to £196 per week—the largest increase since the benefit was introduced—and again this month to £204 per week, as promised. The world has changed a lot since Harold Wilson was Prime Minister, but some things remain the same, and Labour is still putting its money where its mouth is and standing up for carers.

Supporting carers should be a moral mission of any Government. There are 5.8 million unpaid carers in the UK, and the economic value of their contribution is some £184 billion per year, which is more than the entire NHS budget in England. However, despite the value that carers bring to our society, we often fail to value them. According to Carers UK, 1.2 million unpaid carers in the UK live in poverty, and around half of carers cut back on essentials in 2025.

There is a multitude of reasons for carer poverty. Many carers give up paid work, but many juggle paid work and unpaid care, often reducing their hours, harming their careers and impoverishing themselves. It is for all those reasons that the carer's allowance overpayment scandal is hard to stomach.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing this subject forward. Does she not agree that the amount of money the Government have saved from the unpaid labour of carers is astronomical, and that unless the Department can prove that there was a deliberate overclaim, discretion must be available? These people, whose lives are dedicated to the care of others, do not need the stress of paying a penalty for a mistake and thereby being treated as a criminal.

Anna Dixon: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that the impact of the overpayments on carers is terrible, and I am going to share the story of someone who was

affected. I am sure others have heard similar shocking stories. As many as one in five unpaid carers who claim carer's allowance and work part time were hit with overpayments. Thousands of carers have been left with huge debts and the fear of financial ruin.

Helen cares for her son Robin. He was born with a heart condition, respiratory vulnerabilities, developmental delay, mobility issues and Down's syndrome. Helen gave up work as a teacher to support Robin and she relied on carer's allowance. She also received some royalties for online resources that she had created as an education provider. She was paid those every six months, but the Department for Work and Pensions considered them as monthly earnings. It stopped her carer's allowance and informed her that she had incurred overpayments going back over four years. She was charged more than £2,000 and told to pay back £50 a week. In her words,

"there was no care of how we would live or survive. It took me three very long years to repay the debt. It hung over like a great shadow, the letters, the fear of what could come. We were devastated by the department's actions. Carers just don't have bank balances that can stretch and withstand such pressures...you are so vulnerable...it shouldn't be this difficult".

As I have said, Helen's is not an isolated case; thousands of carers are in this position, not as a result of failure on their part to report to and notify the DWP, but owing to a failure of Government. This scandal is a stain on the record of the British state.

I therefore commend this Labour Government for asking Liz Sayce to conduct an independent review of carer's allowance overpayments. She made it clear that overpayments were caused

"not by widespread individual error by carers in reporting their earnings but by systemic issues preventing them from fulfilling their responsibility to report."

I welcome the fact that the Government have accepted the vast majority of her recommendations and set aside £75 million to implement them.

Among other things, the review called on the Government to reform the earnings averaging processes and guidance, as well as that for allowable expenses, so that there is clarity, transparency and predictability, and it called for a thorough reassessment of cases to right the wrongs and deliver redress. It called for creative short-term solutions to address the cliff-edge crisis, while the DWP works on a longer-term plan. That is vital. If someone earns one penny over the earnings limit, they have to pay back the whole weekly carer's allowance. The Sayce review found that although the earnings limit cliff edge does not itself cause overpayments, it dramatically increases their scale and impact, negatively affecting people's health, finances, wellbeing and opportunities to work. Will the Minister update us on progress on the introduction of a taper system?

Liz Sayce recommended a whole range of other reforms, from upgrading computer systems to using more empathetic language, improving the join-up between types of benefits and simplifying the system. I thank her and her team for completing this crucial task. I urge the Minister to implement the recommendations with urgency and to set out the timeline for doing so.

Turning to those affected, I welcome yesterday's announcement that the Government have launched an audit of more than 200,000 carer's allowance cases affected by unclear Government guidance that was in place between 2015 and 2025. The cases will be reviewed,

[Anna Dixon]

and debts potentially reduced, cancelled or refunded for some 25,000 unpaid carers. That is excellent news and I am sure the Minister will say more. However, I believe that there are several categories of people who have been adversely affected whose cases remain outstanding. The DWP appears to be accepting responsibility only for those affected by the unlawful guidance on average earnings and not for the lack of clear guidance on expenses deductions.

Will the Minister ensure, as the audit begins, that the DWP fully addresses all aspects of maladministration? First, there should be consideration of cases in which the DWP held information regarding expenses but did not act on it or make corrections for many years. Secondly, I urge him to ensure that cases in which data has been “lost” by the DWP are dealt with as Liz Sayce recommended, and treated as cases of official error unless the DWP can prove otherwise. Thirdly, in the cases of those affected by the failure to adjust universal credit correctly, Sayce recommended that the DWP should pay UC arrears. I would be grateful if the Minister addressed whether the audit will include reviews for those missing groups.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Stepney) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. She rightly highlights the important contribution that carers make to our country and the savings of £184 billion a year. The carer's allowance scandal that this Government have had to deal with, which has taken place over a number of years, has parallels with the Post Office scandal in the way that individuals have been treated. Does she agree that the Department for Work and Pensions, which rejected a recommendation by the Work and Pensions Committee to undertake a regular audit of its progress on carers, should do that, so that we can see the progress the Department is making?

Anna Dixon: I am a member of the Public Accounts Committee, and we have requested that the DWP reports every six months on its progress on implementing the Sayce review. As a member of that Committee, I will certainly be keeping a close eye on progress.

My final point is about the culture in the DWP. I have had the opportunity to challenge its senior officials in the Public Accounts Committee, and I was shocked by the culture on display, which clearly regarded the victims of Government incompetence as benefit fraudsters. It disturbs me that that culture has been prevalent for so long and that, despite knowing about carer's allowance overpayments for many years, the Department did little or nothing. As a Committee, we are clear that the lack of integrated and concerted leadership from the Department exacerbated the crisis. I ask the Minister for reassurance that he is confident that the senior team at DWP understand the nature of the harm done to carers, are fully committed to putting this right and do not adopt a defensive culture.

On the 50th anniversary of carer's allowance, I call on this Labour Government to right the wrongs caused by the state, which have parallels with the Post Office Horizon scandal, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali) said, and

to put right the scandal of carer's allowance overpayments so that our carers are paid what they deserve and not punished for the dedication and care they provide.

11.11 am

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship this morning, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) on securing this extremely timely debate, which is a welcome opportunity to set out some of the work that the Government have been doing in response to the concerns that she has raised. She is a very strong advocate for unpaid carers; she was before entering Parliament, as she said, and she is now as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on carers. I echo her remarks about the significance of this year, which is the 50th anniversary of the introduction of carer's allowance by Harold Wilson's Government. It is right to mark and celebrate that.

My hon. Friend has spoken previously of how her mother cared for her grandmother for nearly 30 years. I think all of us can grasp how important and valuable the heroic scale of the contribution made by unpaid carers is, and my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali) is right to draw our attention to the economic value of that contribution. The contributions of unpaid carers are vital to the family members, friends and neighbours they look after, but also to our communities, our country and our economy.

We inherited a dreadful situation in which some very busy, hard-pressed carers, already struggling under a huge weight of caring responsibilities, found themselves with large, unexpected debts due to alleged overpayments of carer's allowance. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley gave a particularly clear example of the problem that arose, and I will comment on it a moment.

The Work and Pensions Committee, among others, including the Public Accounts Committee, looked at this problem when I was the Chair, and I am pleased to now be a part of a Government who are able and willing to do something about it. We made a very early move after we were elected—I think that it was in the first Budget after the general election—to increase the weekly carer's allowance earnings limit, as my hon. Friend said, to match 16 hours of work at national living wage levels.

As my hon. Friend said, that change from April 2025 resulted in the largest ever increase in the limit. It means that more than 60,000 additional people will be able to receive carer's allowance between 2025-26 and 2029-30, but it is also important to note, particularly in the context we are discussing, that the chance of inadvertently slipping above the earnings limit is greatly reduced, because the limit will keep track with increases in the national living wage in the future. As my hon. Friend said, the earnings limit rose again to £204 per week from the beginning of this month.

People had a real problem in the past when the national living wage was increased, because their earnings that had been below the earnings limit went above it, and there was nothing to alert them to that; they had to monitor it themselves. Quite a lot of people were tipped inadvertently above the earnings limit, leading to an

overpayment of carer's allowance. I am very confident that the change we have made to keep the earnings limit in line with the national living wage will be a big step forward in reducing the incidence of overpayments in the future.

Anna Dixon: I had understood that we were also looking into opportunities to alert carers of potentially having breached the earnings limit. Is there anything in place to help communicate information from His Majesty's Revenue and Customs or the DWP to carers?

Sir Stephen Timms: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. I will come on to that, because there is some progress in that area.

As my hon. Friend said, having made the change to the earnings limit, we commissioned the independent review led by Liz Sayce, the former chief executive of Disability Rights UK and a well-respected and widely recognised expert in disability benefits. Her review was published in November and, in my view, she did a brilliant job. She really got to grips with what had gone wrong, and I echo my hon. Friend's thanks to her. The report found that many carers had faced unexpected debts because of errors in the way that the DWP had applied averaging rules on fluctuating earnings. The guidance used by DWP staff since 2015 had not properly reflected the law, which permits averaging over a period when assessing whether earnings are above or below the earnings limit.

The case that my hon. Friend mentioned of somebody who was receiving income once every six months is a clear example of the problem. I do not know what the figures were in that case, but it may well be that if Helen's earnings had been averaged over six months instead of being taken into account in one month, they would have been below the limit. That is exactly the sort of instance that we will examine in the reassessment exercise, which I will say more about in a moment.

We accepted 38 of Liz Sayce's 40 recommendations in full or in part, and we have already made progress on more than half of them. I will set out those recommendations and what we have done in response, and I will pick up on a couple of my hon. Friend's questions. The review recommended putting right historical overpayments caused by flawed guidance on the averaging of earnings. I am pleased to say that new and correct guidance has now been in place since the start of September 2025, but it was wrong from 2015 for 10 years.

We are now delivering the reassessment exercise that Liz Sayce recommended: reclassifying affected overpayments as "not recoverable", refunding carers where appropriate, and applying a fair approach where records are no longer held by the Department. The reassessment exercise began yesterday, so this debate is particularly well timed, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for having secured it.

As my hon. Friend said, the Government have set aside £75 million of funding for refunds under the exercise in the financial years 2026-27 to 2028-29. That is a three-year period; we are hoping we can complete the exercise in two, but just to be sure, we have allowed three years to ensure we can complete it properly. We are expecting to review more than 200,000 cases, so it is

a major undertaking. As she said, we estimate that we will be reducing, cancelling or refunding debts for perhaps some 25,000 carers in the course of the exercise.

Rushanara Ali: I draw the Minister's attention to a point about reassessment made in yesterday's *Guardian*: "the government has admitted its existing 'business as usual' overpayment recovery policies will be maintained while a full overhaul of the benefit is completed, in effect ensuring that carer's allowance penalties will continue to be imposed."

Can the Minister assure us that that is not the case and that these penalties will not continue to be imposed?

Sir Stephen Timms: Let me come to that point in a moment. I saw the article that my hon. Friend refers to. It is an important point, and I will address it in a couple of minutes.

My hon. Friends have quite rightly raised questions about accountability for the review's delivery. We have appointed a senior responsible officer, and we have committed to update both the Public Accounts Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee on progress every six months. The review highlighted the need for clearer guidance and better communication with carers, particularly on earnings averaging, overpayments and reporting responsibilities, so we have revised the decision letters so that carers are clearer on how their earnings have been averaged and on exactly what changes they need to report and when.

We have also redesigned the overpayment communications to be clearer and to show more empathy, I hope, than was shown in communications previously. We have strengthened the signposting to independent advice and debt support, including to charities and free money guidance, and we have made it clearer how carers can ask questions, challenge decisions or agree affordable repayment plans. We are continuing to test and develop the letters and the guidance, and there has been recent user research to assess clarity, understanding and impact.

We are planning further improvements. I want to express my appreciation for the carers organisations, particularly Carers UK and the Carers Trust, that we have been working with. They have put a good deal of work into this, together with the Department, to try to ensure we get these communications right. I hope that is going to be a significant improvement.

The Sayce review pointed to the lack of awareness and take-up of carers' national insurance credits. We want to make sure that carers understand what they are entitled to, so we have been reviewing our letters and guidance to increase awareness. The review recommended reducing the impact of the earnings cliff edge while longer-term reform is developed. As my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley quite rightly pointed out, if someone is a penny over the earnings limit, they are not entitled to any carer's allowance; that has been the case ever since 1976.

We have commissioned research on the impact of the higher earnings limit, which is now being regularly updated, unlike in the past, and commissioned behavioural research to inform future policy decisions, including changes to regulations, short-term mitigations and longer-term reform, including a taper. In the end, I think that will be the answer: instead of an earnings cliff edge or cut-off limit, there should be an arrangement so that

[*Sir Stephen Timms*]

the carer's allowance reduces in a tapered way. It will take some time to develop that and put the IT in place and so on, so we are looking at what we can do in the meantime.

As my hon. Friend touched on, the review recommended better join-up between carer's allowance, universal credit and other benefits. We are aware that a considerable burden is placed on carers, requiring them to resolve offsetting issues themselves. We have accepted Liz Sayce's recommendation, and we will put in place an automated solution. While we develop that—again, that will take a while—we will put in place a manual workaround.

The review recommended tackling backlogs and identifying overpayments earlier. We have reduced the backlog of automated earnings notifications from HMRC. We now process those alerts much faster, allowing issues to be identified more quickly—another point raised by my hon. Friend. In future, we want to follow up on all those alerts, not just about half of them as we did in the past, so that we can draw people's attention to problems as they arise. Taken together, those actions are about listening to carers, fixing what went wrong, supporting people better and modernising carer's allowance in the future.

In response to the review's recommendations on faulty averaging guidance, we will reassess carer's allowance cases that might have been affected. A number of people, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney, have raised the question of why we did not pause all carer's allowance earnings overpayments action pending the review's outcome. My answer is that we have been clear about our approach all along: we have to balance fairness for carers with our duty to taxpayers. If money has been paid out incorrectly, it needs to be recovered. We have retained that position as the review was under way.

In most cases, the Department already holds enough information to carry out the reassessment, and affected carers will not need to take action unless the DWP asks for additional details. For older overpayment cases, dating back to 2015 or perhaps a few years after that, the DWP may no longer hold the relevant data and information: we are required to retain data only as long as it is needed for the purpose for which it was collected.

The Department will open a simple online form to allow people to submit the relevant information. We are aiming to do that in November this year.

The Department will work closely with organisations supporting carers who think they may have been affected to register for reassessment on gov.uk. Everybody whose case is reviewed will be notified of the outcome, including whether their overpayment has been confirmed or changed. Advice and support for anyone whose carer's allowance case is, or might be, involved in the reassessment exercise will be available, at no cost, from the Department or trusted partner organisations such as Carers UK and the Carers Trust—I thank them again.

Hon. Members have asked how progress will be tracked. The reassessment exercise is part of our broader response to the independent review and, as I have said, we have committed to updating the Public Accounts Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee on our progress every six months. Those updates will include statistics on progress, and they will enable the Committees to scrutinise progress and hold the Department to account. We will also put some information in our annual report and accounts.

Rebuilding trust requires honesty, accountability and action, and that is the approach we have aimed to take throughout this process. We have to fix the problems and correct the mistakes; the work of unpaid carers is too important and too valuable not to do so. More broadly, we want to improve and modernise carer's allowance to make it easier for unpaid carers to combine their caring responsibilities with paid work where they are able to, and better reward them for doing so. We will also ensure that those receiving carer's allowance and universal credit receive a more joined-up service than they have in the past. We owe that to those who provide such a vital service to our fellow citizens.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, the all-party parliamentary group and the Committees represented in the debate will scrutinise how we deliver on those aims very closely. They are absolutely right to do so.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

“For Women Scotland” Court Ruling: First Anniversary

[GRAHAM STRINGER *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the first anniversary of the *For Women Scotland v The Scottish Ministers* ruling.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank all hon. Members, as well as those in the Public Gallery, for their attendance. On Thursday, we will celebrate one year since the *For Women Scotland* judgment. That was a landmark ruling by the UK Supreme Court. It clarified something that frankly should never have needed testing in the courts: that the term “woman” in the Equality Act 2010 refers to biological sex. The ruling was a victory for the rights of women and girls; it affirmed that being a woman is a matter of biology not paperwork, and it should have ended years of uncertainty around sex-based protections.

The judgment confirmed what most people already know instinctively: biological sex matters. It matters in sport, prisons, healthcare and education. It matters for women’s safety, dignity and privacy. No amount of paperwork, policy or self-identification can change that reality. I commend the brave women who led the legal challenge. They persevered in the face of intense opposition, and finally common sense prevailed.

The Minister for Women and Equalities claimed:

“This ruling brings welcome clarity and confidence for women and service providers.”—[*Official Report*, 22 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 945.]

On paper, it has done so, but if we step outside the courtroom and into workplaces across the country, that clarity often evaporates. Instead of confidence, we see utter confusion. There is still an invisible hierarchy of rights in many workplaces. The rights of biological men who identify as women are still being prioritised over the rights of actual women. Hospitals and sports centres are still allowing biological men into female-only spaces.

Even parts of the civil service, which is supposed to be the bastion of political neutrality, are still allowing trans-identifying males to use female toilets. Government Departments should be leading by example, not presiding over unlawful and out-of-date policies. The law is clear, the facts are clear, and the refusal to act is a choice. Meanwhile, women who uphold biological reality are still being challenged, disciplined and subjected to exhausting legal proceedings. One year after the *For Women Scotland* ruling, Government Ministers are still dodging this topic because it is politically uncomfortable.

As the charity Sex Matters has said so well,

“Complying with the law is not a culture war”.

One year later, we are still waiting for the Minister for Women and Equalities to lay the Equality and Human Rights Commission’s updated code of practice before Parliament. That will require businesses and public bodies to protect women-only spaces. I welcome the Minister’s written statement earlier today confirming that the Government intend to lay the code in May. That is a long-overdue development, following many months of excuses. One could be forgiven for thinking that this debate and the events planned for this week have sparked that development.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. On the point about the anniversary and the statement from the Minister for Women and Equalities that she intends to lay the guidance in a matter of weeks, will my hon. Friend join me in expressing the hope that that will be the long-overdue point at which we see a step change in Government attitudes to reflect the biological facts that society understands and knows?

Carla Lockhart: I sincerely hope my hon. Friend is right and that the Government will do the right thing as per the law.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The hon. Lady is being extremely generous with her time. Does she feel, as I do, that a lack of political courage is what has delayed the new guidance? That lack of political courage has fallen on the heads of people having to make these decisions, such as nurses on wards, people working in sports centres and the like. They do not have the Government guidance to stand behind and say, “This is what the law says. This is what I’ve got to do”, so they are having to make decisions and then take the flak and sometimes abuse from people who are disappointed by their choice.

Carla Lockhart: I will certainly move on to some examples where there has been a great personal cost to folks who have had to lead the way on this issue.

One year later, we still need clarity on workplace regulations. Workplaces are in limbo because the revised code of practice will not even apply to them. One year later, we are still waiting for the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to introduce new guidance specifically for the NHS. Last April, he promised that it would be published within weeks. The silence is deafening. These delays speak for themselves. This is not a grey area; it is not complicated. It is a failure to act on a simple legal and biological truth. Women’s safety is not a political plaything, and it should never be treated as one. The lack of progress comes at a real human cost to women across the UK.

I recently hosted Jennifer Melle and the Darlington nurses here in Parliament, and I am delighted that they are in the Public Gallery watching proceedings. They found themselves in the eye of the storm simply for upholding women’s rights. They are dedicated NHS professionals, not campaigners, yet they were hounded at work and dragged through the courts, not for wrongdoing, but for stating a basic biological fact. Their testimonies are deeply moving. Some of them are mothers of young children, carrying the strain not just at work, but at home.

After Jennifer Melle referred to a biological male and convicted paedophile as “Mr”, she was suspended for two years, unable to work, and she was threatened with revocation of her licence to practice. Where was her nursing union, which should have stood with her in her hour of need? It was missing in action, afraid to counter the wokeness within. Jennifer believes that what happened to her was a punishment for whistleblowing. She said:

“I did not always show it, but I was deeply traumatised by what had happened to me...I lived under fear, anxiety, and the possibility of losing the job I loved.”

[Carla Lockhart]

When we compare Jennifer Melle’s case with the Darlington nurses’ case, we can see a pattern emerging. After a biological male was allowed to use their changing room, the Darlington nurses raised legitimate concerns about privacy and safety. Instead of being listened to, they were told they needed to be “re-educated” and to “broaden their mindset”. They were left with no other option but to take legal action. These nurses were already working flat out, caring for others, holding the system together and doing their job with skill and dedication every single day. That should be enough. They should not have been forced to fight for their legal rights.

Jennifer Melle and the Darlington nurses have shown tremendous courage and conviction, but let us be honest, that has come at a price: a personal toll, a professional toll, time, stress and reputation. Despite their legal victories, the punishment has been in the process. Women across the country are watching these legal cases unfolding and drawing the obvious conclusion: “Keep your head down or risk your livelihood.” The result is a chilling effect that should trouble every Member of this House.

Women are self-censoring. They are being forced to choose between telling the truth and keeping their jobs. They see colleagues hauled before tribunals, threatened with professional sanctions and subjected to reputational harm. Understandably, they often decide that it is simply not worth the risk. Bethany Hutchison, one of the Darlington nurses, put it this way:

“A culture of fear took over, not among those breaking safeguarding norms, but among the women raising concerns. Many vulnerable colleagues, often the breadwinners in their households, felt intimidated into dropping their complaints, until only eight of us remained.”

That is what happens when an institution closes rank and sidelines women’s voices.

It should not be down to individual women to contest gender ideology in the workplace. The Government should be backing women all the way, ensuring that they are treated with the safety and dignity that they deserve. Instead, a whole year has passed and still those on the frontline are being left to navigate these complex and sensitive issues alone. Silence is not neutral; it sends a clear message that women’s rights come second to political sensitivities and noisy activists. A ruling that exists only on paper is not enough. The Government must act, not with warm words, but with real, practical guidance that ensures that women are protected, not punished, for asserting their rights.

To briefly address the position in Northern Ireland, it is quite frankly extraordinary that we are even having to contemplate a different application of the ruling within the United Kingdom. The suggestion that the Windsor framework could create divergence on something as fundamental as the definition of a woman raises serious questions about sovereignty and equal rights across this country. Women in Northern Ireland should not have less clarity or protection than women in England, Scotland or Wales. I call on the Minister to give absolute clarity that this UK Government will stand up for women in Northern Ireland.

I am glad that, despite some of the noise and legal challenges around this issue, our Education Minister has moved to release guidance to schools. He made it

clear that single-sex spaces in schools should be based on biological sex and that the safety, dignity and privacy of girls must be protected. That was a proportionate and practical response to the law as it stands and I welcome it. That stands in stark contrast to the delays that we are seeing elsewhere.

I end with three requests of the Government. First, I urge the Minister for Women and Equalities to lay the EHRC’s updated code of practice before this House as a matter of urgency—no more prevaricating; no more delay. While the Minister has today finally indicated that that will happen in May, we must ask why clarity has not been provided far sooner. Secondly, I urge the Minister to provide guidance for workplaces. Employers must be left in no doubt that single-sex spaces are reserved for people of the same biological sex. No employee should be compelled to use a person’s preferred pronouns.

Thirdly, I urge the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to fulfil his promise and issue guidance on single-sex spaces in the NHS specifically. In the absence of leadership from the Government, others have already stepped in. The Darlington Nursing Union and the Christian Legal Centre have already produced draft guidance for NHS trusts. It is ready, workable and would help ensure that no more women are forced to endure what Jennifer Melle and the Darlington nurses faced. I thank Christian Concern for its support for Jennifer and the Darlington nurses.

Let us be clear: the For Women Scotland ruling was a victory on paper, but in many cases it still needs implementing in practice. Biology should not be disputed in any sector. A woman is not a feeling. A woman is not an identity. A woman is a biological reality. We must act now to ensure that women are heard, protected and respected.

Several hon. Members rose—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to speak, as it is very helpful in determining whether to put a time limit on. Given the number of Members standing, however, I will not be putting a time limit on now.

2.43 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) for securing this debate. We are so used to having small time limits for these debates that I am afraid I have not prepared anything like as much as I would want to say.

On 16 April 2025, the Supreme Court ruled unanimously that for the purposes of the Equality Act 2010, sex means biological sex, not gender. A woman is an adult human female, and a male is an adult human male. That is, of course, what the vast majority of the public know simply to be true. The Supreme Court judgment was won by three courageous and formidable women: Susan, Marion and Trina, known as For Women Scotland. It was a victory for women’s rights and for gay rights as well.

Lesbians have been at the sharp end of this campaign to erode women’s rights. If the Scottish Government, Amnesty International and activist groups such as the

so-called Good Law Project had their way, anyone at all could call themselves a lesbian. A lesbian would no longer simply be a woman who is attracted to other women, but could be any man calling himself a lesbian. Biological men—mostly those without any reassignment surgery—label themselves as lesbian, but they are simply men attracted to women, so straight men. Yet the lesbians are the “bigots” and “transphobes” if they dare to point that out.

This also plays out daily in the political sphere. Many activists in political parties and politicians, and some political leaders themselves, are wedded firmly to this nonsensical ideology.

Dr Caroline Johnson: The hon. Lady is making a very good speech. Does she share my concern that it plays out in the scientific arena as well? The UK Health Security Agency has been collecting data in relation to sexual health infections on the basis of gender rather than sex.

Rosie Duffield: Absolutely. Of course, that is the hon. Member’s area of expertise. I know many health professionals who are incredibly frustrated at this simple twisting of facts, which should not be done at all in the NHS. I thank her for pointing that out.

With a few admirable exceptions, many Members of Parliament are unable to identify or define a woman. They reject that women’s spaces must be exclusively for biological women and have decided that those of us intent on the Equality Act being upheld are evil incarnate.

For centuries, women have had to fight for our rights. We have had to fight male threats of violence and male acts of violence. We are used to having to protect ourselves and our spaces. The very least we should expect from our own Government is the leadership and conviction to back those rights with basic and fundamental legislation. The Labour Government did that in 2010, yet here we are, 16 years later, having to force the current Government to uphold and enforce the law, and make it crystal clear to the NHS, sporting bodies, membership organisations and Government Departments that the law must be followed and adhered to—that is their job.

While the Secretary of State says that her Government have

“always supported the protection of single-sex spaces based on biological sex”,

men who choose to identify as women are still permitted to receive care on women’s hospital wards, access women’s toilets—including in this building—compete in the women’s category in parkrun and take women’s places in grassroots sports, and there are still men in women’s prisons. Actions speak louder than words. The law is the law, so what exactly are the Government waiting for, and why are they incapable of showing even the most basic leadership?

The Supreme Court has been clear, and trans-identifying people remain protected in law under the protected characteristic of gender reassignment. None of their protections or rights have been taken away.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): The hon. Lady is making an interesting speech, and I thank her for it. I think we are probably on different sides of the debate,

but it is still interesting. She says that none of trans people’s rights has been taken away. I wonder whether she can explain the legal limbo that trans people feel they are in when trying to obtain a gender recognition certificate. They are required to live in their acquired gender for several months in order to obtain a certificate, but if they cannot access the spaces for the gender that they are seeking to acquire, they cannot fulfil that criterion. Does she agree that that creates a legal limbo and does actually take away some of their rights?

Rosie Duffield: The hon. Member has a really good point. That lack of clarity is why we need the Government to explain fully what the EHRC is saying and how it pertains to the Equality Act. With or without a gender recognition certificate, biological men are not able to access women’s spaces—women’s toilets, women’s sports. The Supreme Court made that incredibly clear. The area of gender recognition certificates is a bit grey, and I can understand why some trans-identifying people are confused by that. That is why the Government have to step in. This is a matter of legislation.

None of the activists on my side—feminists—is saying that we want to exclude those people, make them feel terrible or give them a hard time. Bodies can introduce single-sex spaces, unisex toilets and all kinds of other activities for those people that they are allowed to take part in. We just do not want our rights to make way for biological men, who are bigger, stronger and faster, and physically potentially more dangerous to us. That is a fundamental right that many of us have fought for generations to get. Yes, there are some confusing parts, but not in the Supreme Court judgment. The Court made it very clear; the Government just have to get on with it, instead of hiding behind the judgment.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): I just want to put on the record how welcome it is to see the comments of the Scottish Labour leader, Anas Sarwar. It is fair to say that Scottish Labour has been on a bit of a journey on this issue, but he has got to the right place, and I welcome that. I join the hon. Lady in stating that the Supreme Court judgment clarifies existing law. It did not change the law. It is about enforcing the existing law. Women have had their lives ruined by this issue over many years, and they are still having their lives ruined by it, as we see in the Sex Matters “One year later” report. Is the hon. Lady as baffled as I am that we still seem to have violent men—murderers, no less—in women’s prisons?

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I remind hon. Members that interventions should be short and to the point. We have had two quite lengthy interventions. The business is not oversubscribed, so if hon. Members wish to bob, they may well catch my eye.

Rosie Duffield: Thank you for clearing that up, Mr Stringer. The hon. Gentleman makes some really good points. Sex Matters has been pointing out, especially in its new leaflet, that so many people, whom we do not get to talk about every day, are still being subjected to these ridiculous tribunals. Jennifer Melle, whom the hon. Member for Upper Bann mentioned, was simply a nurse referring to a biological man as a biological man in her notes. Without wanting to get into too much horrible detail, I believe she was catheterising a man,

[Rosie Duffield]

which is very different from catheterising a woman, yet she was the one subjected to hideous racial abuse and suspended from work.

These things happen every day. We know about them because we are involved with the organisations that help those people, but the general public do not necessarily hear about them and the Government seem very far removed from the reality that not stepping in is causing. Many of those cases would not have taken place if the Government had introduced guidance, spoken on the issue, or had the front to say what I know many of them secretly believe, but do not articulate because they are afraid of their own activists—I am living proof of that. That is a real shame.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I know this is a really important subject to the hon. Lady. Of course, the Government received the revised draft guidance only yesterday and they issued a statement today. It is important to remember that.

The hon. Lady mentioned parkrun a minute or two ago, before the flurry of interventions. What does her vision mean for me, as a keen parkrunner? Would I have to submit evidence that I am a man to parkrun in order to run as a man? Likewise, would women have to do the same? How does she see that working?

Rosie Duffield: I think it is fairly obvious that the hon. Gentleman is a man, to be honest. I think the majority of the human race could tell that. If there is a much smaller person running in that category, they simply do not belong there. The Government have had the guidance since September, but this is the law of this country. No Minister or Government MP needs guidance from the EHRC to suggest ways in which organisations could uphold the law. We made this law, and we are there to advise people how to enact it and adhere to it. We do not need the EHRC. That is just another way of pushing this down the road. It is great to have that guidance. It has done a really good job—that is what it does—but the Government do not need it. It is just another red herring—a delay tactic.

Marie Goldman: On the point about it being fairly obvious which gender someone is, I wonder whether the hon. Lady has heard about the case of the woman who had a double mastectomy and frequently gets misgendered as a man? What would she say to that woman?

Rosie Duffield: That is extraordinary, but we are talking about a country of 70 million-odd people, 51% of whom are women. The majority of people know what a man or a woman is. If one has a problem with that, that is a specific personal problem. That is a man; these are women. We all know. It is an absolute load of rubbish that we do not, so I reject that. I say to the Government: women are watching, women will be voting, and most people in the country are women.

Tracy Gilbert (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): Alice Sullivan has spoken a lot about identifying sex and gender. Does the hon. Member agree that sex and gender are not the same thing, and that if we are registering for a parkrun, another sporting event or anything else, we all know what is on our birth certificate?

Rosie Duffield: That is exactly right. We are not talking about gender identity. We are talking about the law as it adheres to biological men and women.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rosie Duffield: For the very last time.

Dr Caroline Johnson: The hon. Lady has talked about the courage of the people who stood up on this issue, but will she reflect on the people who felt censored? For example, I spoke to a young lady in my constituency who participated in a hockey club, but she stopped going. The parents of another girl stopped her going to the same club, because there was a man on the young ladies' hockey team who insisted on using the changing room and the girls felt uncomfortable changing in front of him. The issue is reducing the participation of particularly young women in sport, which is regrettable. Guidance from the Government to make things clear will help to ensure that women can participate in sport fairly and safely.

Rosie Duffield: The hon. Member makes a good point. MPs on my side of the argument will certainly hear that time and time again from parents. There is a group called the Bayswater group whose members have gone through the problems and difficulties of their children wanting to transition from a very early age, with all the categories of sport that they should or should not go into. Guidance would really help those parents, but certainly girls should not feel that they should not participate.

All women on this side of the argument have felt intimidated at some point, not just by the death threats—those are passé by now—but by the signs and the balaclavas outside, and by the rubbish about it coming from both sides. I have lived this for nearly a decade; it is not both sides. It would be lovely to end all the intimidation. I have been in the Labour party for a long time, and, sadly, there are women now in government who have always been on my side in secret gender-critical groups but do not have the courage to speak up when in government. That is a drastic lack of leadership and lack of courage. I feel very sorry for them.

I say to the Government that women are watching and men are watching. Women will be voting at the local elections, and most people in this country are women. The Government have a problem. Their problem is not that the Supreme Court ruling is too complicated to understand or implement, but that it is too clear for people to continue to misrepresent our activists.

2.57 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank and praise my party colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart), for pressing this issue and for making safe spaces for women in society a matter of fact. She has worked hard to secure a strong and immovable defence for women, and her work is to be appreciated by constituents throughout this United Kingdom; I know that my constituents in Strangford thank her, and many elsewhere would do likewise.

This debate is so important. Today, on the first anniversary of the ruling, I very much welcome the opportunity to speak clearly and categorically to support

my hon. Friend. I welcome the ruling and where it leaves us. For too long, a cloud of confusion has hung over our public life—a confusion that has undermined the safety of women, the fairness of our sports and the protection of our children. The Supreme Court judgment restored common sense, yes—but, more importantly, it restored safety for women. That is critical.

Sex is a matter of biological fact. Protections must be in place, and we must ensure that they are recognised and utilised. The Supreme Court’s unanimous ruling in the For Women Scotland case was not just a legal victory, but a victory for reality. It was a victory for common sense. However, too many of our Government Departments are refusing to accept that reality and, worryingly, refusing to accept the legal ruling. That must end.

Marie Goldman: The hon. Gentleman always makes such interesting speeches. I just wanted to ask about intersex. We have talked a lot about biological fact. Would he explain a little bit more about intersex and the potential decisions that need to be made in relation to intersex babies when they are born?

Jim Shannon: Whenever the hon. Lady refers to me as being “interesting”, I think that says that she and I have a different opinion on an issue. The Scottish courts have taken that legal decision. I am sure that the hon. Lady would always want to support the legal decisions in the land, whatever they may be and whether she likes them or not.

Dr Caroline Johnson: I wonder if the hon. Gentleman would reflect that there is a biological difference between an individual with a disorder of sexual differentiation, whom the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) referred to as an intersex individual, and a biological male who feels that he prefers and is more comfortable living his life as though he were a woman.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her clear message. She reiterates the position that I and many others in the Chamber hold.

Back home in Northern Ireland, Democratic Unionist party Ministers have appropriately taken decisive action, because the safety of our daughters—in my case, my granddaughters—in school changing rooms and the integrity of women’s sports cannot be put on hold. In the Department of Education in Northern Ireland, Minister Paul Givan—my colleague—has moved to scrap flawed, ideologically-driven guidance that ignores the legal opinion and pushes something completely out of order and wrong. The majority of people are convinced of that. We are ensuring that schools remain places of common sense, where toilets and sports are defined by biological sex. We will not allow a culture where teachers or pupils are forced to speak untruths or where biological males are permitted into female-only spaces.

It is deeply disappointing to see some, including the Equality Commission, trying to use the Windsor framework or complex legal roadblocks to delay the inevitable. Let us be clear: there is no Northern Ireland exception to biological reality. To suggest that a woman in Belfast is defined differently from a woman in Glasgow or London is not only absurd; it is legally incoherent. I remind everyone of the Glasgow legal opinion, which was very clear. If we are all adhering to the law of the land—I do

not think that anybody in the Chamber would not want to support the law of the land—then we can all agree on that.

We are not interested in expensive court cases that seek to overcomplicate the obvious, as some would perhaps try to do. We are interested in protecting the hard-won rights of women and girls. We are interested in ensuring that, when a service is advertised as single sex, it means exactly that and nothing else, as the legal decision in Scotland indicated. We have the legislation in place. We need adherence now, and we look to the Minister to demand this of every publicly funded body. This is about dignity, privacy and, above all, the truth. The DUP, my party, will continue to lead from the front, ensuring that our laws and services reflect the common-sense values of the people we represent. The Government must follow suit as a matter of urgency.

3.3 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) for securing this debate on the first anniversary of the For Women Scotland Ltd v. the Scottish Ministers ruling. I also thank her and other colleagues in this Chamber for their work on these sensitive issues surrounding sex and gender. They have helped ensure that Parliament continues to grapple with these issues in a careful and thoughtful manner.

This issue has faced our society since before I became a Member; and even before I entered this place, it was clear that it was being weaponised, one human being against another, by people who do not always have the best interests of those groups or human beings at heart. I am struggling to put into words my complete confusion that, in the 21st century in the UK Parliament, we are debating what a woman is. It is Adam and Eve, if you are people of faith or believe in the origin of human beings, and even if you are not people of faith, people have known what a woman and a man are since the beginning of time.

I stand here with full respect for those who feel or want to be or, for whatever reason that I do not understand, believe that they are a different gender from the biological sex that they are in. However, women’s rights have been less, and diminished, for centuries, and every single year they are fighting on many fronts for equality. I have stood in this place and in the main Chamber talking about women’s rights on healthcare, maternity rights and gender pay equality—things that men have taken for granted but where they have imposed a substandard level of right on women. It is completely unacceptable. But here we are now, questioning the fundamental biology of women—not just in this place, in this country, but everywhere in the world. I cannot reconcile the situation that we have faced.

When the Supreme Court finally gave a ruling that clearly defined what a man and a woman are under the law, we expected this gaslighting, this aggressive lobbying and this fighting between fellow human beings to, hopefully, recede with clear guidance, rules and processes at parliamentary level, at a legal level and at an employment rights level. But here we are a year later, and the Government have been dilly-dallying and sitting on the ruling, which does not change the law, as the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) said.

[Iqbal Mohamed]

The anniversary provides an opportunity not only to reflect on the nature of this specific ruling, but to reaffirm the fundamental principle that in a democratic society governed by the rule of law, the judgments of our highest courts must be respected and properly implemented. The Supreme Court's ruling of 16 April 2025 brought much-needed legal clarity. It confirmed that, within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010, references to "sex", "man" and "woman" are to be understood as referring to biological sex. How somebody felt that they referred to something else, I cannot understand. That was not the creation of a new law, but the authoritative interpretation of legislation passed by Parliament.

I stand here with women constituents, men constituents, trans women constituents, trans male constituents and people who are still trying to find their way through their biology and feelings, and I stand for each and every one of those without fear or favour. I have met trans people in my constituency, both those who have transitioned fully, so they are either a man or a woman because biologically they have transitioned, and those who have not transitioned and have a gender recognition certificate or live their life as the opposite gender.

Marie Goldman: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Everyone is being generous with their time today, and I am grateful. He said that people have transitioned "biologically". I thought biology was either one thing or the other and was immutable. Could he explain that point?

Iqbal Mohamed: I am not a medical doctor—there are experts in this room—but if somebody has gone through operations under the NHS and that is medically assessed and professionally delivered, I respect their current biological status. If I have used the wrong language, I apologise, but these are special cases. The case that the hon. Member mentioned earlier in an intervention, where somebody had had breast cancer and had a double mastectomy, and may be misidentified as male, is a special case; that person has gone through a physical change that may make others see something different from who they are. Those are separate arguments to biological males identifying as women.

As I was saying, none of these transgender constituents of mine has come to me and said, "I want to be entering single-sex spaces of the other gender to make me feel that I am who I believe that I am." I think that needs to be understood—that this view is not universal across the transgender community.

Clarity in the law is profoundly important. Without it, public bodies, service providers and indeed individuals are left navigating uncertainty. Inconsistent interpretations risk undermining both compliance with and confidence in our legal system, to distressing effect. Rights that already exist in law for any gender, biological sex, man or woman, cannot be usurped by new demands from people in our community, whether it is trans, or Muslims, or Christians, or people of no faith. Rights, once they are acquired and in law, should be protected and implemented, and any new demands or changes required to support in full other members of the community who may differ must be grappled with and dealt with by the Government without undermining existing rights.

The Court's judgment provides a clear, coherent framework within which decisions can be made, particularly in relation to single-sex services, which the Equality Act explicitly permits. Yet this judgment did not remove rights from trans people. Protections preventing discrimination remain firmly in place, as they should. Trans rights are human rights where they are not impinging on somebody else's human rights. That is a really clear distinction that we need to make.

This is not a zero-sum question of one group's rights being set against another's, with gains for one group coming only at the expense, or at the loss, of the rights of another. Rather, it is about ensuring that the law is applied as intended, recognising distinct protected characteristics and giving effect to each in a way that is workable and, crucially, fair. Of course, implementation must be done sensitively and responsibly, taking pains to ensure that the human rights and dignity of all are respected. The law already allows for flexibility to accommodate this.

It is therefore really difficult to understand why the public sector, especially the NHS, is spending hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of pounds on going to tribunals, knowing that it will lose, for an ideological, entrenched reason. That should not be happening. That money should be spent treating women, trans women, trans men and other patients within the NHS. I pay tribute to the Darlington nurses and Jennifer Melle for being here, and for being the light, or the source of information, around this topic, having gone through so much suffering and persecution to stand up for their basic human rights as biological females.

Dr Caroline Johnson: The hon. Member is talking about the way care is managed within the NHS. Has he thought about the importance of ensuring that the biological sex of trans women and trans men is known by the clinician who is treating them? If they are on a ward, there will be a presumption that they are the same sex as the other people on the ward, which could leave them in a difficult position medically. If they receive a blood test result, perhaps for haemoglobin, the results will be interpreted based on the sex that the clinician understands the person to be, which could lead to an error if that is not the patient's actual sex. When a patient is invited for screening, they need to be invited for the right type of screening and not the wrong type of screening, for their own safety. When statistics are produced that help with epidemiology and further healthcare, they also need to be done in an accurate way.

Iqbal Mohamed: I thank the hon. Member for her expertise in this area. Recognising biological sex is in the interests of trans people as well. We are not just different on the outside; we are different on the inside. Hospitals need to be able to treat people for who they are, not who they believe they are or who they want to be. We could end up with mistreatment, misdiagnoses and further litigation against the NHS for causing harm to somebody because we did not explicitly take into account their biological sex.

The law already allows flexibility to accommodate the implementation of human rights for all. It permits the provision of single-sex services where justified, while also enabling appropriate alternative arrangements, such as unisex facilities, where these are needed to ensure

that everyone is treated with respect. However, the clarity in principle that the ruling provides must now be matched by clarity in practice.

We are now seeing movement from organisations. The International Olympic Committee recently announced that it will not allow non-biological women to compete in women’s sport. Girlguiding has now updated its guidance to go back to admitting guides based on biological sex. That is not discrimination against trans people; it is just common sense, and the protection and implementation of existing rights for girls and women.

In that spirit, I ask the Minister three specific questions. First, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that public bodies and service providers are not delaying implementation of the judgment under the mistaken belief that they must wait for further guidance before acting? The Supreme Court ruling was black and white, and gave all employers, the public sector and sporting bodies enough information to proceed with implementing it.

Secondly, how do the Government intend to support service providers in striking the balance between single-sex and unisex services in practice, particularly in frontline settings such as healthcare, education and local authority services, where the consequences of uncertainty are often felt most acutely? Finally, can the Minister set out how the Government intend to communicate clearly with the public about what the judgment means in practice, so that both women and trans people understand their rights and protections under the law?

As legislators, we have a special responsibility to ensure that the law remains coherent and relevant to the world we live in. One year on, I hope that the message is clear. The law has been clarified. The rights of women to access single-sex services are justified and recognised. The protections afforded to trans people remain in place, and the responsibility now lies with all of us—whether that be the Government, public bodies, parliamentarians, employers, sporting bodies or any other group—to ensure that this clarity is translated into consistent, lawful practice.

3.18 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Stringer. I commend the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) on raising this debate in a timely manner, as we approach the anniversary of the Supreme Court judgment that biological sex is the determinant in matters of the Equality Act. That very judgment is a commentary in itself on how our society had been hijacked to the point that common sense had been suborned by the suggestion that a person could be a woman without biologically being a woman. We had got to such a ridiculous position that it took our Supreme Court to tell us the most fundamental and obvious thing that we all should have known. I very much welcome that judgment.

I join in the regret expressed for the sluggishness of the Government’s response to the judgment. Here we are, a year on, and we still await guidance. It seems to me that we are therefore still infected by an ideology that does not want to face up to that very simple and compelling finding of our Supreme Court. I say to the Government: it is time to get on with it. It is now abundantly, demonstrably, incontrovertibly the law, and it is time it is respected and adhered to across all elements of our society.

Marie Goldman: A lot has been said about common sense in this debate. Will the hon. and learned Gentleman will join me in reflecting that common sense used to hold that the Earth was the centre of the universe and that everything else revolved around it, and that common sense does not hold true forever?

Jim Allister: I do not think that was ever common sense, and if that is the depths to which the hon. Member has to stoop to try and find an argument, it is a very ineloquent commentary upon herself.

I have concerns that we could arrive at a situation where the Supreme Court ruling, which is emphatic and clear, might in fact be disappplied in a part of this United Kingdom, because of the iniquitous Windsor framework. One would have thought that in a United Kingdom, a woman is a woman wherever they are. But in the United Kingdom, under the Windsor framework, we are told that Northern Ireland is subject to a different ambit of laws. We are told that under article 2 of the Windsor framework, we are subject to European law on matters that, some argue, extend to this very subject.

We await—it is due shortly—the Dillon judgment from the Supreme Court as to the extent of article 2. The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission has been so ideologically captured by the trans agenda that it is limbering up to bring a legal challenge to the Supreme Court ruling to say that it should not apply in Northern Ireland because of article 2 of the Windsor framework. If that is upheld, we face a dire situation because we already know what the European courts think on this subject. We know it definitively because last month the European Court of Justice ruled, in a case called Shipova, that biological sex can be trumped by gender self-selection. If, as a consequence, a part of this United Kingdom is subject to that jurisprudence, and not the jurisprudence of our own Supreme Court, we are staring into a situation where Northern Ireland would have a different definition of a woman and a different approach to equality laws, and a situation where that which applies everywhere else would be disappplied in Northern Ireland. That would be of immense constitutional significance.

If that worst case scenario were to happen, and if we had a ruling to the effect that, because of article 2 of the Windsor framework, the Supreme Court common-sense ruling does not apply to the whole United Kingdom, will the Government pledge, in the name of being the Government of a United Kingdom, to ensure a united definition and application of the law across the UK? I trust that necessity for that will not arise, but if it does it will be down to the Government to demonstrate whether or not we are a United Kingdom or whether, in addition to every other inequity, we could now have an Irish sea border on gender identity. That would be intolerable, and it would have repercussions far and wide—not least constitutional. I do hope that common sense will prevail, that we will not be found, because of article 2 of the Windsor framework, to be in a different jurisprudence and that we will have the same benefits—benefits that I trust the Government will soon elaborate on. They have dragged their feet far too long already.

Internationally, there has been some progress. The International Olympic Committee has rightly made a decision that someone has to be a biological female to compete in women’s games. That is right, sensible and

[Jim Allister]

necessary. It is really quite the commentary on our society that we have got to a point where nurses like the Darlington nurses have had to be dragged through the courts to establish the most fundamental principle—one that we have all known from when we could first speak, walk and toddle about—that there is a difference between a man and a woman.

The Government must grasp this nettle. The Supreme Court has pointed the way. There is no escape route. Now is the time to embrace that and to ensure that we have the correct guidance right across this land. It is a matter of regret to me that, in Northern Ireland, the Stormont Assembly still has not grasped the nettle and still allows biological men to use women’s toilets. Thankfully, in this place, the right steps were taken last June, but a year on, it still has not been addressed in Stormont. It too needs to catch up with the world and face biological reality.

3.26 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) for securing this important debate, even though I know we are on slightly different sides of it.

For far too long, trans, non-binary and intersex people have understandably been left anxious and fearful about the practical implications of the Supreme Court ruling. In its judgment, the Supreme Court stated:

“It is not the role of the court to adjudicate on the arguments in the public domain on the meaning of gender or sex, nor is it to define the meaning of the word ‘woman’ other than when it is used in the provisions of the EA 2010.”

Would the Minister therefore confirm that the judgment does not and will not affect the interpretation of any other Acts of Parliament?

The ruling also reaffirmed that trans people continue to be protected from discrimination under the Equality Act. Unfortunately, a year on, the Government have still not provided adequate detail on how that will be achieved. Instead, they have created a legal minefield that has left trans, intersex and non-binary people in limbo while exposing businesses and organisations to costly legal action.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission’s draft code of practice, which was leaked in November, only worsened the environment. Trans people who hold gender recognition certificates have explained to me the legal limbo that they now find themselves in. During the lengthy process to obtain such a certificate, they are required to provide formal evidence that they live, and will continue to live, in their acquired gender, yet the draft EHRC guidance indicated that they may be required to use facilities based on their birth sex. That simply is not a coherent legal position, and we urgently need clarity on the practical implications of the Supreme Court ruling for someone trying to obtain a gender recognition certificate.

The draft EHRC guidance also proposed that staff working across the economy, from hotels and hospitals to cinemas and care homes, could be required to question people about their sex based on how they look, their behaviour or concerns raised by others, and refuse access

to them if there is doubt they are telling the truth about their sex. That is unacceptable and unworkable. It would put trans and non-binary people in unsafe situations, and it is inevitable that it would acutely impact women and girls.

Jonathan Hinder: The hon. Lady is outlining cases where the application of that guidance might be difficult. Does she think that it would be difficult for someone to determine whether I, given the way I look, should be in a women’s single-sex space?

Marie Goldman: I am going to answer the hon. Gentleman’s intervention in a slightly different way. There is something called the 80:20 rule, which states that, in pretty much anything in life, we should put 80% of our effort into 20% of situations. The vast majority of the time, it is really easy to deal with situations, including the one the hon. Gentleman just outlined. The hard work—the 80%—comes in 20% of the cases. It might not be that exact ratio, but a lot of the time we have to work a lot harder to deal with the cases that are in the margins and harder to determine. I know that from my past work in IT, but it applies to lots of other things.

The hon. Gentleman suggests that he would be instantly recognisable as a man, and would be able to use facilities for men, and I would not disagree, but there are many situations—certainly a minority, but they should still be handled with care—where it is not as easy to determine. As a country that is caring, we should not ignore those situations. How a country or society looks after its most vulnerable people, who are usually part of minority groups, is how it should be judged, so I suggest that we need to take care on this issue.

Carla Lockhart: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way; we are utterly opposed. Does she agree that the cases involving Jennifer Melle and the Darlington nurses are examples of this very issue? Someone looked like a male standing in the changing room when they were referred to as “Mr”, but these people had to go through the courts to prove it. That is wrong.

Marie Goldman: That is exactly why we need the Government to come forward with proper guidance—so that organisations can work through this properly and understand when they are working within the rules, and so that they do not have to reinvent everything for themselves. We do not have that guidance, and it is desperately needed.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Could the hon. Lady say what her ideal situation would be? Would it be that if a gentleman walked into the ladies’ changing rooms, perhaps at a swimming pool, it would be illegal to stop them or even ask them? Would the solution be that any man could go into any women’s changing room if he wished?

Marie Goldman: I struggle with the idea that a trans person would go into the opposite sex’s changing rooms, which they are supposedly not allowed into, for the purpose of causing harm. That is surely what we are worrying about: harm being caused, particularly to women. I struggle with the idea that, at the moment, it is the sign on the door that is preventing someone from causing harm to women. Do they go, “Oh, I wanted to

harm a woman, but I’m not going to do it because the sign on the door says I shouldn’t”? I struggle with that argument in general.

It should not need to be spelled out in Britain in 2026, but requiring women and girls to prove that we are female enough—because we have to do the same thing—is not only a deeply regressive step and an impractical requirement to put on businesses and other organisations, but deeply discriminatory, judgmental and, speaking as a woman, outrageous and unworkable.

Tracy Gilbert: As a lesbian woman, I have often been misgendered. As a young person—a tomboy—that sort of thing did not bother me; I wore it as a badge of honour. I am very worried that we are talking about fitting women into stereotypes. Surely, in this day and age, we are trying to move away from gender stereotypes as women, lesbians and gay people. Does the hon. Member agree that a trans woman can be a trans woman and a trans man can be a trans man—they are not a woman and they are not a man; they are a trans woman or a trans man—and services should be provided on that basis?

Marie Goldman: One of the most important things is how we behave towards each other as a society. I do not want women, men or anybody to have fit into stereotypes. The hon. Lady is absolutely right—we want to live in a society where we accept people for who they are.

Jonathan Hinder: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Marie Goldman: I will make some more progress.

That requirement is unworkable. There is not one of us here who does not know how stressed our local small businesses are. How could it ever be proportionate to require overstretched staff in these businesses to police gender norms for their own customers to access a facility as basic as a toilet? The business community has already loudly voiced its concerns. In September last year, hundreds of businesses signed a letter opposing the EHRC draft proposals, given the impact they would have on their employees and their costs, as well as the legal risk they would create.

Iqbal Mohamed: The hon. Member is talking about employers and their preferences, but they oppose gender equal pay—they would rather pay women less than men to make more profits. Just because some company says they disagree with something or they are against it does not make it wrong. Does the hon. Member agree?

Marie Goldman: The hon. Gentleman might be confusing two very different issues. There are deeply upsetting impacts on cisgender women, too, including heartbreaking stories, as I mentioned earlier, of women who have undergone cancer treatment being questioned over which toilet they use because they do not conform with what a woman “ought” to look like.

I am pretty sure that nobody in this Chamber today wants to live in a country where those who have suffered from cancer are worried that they will be challenged on their appearance when trying to use public toilets. Requiring women to use separate facilities, such as disabled toilets, instead of spaces that match their gender is also not a workable solution. I have heard from trans and non-binary

individuals who say that it would effectively out them, exposing them to a greater risk of harassment or even violence and depriving them of their right to privacy.

Organisations that want to be inclusive have also been affected. Last year in a statement to the House, in which she welcomed the clarity provided by the Supreme Court, the Minister for Women and Equalities said:

“of course providers can offer inclusive services, should they choose to do so, so long as they are clear about who they are offering their services to.”—[*Official Report*, 22 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 959WH.]

However, that has not been the case. I ask the Minister to clarify whether the Government’s position on that point has changed.

Along with Liberal Democrat colleagues, I have regularly called on the Minister for Women and Equalities to take action to solve these serious issues. I therefore cautiously welcome the news that the Government intend to lay the code in May. That will hopefully bring an end to the uncertainty and worry that the trans community, businesses and organisations have been exposed to for too long.

The Minister must ensure, however, that the new guidance is workable and inclusive. The Liberal Democrats will accept nothing less. It must lay out how it will protect the dignity, safety and rights of all, and ensure that trans people are not prevented from participating in public life because there are no facilities that they can safely use. As I think many of us would agree, it is also essential that the guidance is subject to full parliamentary scrutiny. It must have a full debate and a free vote.

Rosie Duffield: Will the hon. Member clarify, as the Liberal Democrats are opposed to what they see as the interpretation of the law—specifically the Equality Act 2010—whether they propose a change to that Act? The EHRC is simplify clarifying the Supreme Court’s clarification of that existing law.

Marie Goldman: That was a timely intervention because my next paragraph deals exactly with that.

Separately, to deal with the unacceptable legal limbo that many trans people are in, I encourage the Minister to appoint a Joint Committee of MPs and peers, on a cross-party basis, to conduct post-legislative scrutiny of both the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and the Equality Act 2010. The Committee should take evidence from affected communities, including trans people, and propose any amendments or new legislation that it sees as necessary to ensure that existing rights are protected.

Trans people are worried for good reason. Two thirds of them have experienced harassment and violence simply because they were identified as trans. It is sadly an all-too-common theme throughout history that vulnerable minorities—in this case a minority that makes up less than 1% of the UK’s population—are scapegoated for society’s ills.

Tracy Gilbert: Does the hon. Member recognise that women are a vulnerable group and that we make up half the population, yet we are still subject to more violence than any other group of people in society?

Marie Goldman: I do agree with that. The vast majority of women who are attacked are attacked by men, and those are men who they already know. If we are going to focus on protecting women, I would suggest that that would be a very good place to start.

Jonathan Hinder: Does the hon. Member accept that, as she says, men are generally the ones who attack women and that, if we do not have single-sex spaces, predatory men will use circumstances that are to their benefit to attack women? That is exactly why we need single-sex spaces.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. Can the hon. Lady bring her comments to a close, having answered the hon. Gentleman's question?

Marie Goldman: I will briefly answer the hon. Gentleman by saying that, although I do not have the stats in front of me, a huge proportion of women are, sadly, attacked in their own home and single-sex spaces will not prevent that from happening.

Protecting the rights of women and ensuring dignity and inclusion for trans people are not competing objectives. Both are essential to a fair society. It is basic British decency to afford that. The Liberal Democrats believe as such and that is what we will continue to call for. The Government must now provide leadership and certainty to achieve that balance.

3.38 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) for securing this important debate, and for her work to support single-sex spaces and nurses such as Jennifer Melle and the Darlington nurses who have been hounded and harassed for asserting that biological sex is real.

On a personal point, in my interactions with the Nursing and Midwifery Council and the NHS trusts, I have had complete disinterest from people in positions of power, and an arrogance that they were right when, actually, the Supreme Court ruling showed that they were in the wrong and that those nurses—those employees who were not in positions of power—were correct. I also pay tribute to the incredible women of For Women Scotland. Without their strength and determination we would not be in the position that we are in today. I thank Trina, Marion and Susan, as well as the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield), for their tireless work because, Lord knows, they have all suffered for it.

The Supreme Court ruling is crystal clear. In the Equality Act 2010, "man" means man, "woman" means woman, and "sex" means sex—no more legal fiction, just simple biological fact. Women and girls breathed a sigh of relief when we saw that ruling, but what have we seen from the Government since? A first-rate lesson in dither and delay and a determined effort to avoid doing their job. This is one of the most important issues on the Secretary of State's desk. It is utterly disgraceful that she had to be shamed into finally agreeing to meet with For Women Scotland a year after the ruling.

We are suffering from a hierarchy of diversity where unaccountable diversity policy officers get to pick which ethnic, religious or minority groups are more worthy and deserving of special privileges. We just heard a speech that was completely devoid of any trade-offs to understand how the women on the other side of those policies would be impacted. That is not equality; it is deeply destructive and divisive. No matter which way it is cut, it always manages to leave women and girls at the bottom of the pile.

Iqbal Mohamed: Does the right hon. Lady agree that the one-year delay in issuing the guidance has discriminated against 51% of the population, causing stress and potential harm?

Claire Coutinho: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The fact that a meeting with the people who brought the court case was not prioritised shows how far down the list of priorities this has been. Just this week, the teacher of the Southport killer admitted that she was silenced for raising concerns about his behaviour, after she was accused of stereotyping him as "a black boy with a knife".

The result was that he went on to kill three young girls. MI6 ran an internship that would hand a place to a private school black boy but turn away a white working-class girl who had grown up in poverty.

To this day, health professionals in this country are excusing harmful cultural practices that affect women and girls, such as female genital mutilation or cousin marriage, in the name of diversity. If anyone complains or argues that women's rights are important and that women have the right to safety, dignity and privacy in a compassionate society, they are labelled as bigoted. It is not bigoted to have these debates and speak up for the rights of women and girls, or to point out that this religion of diversity is now putting them in harm's way. That culture has real, harmful consequences: women have lost their jobs; they have been hounded out of public life.

Tragically, we are missing chances to stop men from killing women and girls. It is the same ideological approach that allowed biological men to force their way into female spaces, sports events and even places on public boards. The women who spoke up for their rights were treated brutally, including within the Labour party. Enough is enough. The law is clear: biological sex is real and this madness has to stop now. When it comes to the Supreme Court ruling, Ministers' adherence to this hierarchy of diversity has left them paralysed, pulled one way by their public statements and another by their own beliefs.

A whole year on from the Supreme Court ruling, the Government are still unwilling and unable to do their job and take the action needed to enforce the Equality Act. Despite the empty words of a written statement conveniently timed to pre-empt this debate, the Secretary of State has still not laid the code of practice before Parliament. Having already waited seven months, we are now sat in publication purgatory: action promised but still not delivered. All the while, out there in the real world, women and girls are paying the price.

Before the Minister tries to fob us off with a can of red herrings about purdah and prorogation, let me say this: the Government made an announcement on potholes yesterday, but they cannot make an announcement on the importance of women's rights. Women have waited long enough. There is no legitimate reason to delay publishing the code because of the devolved elections. They could have done the work ahead of the elections if that is what they wanted. The Equality Act is a reserved matter and the code is not specific to Scotland or Wales. The Government have made plenty of announcements; this is just another excuse for inaction.

We know why they have been stalling: Labour Ministers are too scared of upsetting the gender activists on their own Back Benches to ensure that women’s rights are protected. While they stall for time, who suffers? It is women such as Sandie Peggie, Jennifer Melle, and the hard-working Darlington nurses who have been put through the wringer by the NHS simply for stating that biological sex is real. It is the women who have been raped and find themselves face to face with a man at a rape crisis centre, and the female prisoners who are forced to share their spaces with biologically male inmates.

Countless organisations are failing to comply with the law, with absolutely no consequences. Women and girls are being denied their legal rights on a daily basis. The former chair of the EHRC, Baroness Falkner, was absolutely right; this is cowardice from a set of Ministers who are entirely captured. To quote her directly:

“You have a Government led by a lawyer...yet he’s unable to uphold it in its most visible form”.

Frankly, women deserve better than seven months of misdirection about over-egged requirements for consultations, impact assessments and purdah for devolved elections—God help us! They deserve better than a Secretary of State refusing to withdraw the outdated and unlawful 2011 code. They deserve better than a year of Government Departments and quangos telling us that they are reviewing policies, with no end in sight. They deserve better than a Government crippled by fear, inaction, obfuscation and delay. All the while, women and girls across this country are put at risk and denied their legal rights.

Hopefully, the Minister will take this opportunity to answer a few questions that might put our minds at rest. Why did it take months for the Government to submit a “narrow set of comments” on the draft code of practice to the EHRC, and what exactly were those comments? Did the Secretary of State, as reported in *The Times*, instruct the EHRC to tone down the draft guidance?

Will the Minister take personal responsibility for ensuring that all Government Departments are finally compliant with the Supreme Court ruling? What additional resources are the Government providing to the EHRC to help it to enforce the Supreme Court ruling and the new code of practice? Will the Minister finally name the specific day when the Secretary of State will actually lay the draft code—no more excuses, no more misdirection, no more passing the buck?

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey): It is a real honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. First, I thank the hon. Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) for securing this important debate. As Members have outlined, in the case of *For Women Scotland Ltd v. the Scottish Ministers*, the Supreme Court ruled that the terms man, woman and sex in the Equality Act 2010 refer to biological sex. That means that a person will be considered as their biological sex for the purposes of that specific Act, regardless of whether they have a gender recognition certificate. The judgment also reaffirmed that trans people are protected from discrimination on the grounds of gender reassignment.

This Government have always proudly supported the Equality Act 2010, and we continue to uphold its protections for separate and single-sex spaces and services based on

biological sex. As Members from across the House have outlined today, the provision of single-sex spaces is vital for our constituents, and this Government will always protect it.

There has also been reference to the anxiety currently felt by the trans community, many of whom are deeply concerned about how this judgment will impact their daily lives. This Government will always protect trans people’s rights under the law and ensure that they are treated with dignity and respect. My remarks today are underpinned by the Supreme Court’s vital reminder that the judgment should not be considered a triumph of one group at the expense of another, because pitting different groups against each other and stoking division hinders our shared endeavour of ensuring dignity and respect for women and trans people.

It has been important to hear contributions from Members in this debate, and I thank them all sincerely. The hon. Member for Upper Bann asked me three direct questions at the end of her speech, and the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho) also asked me about laying the code. We will lay the code as soon as possible after the local elections, and we have stated our intention to do so in May.

On the question of workplaces, we expect all duty bearers to follow the law and seek legal advice where necessary. That has been a consistent theme in the debate, and the Government have been crystal clear that we expect people to follow the law as per the Supreme Court judgment.

Claire Coutinho: Will the Minister give way?

Olivia Bailey: I wonder whether the right hon. Lady would let me make some progress. I am sorry; I have quite a lot of important points to get through.

Claire Coutinho: It is a short question.

Olivia Bailey: If it is very short, she has twisted my arm.

Claire Coutinho: I am very grateful to Minister for giving up a moment of time. If she expects people to follow the law, can she confirm that all Government Departments are doing so?

Olivia Bailey: I can confirm that all Government Departments are currently ensuring they comply with the law.

The third question that the hon. Member for Upper Bann asked me was on the NHS. Issuing guidance before the EHRC code of practice is published presents a very real risk that guidance may be inconsistent; I am happy to keep her up to date with progress on that matter.

The right hon. Member for East Surrey and others welcomed visitors in the Public Gallery today. I welcome them too, and want to say clearly that everybody should be safe and respected at work. That includes women’s voices, rights and spaces being respected. I think the right hon. Lady was wrong to say that that has not been a priority for the Government—we have been working tirelessly on giving it the due care and attention it needs—and I think she is wrong to say that we are not determined to uphold the law, as I have hopefully just clarified.

[Olivia Bailey]

I will also clarify that this Government are committed to the rights of women. The last Conservative Government had a terrible record from on women’s rights: victims of rape and sexual assault waiting for years for justice, women waiting years for diagnosis and care in the NHS, women at work suffering stubbornly high gender pay gaps and the Leader of the Opposition even saying that maternity pay had gone too far. This Government are delivering for women and girls. We are halving violence against women and girls in a decade, strengthening women’s rights at work and delivering a new women’s health strategy and cutting waiting lists. We are committed to protecting single-sex spaces and implementing the Supreme Court ruling, which I will come on to discuss.

Debates such as this are important because, in a conversation that is so often deeply polarised we must find ways to work together to move forward. We need more cool heads and constructive contributions, so that we can ensure the vulnerable groups at the heart of this debate—for example, women who have experienced violence and the trans community—are always treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

Today my right hon. Friend the Minister for Women and Equalities has tabled a written ministerial statement on progress with assessing the EHRC’s code of practice for services, public functions and associations. That follows the statement issued by the EHRC in which it explained that it has updated the code of practice and shared that with the Government this week. While we are unable to make further comment at this time due to strict pre-election rules, hon. Members should please be assured that we will take urgent action, with the intention of laying the code in May, as soon as practicable after the election period.

I also want to emphasise the importance of getting this code of practice right. It would be catastrophic for single-sex services to follow guidance that was not robust and then be placed in legal jeopardy again. That is why it is vital that we have taken the time needed to consider the code in full. When we lay the code, we will follow the process as set out in the Equality Act: namely, if the code is approved by the Minister, it will be laid before Parliament. If neither House disapproves the draft within a 40-day period, the Minister will then bring the code into force via a commencement order.

Beyond the process of the code itself, I have heard in today’s debate that some Members are concerned about what the Government have been doing to implement the Supreme Court ruling while the code is being considered. I reassure Members that since the judgment was received, the Government have been crystal clear that we expect duty bearers to follow the clarity provided by the judgment and to seek specialist legal advice where necessary.

Dr Caroline Johnson: Will the hon. Member give way?

Olivia Bailey: I will try to come back to the hon. Member at the end if I can. I do apologise.

I can also assure Members that all Government Departments and their arm’s length bodies have been carefully reviewing the ruling’s potential implications in full to ensure that their policies and guidance are legally compliant.

I have also heard concerns about the implications of the Supreme Court ruling for trans people. The Government firmly believe that trans people deserve to live their lives with dignity and respect, and without shame. That is why we will continue to uphold the Gender Recognition Act 2004, and why we are making progress on delivering our manifesto commitments, which will strengthen rights and protections for trans people. We will deliver a full, trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices. We will also improve healthcare for trans people, using the findings of the recent Dr Levy review on adult gender identity services and the forthcoming Dr Brady review on LGBT+ health inequalities.

We are adding sex and gender reassignment to the list of protected characteristics under the aggravated offences in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to ensure that offences motivated by hostility against someone’s sex, presumed sex or trans identity can be charged as an aggravated offence where the evidence supports that. We are determined to make sure that women, girls and trans people feel safe and secure everywhere—in public spaces, at home, in the workplace and online. I thank all hon. Members for their important contributions, and I thank you, Mr Stringer, for your expert chairship.

3.55 pm

Carla Lockhart: I thank all hon. Members for their participation. I want to thank the Minister, but she completely avoided the question about Northern Ireland, so I want her to write to me on that to ensure Northern Ireland women are protected in the same way as women in England, Scotland and Wales.

I especially thank the hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) for her efforts. She has often faced significant backlash, and yet she continues with courage. The Government need to realise that we are not going away until we see the change that every biological woman deserves. In Upper Bann and right across this United Kingdom, they deserve protection. We simply want the Government to reflect what the Supreme Court clarified: that “women” in the Equality Act refers to biological sex. It should not need law or clarity. It is time that this wokeness and ideology was kicked into touch. A woman is an adult human female, and women across the UK deserve to be protected. I thank everyone for their time today.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the first anniversary of the For Women Scotland v The Scottish Ministers ruling.

National Suicide Prevention Standard

4 pm

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that they may make a speech only with the prior permission of the Member in charge and the Minister. I have received no information that such permission has been given. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for businesses implementing National Suicide Prevention Standard BS 30480.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. This debate is about a risk we often overlook in our workplaces, but which can have a great impact on families, work colleagues and a much wider group of people. We have rigorous standards for fire safety and electrical wiring, and for hard hats on construction sites. We accept those as the cost of doing business safely yet, until now, we have had no such road map for the most complex safety risk of all: the mental health and lives of our employees.

Research shows that one in four adults has contemplated suicide, and one in 13 has attempted it. For every suicide death, at least 135 people, including colleagues, clients and communities alike, are directly or indirectly affected. Suicide is the leading cause of death for men under the age of 50. According to the Office for National Statistics, it was the leading cause of death for males and females aged 20 to 34 in the UK for all years observed, accounting for 27.1% of male deaths.

Suicide touches nearly every workplace, yet most organisations lack the tools to address the emotional aftermath.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First of all, I commend the hon. Lady for introducing the debate; this is a massive issue, absolutely. Does she not agree that, as 90% of businesses are small businesses with no human resources department, it is difficult for employers to be aware of the help for staff, and to be trained? Further, does the hon. Lady not agree that the Government, and particularly the Minister, need to ensure that accessible training is of no or minimal cost to small businesses? The very thing that the hon. Lady wants to happen can happen, but it needs that wee bit of help.

Liz Twist: Of course small and medium-sized enterprises are in a difficult position without large resources, but there are lots of things we can do. As the hon. Member suggests, I will ask the Minister what we can do to ensure that SMEs also have the ability to take part in this training.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Does the hon. Member agree that BS 30480 will make a real difference only if businesses are actively supported in implementing it, rather than simply being left with a “do your best” approach? In that context, would she support formal a Government endorsement of the standard, including through health and safety guidance on work-related stress and psychological risk?

Liz Twist: Indeed, I will be pushing the Government to do all they can to support the implementation of the standard, and to recognise those psychological risks.

As we know, male-dominated industries such as construction face severe historical challenges with work and mental health. Agriculture and farming workers face extreme social isolation and financial pressures, and have access to lethal means. Healthcare workers and emergency responders experience severe trauma alongside having ready access to pharmaceuticals.

The economic impact of suicide is clear. In the UK, it is estimated at nearly £1.46 million per death. Nationally, this costs the UK economy nearly £10 billion per year, factoring in the cost of lost productivity, healthcare and emergency services. Suicide has a profound effect on every workplace it touches, whether through the loss of a colleague, supporting someone in crisis or managing the complex emotional and operational aftermath. Yet organisations are not necessarily equipped to address this issue openly and effectively. For employees without proper support, the trauma and grief of exposure to suicide significantly damages workplace attendance, retention, performance and productivity. Colleagues often experience profound feelings of guilt, inadequacy and confusion.

Because people fear saying the wrong thing, they often do or say nothing, which leads to further distress and emotional toll. This standard, informed by research, data and lived experience, aims to provide organisations with practical, evidence-based recommendations to help plan for, respond to and support people affected by suicide, or those with thoughts of suicide, in the workplace and beyond. The standard is designed to help workplaces support people who might be on the frontline of dealing with the stresses and strains of life.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for her work in chairing the all-party parliamentary group on suicide and self-harm prevention. I also thank her for jointly organising an event in Parliament to which constituents of mine, Anna Scott and Roger Cunliffe, who lost their daughter to suicide, brought the Yorkshire Speak Their Name quilts; we had 19 quilts on display here in the Houses of Parliament.

Will the hon. Member recognise, however, that those in our farming community, working in isolated environments, are of particular concern, with men in farming being twice as likely to lose their lives to suicide as the average man working in any other environment? Will she join me in celebrating the work of the Farming Community Network and others, which do so much to support those working in isolated environments, particularly in the farming community?

Liz Twist: I thank the hon. Member for that question. I had great pleasure in working with his constituents on the quilt exhibition in the Upper Waiting Hall; it was a tremendous experience, and they do tremendous work. Farming is indeed one of the industries most affected by these circumstances. I certainly commend the work being done on the agricultural side, by organisations such as Yellow Wellies, to ensure that those issues are addressed.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I really appreciate all the work that my hon. Friend does in this area. I was very moved when a constituent, a police officer, came to me to share the experiences from his force when

[*Rachael Maskell*]

somebody took their life. The force did not have the tools available to support him, leading to his own mental health challenges, and to those of his colleagues. Therefore, it is really important, as part of this standard, that employers are equipped to identify those pressures—often overwork and stress, or bullying at work and the culture set in the workplace—and to then address the challenges that people face with trauma. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need that holistic approach to people's wellbeing at work?

Liz Twist: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Certainly I agree that we must do all that we can. I hope that, in this debate today, we will be able to take steps forward to implement the standard.

I want briefly to touch on the work that the British Standards Institution does. It plays a vital role in workplace standards of all kinds in this country. The BSI is 125 years old this year. I am sure the Minister will join me in congratulating the BSI on that achievement, and the enormous contribution it has made to businesses and the everyday life of people throughout the United Kingdom since 1901.

British standards have helped with everything from saving lives with medical devices to air raid shelters during the war, crash helmets and now addressing suicide. I thank colleagues from the BSI for being here in the Public Gallery today to raise awareness of their organisation's hard work, particularly on the new standard BS 30480: "Suicide and the Workplace". I know that the BSI has a positive impact on society through its work. As chair of the APPG on suicide and self-harm prevention, I am pleased to have supported work on that standard. I am also delighted that the House has endorsed the standard and is seeking to adopt it following internal consultation.

The publication of the world's first standard on suicide and the workplace represents a significant milestone in supporting mental health and wellbeing at work across the UK and beyond. The BSI, acting as convenor, brought together many leading individuals and organisations to develop it. The standard itself calls for assigning a named senior leader to take responsibility for the organisation's suicide prevention strategy and provide targeted training so that line managers are confident in spotting warning signs.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): My hon. Friend is a true champion for mental health and has been quite an inspiration to me since I have been in Parliament. The standard is an amazing step forward for mental health in the workplace and is hugely welcome. It will save lives and help people in their everyday lives who experience suicide happening around them. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to be proactive and open up channels of communication really early to prevent suicide? We should encourage things such as mental first aid training in the workplace, which is really important.

Liz Twist: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. Indeed, the whole purpose of this debate is to encourage us to be proactive and work with other organisations and employers to ensure that the standard is implemented and lives are saved.

Additionally, the standard encourages businesses to collaborate with workers to help design individual safety plans that outline coping strategies and emergency contacts at times when they need help or support. I was glad to work with the BSI on the standard. It represents the outcome of a huge amount of work involving employers, and mental health and suicide prevention organisations such as Samaritans, trade unions and BSI staff, some of whom are in the Public Gallery today. I was especially pleased that Mr Speaker granted permission to help launch BS 30480 in Speaker's House last November.

I pay tribute to Professor Ann John, director of the National Centre for Suicide Prevention, who chaired the BSI committee, and within that, Marcus Long, who led the communications group, and Peter Kelly, who led the drafting panel. I also thank the BSI staff I have worked with over the past few months—Jane Packer, Lachean Humphreys and Robert Jervis-Gibbons—for their leadership on the standard. It has been a great pleasure working with all of them, but now we have to make sure that the standard is rolled out by employers. There has been a great deal of enthusiasm from employers to date, with 11,500 downloads of the standard so far.

How can the Government promote the standard? I believe the standard will help many workplaces across the UK, and I am sure the Government will work with me and the BSI to promote it to businesses. For example, Heathrow airport has publicly spoken about its adoption of the standard, and so has the Inclusion Education, in a recent BSI webinar in which I took part. Can we please encourage more to follow their lead? I believe we need the Government's help to do this.

As we have heard, the standard offers clear guidance for organisations of all sizes and sectors, including public bodies, charities, social enterprises, businesses and commercial enterprises. I hope the Government can actively promote it, especially within high-risk, male-dominated industries, by leveraging their new and existing partnerships, such as the upcoming three-year collaboration with the Premier League, aimed at improving men's health, literacy and suicide prevention. Furthermore, the Department of Health and Social Care could work with the Health and Safety Executive to ensure that workplace first aid and safety guidance emphasises the importance of managing risks to mental health using the standard. I am pleased the Government mentioned the standard in the men's health strategy earlier this year, and that was significant. That is a good starting point for ensuring that employers start to implement the standard. The focus of today's debate is how the Government can help with that task and help BS 30480 contribute to the national suicide prevention strategy.

April is Stress Awareness Month in workplaces, and I hope the Minister will agree to some actions today, maybe on behalf of his colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade. First, will his Department help to promote this important standard with business, public sector bodies and throughout Government? Secondly, will he commit to jointly organising and attending a roundtable with me, the BSI, the Department for Business and Trade, key UK businesses, SMEs and the unions to discuss the roll-out of the standard across UK workplaces. Thirdly, will he say how the Government will ensure that small and medium-sized enterprises can access the trauma-informed training required to implement the standard effectively?

We want to ensure that the standard not only raises awareness, but gives organisations the tools they need to reduce risk, intervene effectively and encourage conversations, breaking down the myths and the stigma that talking about suicide causes people to feel. With help from the Government and colleagues in this place, we can all work together to achieve our ambition of seeing fewer people die by suicide.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Dr Zubir Ahmed): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist) for securing this debate on a topic that is especially close to her heart and for her work more generally to promote action on suicide prevention. I am also grateful to hon. Members across the Chamber for their interventions.

Every suicide is nothing short of a tragedy. It has lasting and devastating impacts on families, friends and communities. Ensuring that the right care and support are available to someone who may be struggling when and where they need it can make all the difference in saving a life. That is why reducing the numbers of lives lost to suicide is a key priority for this Government, and we are committed to taking forward the suicide prevention strategy for England. The strategy focuses on harnessing efforts across civil society to help identify and support people at risk.

Standards such as the one produced by the British Standards Institution play an important role in raising the profile of suicide prevention in England and in supporting employers to play their part. I take this opportunity to congratulate the BSI on 125 years of tireless work, ensuring quality not only in British society, but across the world. The British Standards Institution is the UK's national standards body—an independent organisation that develops standards that shape and encourage best practice across myriad professional sectors. The Government's relationship with the BSI is through a memorandum of understanding, primarily to support the UK standards system, rather than to direct or enforce implementation of standards by businesses.

Decisions on adoption and implementation remain with individual organisations, although the Government may play a role in encouraging awareness of those standards to support best practice. In November last year, as we heard, the BSI launched a new voluntary standard entitled “Suicide and the Workplace”. That standard was particularly notable, given that it was not just the UK's but the world's first national standard supporting suicide prevention efforts in the workplace—a truly commendable achievement. My ministerial counterpart, the Minister with responsibility for mental health and women's health, Baroness Gillian Merron, was particularly pleased to speak at the launch of that standard.

As with other BSI standards, this voluntary British standard is published as guidance; it is designed to support organisations of any size and across all sectors in strengthening their approach to suicide prevention, intervention and bereavement support in the workplace.

On uptake, I was pleased to hear that the standard has been well received so far, with more than 11,000 downloads since its publication in November. It is

overwhelming to hear that businesses across the country are putting the standard into practice, including Heathrow airport and Inclusion Education, which have publicly adopted it.

The standard is advisory and is intended to be integrated into existing organisational policies and health, safety and wellbeing arrangements, and therefore to be flexible. In terms of supporting its implementation, decisions on how to use it rest with individual organisations, but the Government recognise that some employers may choose to use it as a reference point or benchmark alongside their existing workplace mental health and wellbeing policies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett knows I am not a Department for Business and Trade Minister, but I am committed to making sure that she is linked in with the appropriate Minister in that Department, particularly around her asks on how smaller and medium-sized enterprises can access and implement the standard and overcome the regulatory and financial hurdles to doing so, and I would be delighted to try to organise that meeting for her.

Rachael Maskell: In 2003, the last Labour Government introduced a programme called Dignity at Work. It looked at bullying in the workplace, which we know is significant, and there are a lot of parallels we can draw on. A partnership was formed between trade unions, Government, businesses and public sector bodies to implement a programme of work to address bullying in the workplace, and it was incredibly successful. Will the Minister look at the Government being more interventionist on this standard and perhaps adopting a similar programme of work?

Dr Ahmed: My hon. Friend is always knowledgeable about these matters and she tempts me to egress across the confines of my departmental portfolio. I am happy to cite her recommendations in my correspondence with colleagues in the Department for Business and Trade when I try and set up a meeting for my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett.

The role of employers generally cannot be understated. As the suicide prevention strategy clearly sets out, by improving support practices and conversations employers can and do save lives from suicide. Almost three quarters of people who take their own lives are not in contact with NHS mental health services. That points to the importance of public and private sector organisations—well beyond the confines of what we see as the traditional NHS—that are well placed to reach those vulnerable people most at risk. Workplaces provide the perfect opportunity to signpost people to the support they need. Employers should support practices and conversations that help to prevent suicides—for example, by having employment assistance programmes, line manager training and support networks in place for employees. Every employee should feel supported, and every employer should ensure that support is known of and available to their staff.

As has been highlighted, we know that some sectors are disproportionately affected by suicide. For example, suicide rates in construction are four times higher than in other business sectors. The Construction Leadership Council's mental health project has focused, through the lens of prevention, on identifying the primary root

[*Dr Ahmed*]

mental health causes impacting construction workers. The project, in partnership with Mates in Mind and the University of Warwick, held a series of regional focus groups with on-the-ground workers and identified those causes as including late payments, a lack of stable work, and workers having to travel and stay far away from family and loved ones. The Department for Business and Trade consulted on those issues and received around 3,000 responses. An action plan, together with a joint code of practice setting out how employers across the sector can provide a more supportive environment to address and prevent those issues specifically, will be published this summer.

With suicide prevention, we often talk about the importance of meeting people where they are. Ensuring that people are supported by their workplaces is one valuable way of doing that, and the Government are committed to finding more opportunities to ensure that every person requiring support can access it readily. For example, my counterpart Baroness Merron, alongside co-chairs Money and Mental Health, convened senior stakeholders from financial services to discuss the role they could play in supporting people at risk—both their customers and their employees. I understand there was a great appetite in the room to take further action on this matter, and Baroness Merron is working closely with officials to progress this work at pace.

I encourage all workplaces and employers to familiarise themselves, and align their work practices, with the Government's suicide prevention strategy and to consider how they can best support their staff. I would also encourage them to consider drawing on the BSI standards as an exemplar tool to help embed suicide prevention in working practices.

Finally, as the BSI standard highlights, the importance of community, both inside and outside the workplace, cannot be overstated. That is why so many of the Government's ambitions surrounding suicide prevention, and indeed wider prevention, hold community at their core. With our 10-year health plan, we are shifting care and support from traditional institutions into the community, and our focus is more firmly on prevention. Through the new community-based mental health centres that are being piloted, people and families can receive care and treatment when they need it, in their community, 24 hours a day, and in a much calmer environment than one finds in traditional A&E departments.

Liz Twist: Can I tempt the Minister to go a little further? I specifically requested a roundtable to encourage take up of the standard. Is something that he can look at and mention to the other parties I discussed?

Dr Ahmed: My hon. Friend is trying to steal the conclusion of my speech, so I will bring it forward. I am always delighted to meet her, and she knows I am happy to contribute to any roundtable that she feels needs my attendance. I can charge my officials with the task of getting that organised.

Those community-based mental health centres are co-delivered with primary care specialist services that can be drawn on as required. People can receive psychological therapies, medication and other interventions, while also having access to expertise that can help with wider issues that may be impacting on their wellbeing and recovery, such as issues with housing, employment and peer support.

Our suicide prevention support pathfinder programme for middle-aged men will invest up to £3.6 million over three years in areas of England where middle-aged men face the greatest risk of suicide. It will support new ways of embedding effective, tailored support for middle-aged men within their communities and will create clearer, more joined-up pathways into existing local suicide prevention systems.

Today's discussion has without doubt highlighted that suicide prevention truly is everybody's business. Every person, organisation and service has a role to play. We can all do more to ensure that we are equipped with the skills that can and will save lives. Our suicide prevention strategy sets out a comprehensive, evidence-driven plan to reduce the number of lives lost to suicide across our country. It highlights the important role that employers and organisations can and should play in supporting their staff to get the support they need. Guidance such as the BSI's "Suicide and the Workplace" standard brings welcome visibility to just how important that role is. I extend my thanks to everyone who contributed to and was involved in the development of the standard.

In conclusion, I know how personally painful debates such as this can be, but all hon. Members will know that the impact of these discussions goes well beyond the four walls of our Parliament and into the streets. That awareness is so important, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett for securing this debate. I would be delighted to meet her and to organise the meetings I outlined.

Question put and agreed to.

Ground-mounted Solar Panels: Alternatives

4.30 pm

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of alternatives to ground mounted solar panels.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I sensed the people coming into the Chamber in the last couple of minutes and I felt a quickening. It was like energy coming together, which is completely appropriate given what we are here to debate: alternatives to land-based solar panels.

The context in which I wish to couch this debate is twofold. One aspect is local and one slightly more geostrategic. People say that in politics, where you sit defines where you stand. Hon. Members may or may not know that I am the proud Member of Parliament for Spelthorne. I sometimes feel the need to remind hon. Members that Spelthorne is not in Lincolnshire or Lancashire; it is, in fact, everything south of Heathrow airport until hon. Members get to the River Thames.

When I was elected, at the last election, to be the Member for Spelthorne, I looked at a very big map of the constituency—hon. Members will be very surprised to learn that I used to be in the Army, and there used to be a very good saying in the Army: “If you don’t know what’s going on, get a bigger map”—and I identified four enormous blocks of blue. That was half of London’s drinking water in four raised reservoirs. Being a practical man, I thought to myself, “Well, there aren’t many votes in there.” I also thought to myself that we cannot really build many homes there.

I did further research and it turns out that in 2016, on the Queen Elizabeth reservoir in a neighbouring constituency, a large technology demonstrator for floating solar was laid down, and ever since it has produced 6.3 MW of power—enough to power about 2,000 homes. That was at the time the largest one in Europe; back in 2016, we were leading. I looked into the situation further in order to see whether we were world-leading, but it turns out that we were not particularly, and that floating solar has been deployed to a greater extent in China, India, Vietnam and Israel. We will come in due course to the benefits of floating solar as an alternative to land-based systems.

I want now to return to the more national context. Frequently, we are led to believe that alternative sources of energy can be something of a zero-sum game—when someone takes one step forward, someone else has to take one step backwards. As I am sure we will hear, in large parts of the United Kingdom there are proposed large, land-based solar farms, frequently on very good agricultural land, so the zero-sum game between food security and energy security needs unpicking.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on bringing forward a debate on this massive issue. Is he aware that there are roughly 600,000 acres of unused, south-facing industrial rooftops in the United Kingdom that could be utilised before we industrialise the countryside? The Government must look at those in order to utilise already built heritage and leave our countryside as it is to produce the food that we need.

Lincoln Jopp: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for making that point. I hope other Members will come forward with their own preferred alternatives to land-based systems, because there are others.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a characteristically brilliant speech—the jokes get better each time we hear them. Does he agree that there are other types of provision? My area of interest is space-based solar power provision, which could provide the same sorts of solutions without taking up precious agricultural land.

Lincoln Jopp: As the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the shadow Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, my hon. Friend is only too well placed to talk about that. As his Whip, I can only say that his jokes get better too.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): On the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) made, I can say that when I was the Minister for Space, I strongly supported space solar, which is a genuinely exciting British breakthrough.

My hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) is making a really important point about food security. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on science and technology in agriculture, I know that we are hugely vulnerable to the geopolitics of the strait of Hormuz and global supply chains more broadly, so we need to do more to support UK agricultural production. In my patch, we have an 8,000-acre solar farm on farmland, which will see good, productive land taken out. This Friday, I am chairing the Central Norfolk Solar Factory Farm Alliance. We are very keen to see solar on reservoirs, motorways, council buildings—on any surfaces we can—but not on good farmland.

Lincoln Jopp: And there we see the battle. Without wishing to get into other controversial areas, it is a little like proposals to build on green belt. If everything else were built on first and we protected the green belt, we would be a richer country.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): South Derbyshire has two grid connections and gets a plethora of applications for solar and battery energy storage systems—it is the bane of my life. I am passionate about moving to renewables. I have just got an electric car, and it is helping me keep my energy costs down for the journeys that I need to make, particularly in the light of what is happening with Iran.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing this debate on alternatives, but does he agree that it is not quite as straightforward as we think? We need to do this quite speedily. People assume that putting solar panels on industrial sites is easy, but we still need to be able to connect them to the grid, which is being upgraded in my neck of the woods. Does he agree that, much as we desperately want alternatives, there is not a silver bullet to get us there?

Lincoln Jopp: The hon. Lady makes a really important point. One of the massive delays in deploying solar power is the requirement to achieve planning permission, and I am so pleased that she has brought that up. One of the beauties of floating solar is that if the owner of the reservoir or former quarry will use the electricity themselves, there is no requirement for planning permission.

[*Lincoln Jopp*]

In terms of speed to deployment, return on investment and speed to profit, this is to a certain extent an answer to a maiden's prayer.

We have not yet added in the third element of this battle between food security and energy security: water security. I believe in climate change. I am more sceptical about carbon neutrality within a certain arbitrary timeline, but the fact is that evaporation is a massive issue as the world warms up. One of the stunning and much less vaunted benefits of floating solar is that it reduces evaporation by 70%. Australia is very expensively covering reservoirs in anti-evaporation covers, but those could be floating solar panels.

I can sense the mood of the Chamber—hon. Members are very keen for me to list the other benefits, so I will do just that. The first, which we have talked about, is that floating solar comes with none of the opportunity costs of putting solar panels on grade A agricultural land, so we can move the debate on from whether we have to choose between energy security and food security.

Secondly, because of the effect on evaporation, floating solar also moves the debate on from the need for water security and energy security. Another stunning benefit is that it is twice as efficient as land-based systems. We would need only half the amount of floating solar as we would need solar covering Lincolnshire or Suffolk agricultural land. Hon. Members who remember their O-level physics will know that the evaporative effect on the underside of the floating solar panel makes it self-cooling, whereas land-based and roof-based systems and those in railway sidings simply get hotter through the working day and become less efficient.

“What about the water in these reservoirs? Surely, Lincoln, this can't be as good as it sounds?” Well, it gets better, especially if the reservoir is to be used for drinking water further downstream. Denuded of heat and light, those things that grow in reservoirs that subsequently have to be filtered out, very expensively, by the water companies cannot grow. It is win-win-win all round.

Let us leave 2016, when we were Europe's leaders, and fast-forward to last year. If ever there was a way to motivate Members of the House of Commons, it is to suggest that the French are beating us at something. Bear in mind the 6.3 MW—enough to power 2,000 homes—on the Queen Elizabeth reservoir. Last year, a plant on a disused quarry in Perthes, France became fully operational. It generates 75 MW.

I visited a former dock in Barrow-in-Furness where a 45 MW site is planned. It has to go through planning because BAE Systems will take the electricity. I would relax the permitted development right to include third-party use of the electricity, so that we can realise the benefits and improve the business case of floating solar to entertain the sort of investment it would need. I think there are 570 reservoirs in this country, and there is floating solar on one—the Queen Elizabeth. Ten further projects are planned. We also have innumerable former quarries and unused ports such as at Barrow. The opportunity is huge; we are talking terawatts. If it is realised, floating solar could generate 1% of UK baseload.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) mentioned space. Clearly, that would be phenomenal. Dare I say that it behoves the Government

to look at this in a more strategic way than hitherto? They published their long-awaited solar road map. It has about 94 pages, and about half a page and a photo are dedicated to floating solar, which they describe as a “nascent” technology. I hope that I have shown that it is not nascent at all; it has been with us for quite some time.

Last August I stood on top of the Golan heights, looking down towards Syria, and saw two enormous reservoirs that were almost completely covered with floating solar panels. We should look to hotter and more arid countries for our sense of where we should take our innovation and technology. My plea to the House and the Government is this: look again at the potential for floating solar. When it comes to energy security, food security and water security, it provides a non-ideological, highly practical solution—a NIHPS—without papering over the beautiful parts of England.

By the way, all the reservoirs in my constituency are raised, so this solution comes with none of the visual vandalism of our country being carpeted in solar panels, to which people object so much. The tops of those reservoirs can be seen only by people taking off from or landing at Heathrow. The hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett) is quite right: nothing is as simple or as perfect as it might first sound. I do not envy her having two grid plug-in points—she will be one of the most popular Members of Parliament going. But if we can, we must examine floating solar in greater detail, because it could, to a certain extent, produce a valuable alternative diversification of our energy supply in a world that is becoming ever more dangerous and insecure.

4.46 pm

Dr Roz Savage (South Cotswolds) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I thank the hon. and gallant Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) for securing this important debate. I have heard the statistic that for all the land allocations that have been set aside for housing, for growing food and for renewable energy projects, and for all the other demands on the scarce land mass that we have at our disposal on this small and increasingly crowded island, we would need another two Waleses. Clearly, they are not making land any more, so how can we get better use out of the square mileage that we have at our disposal?

Ground-mounted solar gives a single purpose to land. Yes, it possibly gives some biodiversity gain; yes, it is maybe possible to graze sheep around solar panels, although I have yet to see it in reality; but generally it is a single purpose for that piece of land. How can we make better use of our land? As the hon. and gallant Member for Spelthorne suggested, we can put solar panels on reservoirs and on rooftops. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) will point out that that is a much more expensive way of installing solar panels—we have had that conversation before—but I would like to ask where the profits go. A 2,000-acre solar farm, Lime Down, is planned for my constituency. It is 100% owned by Macquarie. Hon. Members might be aware that Macquarie was the owner of Thames Water during the time that that company was loaded up with debt. It is a financial institution, not a utility-owning institution, so the profits from the solar farm will not go to local people; they will go to Australia.

What does good look like, if we are to meet our large and increasing energy needs while also bringing the public along on our journey towards net zero? It is important to the project that there be public support, not public alienation. Smaller-scale schemes can and do work. In my constituency there are successful schemes in Long Newton and Corston. The principles are clear: projects that are community-led are more likely to have community buy-in, as are those that are modest in scale, that are sensitively sited and that deliver direct local benefits.

I welcome the Government's support for community solar, including the funding that has reached groups such as Zero North Wiltshire, but we need to go further. Many communities are willing and able to participate. The local power plan and investment through Great British Energy are welcome steps, but they fall short. The Government are proposing about £1 billion for local and community energy; the Liberal Democrats have set out a plan for £3.3 billion. That difference matters. Our approach would scale up community energy into a core part of the energy system, not just a niche add-on. More than 100 MPs have backed reform through early-day motion 2151, so there is clear cross-party support for the right to local supply.

I would like to see the missing piece put in place: community supply licences, peer-to-peer trading and reformed licence exemptions. Of course, ground-mounted solar has a role in the transition to net zero, but it needs to be done right. The tests are simple: is there genuine consultation, real local benefit and protection of our landscape? If we get this right, solar can power our future. If we get it wrong, it will divide the very communities we need to bring with us.

4.50 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. We are focusing on the concept of floating solar, which I am entirely behind. One of the drivers for that is the proposal in my constituency for the Green Hill solar farm, which will be enormous. It will be 1,200 hectares of agricultural land: the size—my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) will like this reference—of Heathrow airport. It will be dispersed over nine sites, require 31 km of different cabling, and use up 65% of best and most versatile land. The Government say that food security is national security, but such a scheme flies in the face of that message. Even the national policy framework EN-1 says that we must minimise the impact on BMV, yet such a scheme is going before the Secretary of State in the next few months. I really hope that he considers that, because this is not the best way to be utilising our land.

Green Hill solar farm will also have a battery energy storage system, which will be installed right outside a village called Grendon. Grendon already has a 50 MW battery storage site, and another 50 have been approved by the Reform council—I am surprised about that, given its view on battery energy storage, but there we are. However, this solar farm will require a further 500 MW on top. That will be 600 MW of storage outside a beautiful country village. It is completely inappropriate for the size. The developers have probably cited the existing source as their reason. However, this addition will completely change the nature of the villages,

and we still have not been able to get an answer to the question, if there is a fire and there is a risk of thermal runaway, what that will mean for the nearby villages? I have been told that they can simply evacuate a village; that is not practical, it is not pragmatic and it does not give our residents any confidence in the scheme that is going forward.

The beauty of floating solar, as my hon. Friend said, is that there will be no land use change, which is one of the most important parts of this. It is also important that there will be no evaporation of the water, which is excellent. One of the objections is the visual impact of solar. The national policy framework EN-1 says that we have to take account of the heritage of an area. This particular solar farm will be around a series of beautiful English countryside villages with rolling hills. The village of Easton Maudit will be surrounded by solar on three sides. That will completely change the nature and experience of the village. Indeed, Sir Christopher Yelverton, a former Speaker of the House—albeit from the 16th century—is buried in one of the fine churches there; I imagine that he would not be delighted by the prospect of this coming on board. There is an important relationship between maintaining the heritage of our areas and the environment that we are in.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is exactly right, and I share her frustration. In my constituency, there is a large area of protected national landscape, the North Wessex downs national park, which is constantly under threat from these kinds of proposals. Does she share my frustration at the lack of imagination shown in the UK? The A303 and the A34 run through my constituency, and there are tens of miles of embankment that could be used for solar panels. That is the approach they take in Germany, the Netherlands and elsewhere, but we never seem to get over the imagination gap about where we could put these things—floating or whatever—that may not be quite so damaging and intrusive. She probably has parts of the M1 in her constituency, which has endless miles of embankment that could be used for solar panels that could power her constituency and mine without harming any visual amenity whatsoever.

Sarah Bool: I entirely agree, and we have been trying to promote that argument. It has unfortunately been claimed that Northamptonshire could become the warehousing capital of the UK, but we should be using the roadsides. We sometimes see airports using the side banks for solar panels. Solar panels should be installed on the covers of petrol stations and on the roofs of warehouses. I know that the last Government were consulting on whether more warehouse space could be used. I know that some people make technical arguments that the roofs are not strong enough and cannot be reinforced, but that is absolute nonsense. We can definitely work to ensure that the roofs are sturdy enough for solar panels.

There is debate about whether it should be the landlord or the tenant who bears the cost of the initial outlay, and about who gets the benefit. All those things are completely surmountable, and we should be able to work on a programme for that going forward. It all goes back to planning, because meaningful requirements could enable solar power generation. I am often concerned that these initiatives end up just being greenwashing

[Sarah Bool]

and that we are only putting them in place to be able to tick a box. What we want to see is these schemes being meaningfully integrated.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a great speech about the importance of thinking about things strategically. Does she agree that if one was thinking about the strategic placement of ground-mounted solar, one would not put it on the best and most versatile farmland that we have for food security?

Sarah Bool: Absolutely. It certainly should not be put there, and the national planning policy framework states we should not be doing that. I therefore find it quite extraordinary that we are still having debates on this issue. There are certainly other alternatives, and they must be explored, so I really do hope that the Government take this issue seriously as it progresses over the years.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I feel that we are slightly misrepresenting the argument. There is no debate about choosing between food security and energy security. The National Farmers Union states that if solar capacity were to increase fivefold by 2035, we would still only see 0.5% of UK agricultural land covered by ground-mounted solar farms. Is it not the case that we are creating a false debate, or does she think that the National Farmers Union is wrong?

Sarah Bool: I am not debating the National Farmers Union; I am saying that we should not be putting farmers in this position. I would not blame any farmer trying to make a bit of extra money from solar, particularly since the current environment is very difficult for them. The problem is that ground-mounted solar is not the best use of that land in any event. Agricultural land should be used for exactly that—agriculture.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech, and I am afraid to say that I think the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) has completely missed the point, because the reality is that this country is about 60% to 63% self-sufficient in terms of food security. This is not just about land being taken out of production; it is also about the long-term degradation of the health of the soil on which the solar is being mounted, because of issues such as shading, reduced rainfall, construction-related compaction issues, reduced organic matter and contamination risks. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just about taking the land out of production but about the long-term degradation of soil health once the land comes back into agricultural production—if it ever does—after the solar agreement of 40 years or so has elapsed?

Sarah Bool: Absolutely, and that is one of the arguments that we were trying to make in the hearing against the Green Hill proposal, which is for 60 years. We cannot see the justification for that. There will be a renewal right, no doubt, and even within those 60 years, the solar panels will be degraded from rain and we will not know what the run-off will cause. There are so many factors that we do not know about, and I want to ensure that we have good-quality agricultural land for the future.

Tom Hayes: I do not want us to keep talking around each other, but the hon. Lady is missing the point again about the quantity of agricultural land that can be taken out of agricultural use. Reference has been made to the idea that the UK would be carpeted with ground-mounted solar panels. That is not going to happen. We can support the goal of food security and we can support the goal of energy security, but we do not need to misrepresent the extent to which agricultural land will be taken out of use for that purpose.

Sarah Bool: I think it is about the quality of the land that is being used. It might be a small amount, but if it is very good-quality agricultural land—as 65% of it is, according to what I have here—the hon. Member's point does not stand up on that front. We just have to be very realistic about it, because there are many different factors. The hon. Member could say that a huge proportion of the country is taken up with golf courses, and say, "Well, we don't take that away," but what we are saying is that this is a fix that is very popular.

Solar does not necessarily work all the time. The actual amount of energy generated is a very small proportion. Sometimes it can work only 10% of the time. It does not work during the night, and there are other issues about the transmission of the energy itself, because of the times of the day that can be used. That raises questions about the grid capacity and the grid connections.

George Freeman: On the important point that the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett) made about connections, what we are discovering in Norfolk is that the grid connection investment is an open door to much bigger solar applications. We have an 8,000-acre one that I am dealing with today. Land agents tell me that 20,000 acres in Norfolk are now being released because we have the grid connection. Much of that will be good land. The danger is that the connectivity driving the investment means, unfortunately, that the land use argument gets distorted.

Sarah Bool: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. I think it also speaks to a wider issue about efficiency in the use of land. The EN-1 national policy statement says that we must be efficient in the use of natural resources, including land use itself. I think it is apt that we talk about floating solar, because we are not taking out agricultural land; we are using land that is serving one purpose but can legitimately serve another without disruption.

Samantha Niblett: One of the biggest concerns, particularly for my tenant farmers, is that when there is a change of land use for a solar farm, not only is the farmer unable to farm that land, but they do not have a farm—they are losing the farm. Does the hon. Lady agree?

Sarah Bool: Absolutely. It completely changes the nature of the relationship. We know that our farmers are already having a challenging time because of Government policies that are coming in; the inheritance tax changes have been devastating for our farming community. This is a point at which we should be supporting them. Part of that support is about saying that actually we need to be building reservoirs. On-farm

reservoirs are going to be very important; again, that is a part of the planning system that we need to change and push through.

I do not want farmers to feel that they should or must go for solar applications in this instance, where actually the entirety of their farmland is taken out of use. The devastating thing about this policy is that a farmer whose family has been farming for generations—generations of them are buried at the Easton Maudit church—has had his tenancy ended and is already out, in anticipation of the policy coming in. Hundreds of years of a farming dynasty have been taken away.

This is not what the Government want to be doing, and it is not where we should be going. We should be encouraging farming, keeping our beautiful countryside, and using the alternatives. As I say, there are plenty, whether that is on top of warehousing spaces or on the sides of roofs.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Glastonbury and Somerton is home to more than 800 farms, many of which have appropriate buildings for housing rooftop solar panels, for example. That would meet some of our net zero targets and allow some of the fertile land, which she has already spoken about, to be prioritised, properly and rightly, for food production. Does she agree that we must expand the incentives for our farmers to install rooftop solar panels, including guaranteeing a fair price for electricity that is sold back into the grid?

Sarah Bool: I thank my fellow member of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee for making those points. Yes, all the different incentives matter. In the farming environment, our farmers have struggled with a lack of certainty. With the removal of the sustainable farming incentive and with the capping and closure of all the different funds, there has been no certainty. In an industry that requires certainty, they cannot just suddenly change a crop halfway through. They have to rely on security, and it has not been delivered so far. We need to do whatever we can to put in place long-term guarantees of funding and make sure that they realise that they are secure for the future.

Dr Caroline Johnson: My hon. Friend is being exceptionally generous with her time. Does she have any comment on the scale of some of these proposals? My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) talked about an 8,000-acre proposal, and 9,340 acres are currently open to planning in my area. It can be quite difficult to appreciate quite how big that is, so for the Minister's benefit let me say that the constituency of Rutherglen stands at a total of 10,230 acres. That means that the solar farms planned in my constituency would cover 91% of his area.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. Two hon. Members have intervened after coming late to the debate. As a courtesy to the Chair and Members, they really should send a note. I have had a note from another hon. Member who wishes to intervene, who has done things properly and has not yet intervened. I say that to hon. Members for this debate and for future reference.

Sarah Bool: Thank you, Mr Stringer.

These sizes are huge. As I say, the solar farm in my constituency will be the size of Heathrow airport. If this application goes through, more than 1% of my constituency will be covered in solar farms. That is not what we anticipated, and it is not the vision that I have for the future. We have far better alternatives. It is important that we move the debate on, as my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Spelthorne has done, to thinking about floating solar.

This is not about our party saying no to renewables or to any other alternatives, because that is not realistic. We need an incredibly good, diverse energy mix. What we are saying is that we should not do that to the detriment of our farms and our farming community and good-quality agricultural land. Solar has many great advantages. I wish I could trade my scheme for the one suggested by my hon. and gallant Friend. That would be far better and I am sure it would be much more appreciated by residents, constituents and the British public.

5.6 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Stringer. I congratulate the hon. and gallant Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) on securing this important debate.

I confess that I had prepared to do far more debunking of climate-denying nonsense, given some of the statements by the hon. and gallant Member's party leader, so I was relieved to hear his very impressive and science-based speech. I support a lot of what he said. The only note that I wrote myself was to say that we do not need to worry that solar panels start to lose efficiency above an ambient air temperature of 25°C, which is a fairly infrequent event in the UK. I totally accept his point about the efficiency of putting solar on water.

If the constituents of the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) have concerns about battery energy storage systems fires, she should point out to them that there have only been about 30 BESS-linked fires globally in the last 15 years. It is actually incredibly safe.

The point about rooftops is about prefabricated buildings—the large warehouses. The roofs have an insurable lifespan of about 15 years, whereas solar panels have a 30-year lifespan, so we need to change the building regulations, as has been said.

That is all a long-winded way of saying, that prior to getting elected, I spent 10 years working in the renewable energy sector, so I have a particular passion for this subject. I am also the chair of the ClimateTech all-party parliamentary group and co-chair of the net zero all-party parliamentary group. I hope that the hon. and gallant Member for Spelthorne will forgive me if I expand a little on the technological options available outside floating solar.

We face a worsening climate crisis, with more frequent extreme weather events affecting communities in West Dorset and across the UK, as well as being in the middle of a cost of living crisis, with families facing high food, fuel and energy bills, compounded by the illegal conflict started by the President of the United States. About 15% of households in West Dorset rely on heating oil, and many do not qualify for the support that has been announced. Petrol and diesel prices are rising.

[*Edward Morello*]

Red diesel for farmers has doubled in price. Fertiliser prices are rising, too, which will feed through to food prices.

As a result, it has never been more important to make renewables work for working families. That is not because they are cleaner and more secure than fossil fuels, although we know that they are, but because they are the cheapest form of energy available. New solar now costs 11% less than the cheapest fossil fuel to generate electricity. Onshore wind is 39% cheaper. Over a decade ago, only 6% of the UK's electricity came from renewables. Today, it is 42%. On Sunday, renewables generated 62% of the UK's electricity, of which solar produced 8.8%. We should be enormously proud of that, but while renewables are getting cheaper, people are not seeing the benefit in their bills. Under the current marginal pricing system, the price of electricity is set by the cost of gas. That means that when global gas prices go up, electricity bills go up too, regardless of how much renewable power, or power of any kind, we are generating domestically. That system has left the UK with the fourth highest electricity prices in the world. It is not working for households or for businesses.

Let us be clear that the answer to energy insecurity is not more dependence on oil and gas; it is more cheap British renewable energy. Under the clean power 2030 action plan, the Government want 95% of Britain's electricity to come from clean sources by 2030—a noble endeavour. To get there, the Government plan to increase solar capacity to between 45 GW and 47 GW by 2030. That will require doubling our capacity.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): When alternatives are not available, building solar farms, as Leonardo is doing in Yeovil, can be important to strengthening grid capacity for businesses and residents. When the site in Yeovil is working fully, there is not enough power in the grid for other businesses to expand. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to make sure that we have alternatives and get more solar out there to power our businesses?

Edward Morello: My hon. Friend is 100% right. Wherever possible, we should generate and use on site. The problem so often—I will come to this point in my speech—is that the value of anything that is exported to the grid fundamentally underlines any kind of investment model when we are looking at on-site generation.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I sent a note, which you were kind enough to mention, Mr Stringer, to apologise for entering the debate late, but I am delighted to be able to contribute.

The hon. Gentleman must surely know that renewables need to face the same tests of cost-effectiveness as all other kinds of generation. For example, the concentration of offshore wind, with very large turbines, a single point of connection to the grid and large amounts of energy, contrasts with the peppering of the country with onshore turbines in small numbers and with multiple connections to the grid. Similarly, putting solar on grade 1 land is just not sensible. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Edward Morello: I can certainly agree with the argument that putting solar on grade 1 land should be avoided wherever possible. The right hon. Gentleman may be

interested in the recent report of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy on our adversaries' attempts to cut subsea cables, and on the implicit danger of having so few connection points with such concentrated areas of offshore generation, as we have seen with recent Russian activity. I will happily pick up that point with him afterwards.

About two thirds of UK solar capacity is ground-mounted, but there are concerns about where developments are located, particularly those built on high-quality agricultural land. I echo the comments of the hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool): I have never met a farmer, especially in West Dorset, who got into farming because they wanted to grow solar panels. Farmers want to produce food, but we must acknowledge that after years of pressure on farm incomes and pressure on them by this Government, some see solar as one of the few reliable ways to keep their farm operating.

We are asking more and more of our countryside. We want it to produce food, support biodiversity, generate renewable energy, capture carbon, provide housing, and support tourism and recreation. We need guidance to identify where solar is most appropriate, steer it away from the best agricultural land wherever possible, and encourage dual-use schemes that allow land to generate energy while still supporting farmers and nature—

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. I call the shadow Minister.

5.13 pm

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) for securing this important debate and for setting out, with his inimitable style and élan, a persuasive argument about how we balance energy generation with the protection of the countryside and the benefits of floating solar, which is a subject close to his heart and about which he is incredibly passionate.

I congratulate the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for South Cotswolds (Dr Savage), my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool), my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) on speaking or intervening in the debate. I was, however, going to accuse my hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) of inadvertently misleading the House when he suggested that the jokes of our hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne were getting better every time he heard them.

This debate is not about whether solar should be built in the UK. His Majesty's official Opposition are absolutely clear that solar does have a role to play. The question is where solar belongs and whether the Government are making sensible choices about how much to rely on that method of electricity generation. Under this Government, we are seeing a rapid expansion of large-scale ground-mounted solar developments on productive agricultural land. Tens of thousands of acres are being removed from food production, often with limited local benefit and little regard for the impact on land use and food security, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire set out so eloquently.

Good agricultural land is a finite national asset, and the foundation of our food security and rural economy. Once it is taken out of use and industrialised, it is rarely, if ever, returned to productive farming. At a time of global uncertainty and rising food costs, it is profoundly short-sighted to undermine domestic food production and the livelihoods it supports in pursuit of energy targets that could be achieved in less damaging, more efficient ways, as my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), who is more knowledgeable about issues pertaining to agriculture than I could ever be, set out.

The push to install solar panels on farmland is yet another blow to farmers and rural communities. Labour's promises to protect rural life have proven empty, with new measures making it harder for family farms to survive and plan for the future. The result is a weakening of our rural economy, and a threat to the future of British farming and our food security.

Rural businesses and communities are raising serious objections, not because they oppose clean energy but because they are being asked to carry a disproportionate burden on their shoulders. In one of her last actions in government, the now shadow Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), changed planning guidance to make sure that the cumulative effects of lots of applications in one rural area were considered together, not just waved through the planning system, and that food security held as much importance as energy security when it came to those decisions. Since coming into government, however, Labour has been approving every single application wherever it can, no matter the impact on local communities, and it has watered down the community benefit scheme that we put in place to make sure that communities are rewarded for hosting this energy infrastructure.

There are also serious questions about efficiency and value for money. Just this week, the National Energy System Operator—NESO—has warned that solar panels could produce more electricity in the summer months than the public could consume. To combat that, one of NESO's suggestions is for consumers to increase their electricity use, with NESO even rewarding them for doing so through a demand flexibility service. Our electricity system should suit the needs of the people, not require consumers to change their behaviour to suit the energy system.

This situation exposes the limitations of relying too heavily on intermittent sources of energy such as solar and wind. Those technologies can play a limited supporting role, but true energy security requires a balanced portfolio that includes sources that deliver reliable, year-round baseload power. NESO has rightly advised that we need a flexible system that matches supply to demand and protects against volatility.

Sarah Bool: I want to make a point about volatility. With the unpredictable way in which solar is adopted, there is a danger that we will end up making compensation payments. When the sun is not shining, we may have to turn off panels and give huge amounts in compensation. That is another dynamic that we have to think about: it is an unreliable and unpredictable source of energy.

Andrew Bowie: As ever, I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, who makes a very important point.

Britain is an island nation with more than 40,000 lakes, lochs and reservoirs. We have led the world in offshore energy for decades, be that oil and gas or offshore wind. Floating solar, as my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Spelthorne suggests, should be explored to see how it might contribute to a future system without displacing food production or industrialising the great British countryside.

Despite the potential of such exciting technologies, the Government are going hell for leather towards onshore wind at the expense of all else, and greenfield solar is being waved through planning systems with alarming speed against the wishes of local communities across the country. The Conservative party continues to support solar on people's rooftops and on top of warehouses, car parks, brownfield sites and other common-sense locations that do not harm our countryside, food production or rural livelihoods. What we oppose is the Government's apparent willingness to sacrifice productive farmland.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order. Before the Minister starts his speech, I remind him to leave a couple of minutes at the end for the Member in charge to wind up.

5.18 pm

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the hon. and gallant Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) on securing it, particularly because I unfortunately missed his Adjournment debate, which I heard was one of the most enthusiastic Adjournment debates we have ever had on this topic. I was delighted to hear him repeat much of that same speech, because I did of course read it in *Hansard*. The map joke was there in the Adjournment debate, and it was there again today. We appreciated it all the same, and it was great to hear it in person. I thank him for securing the debate, and I genuinely thank him for the enthusiasm he has shown for floating solar. I will come back to that in a moment.

I was also pleased to hear the hon. and gallant Member say that he believes in climate change. That should not be breaking news to anyone, but when we hear Conservative Members stand up and confirm that science is in fact science, it is none the less a relief to me. I was delighted to hear that. However, the challenge—and I will come back to this point—is that, as much as there is a recognition that climate change is a threat, there is also a distancing from any of the actions that would help us to tackle it, and that is simply not a sustainable position for anyone to hold.

If we think about food security, water security and national security, all of them would be put at huge risk by not tackling the climate crisis. This is a very real challenge for us to deal with at the moment. That more dangerous and insecure world is exactly why we are embarking on the clean power mission.

Sir John Hayes: While the Minister is on the subject of science, would he turn his attention to agronomy? He will know that only around 15% of the land in the United Kingdom is grade 1 and 2. Much of that is in the east of England and, indeed, in my constituency in Lincolnshire. Lincolnshire has been targeted by solar developers, with countless large solar plans in the offing.

[*Sir John Hayes*]

Will the Minister recognise that those two things cannot be squared? We cannot have the most productive and versatile land being used up for solar at the cost of our food security.

Michael Shanks: I was going to come to the trading of statistics later in my speech, but let me do it now, because there is a fundamental point around the disingenuous trading of statistics on land use. My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) made a valiant effort at trying to correct that, but let me give Members some sense of this. At the end of 2024, ground-mounted solar panels covered an estimated 0.1% of the total land area of the UK. Even if we achieve the ambitious targets that we have set out in the clean power action plan, they will be expected to cover 0.4% of the total land area and 0.6% of agricultural land. That is if we achieve our hugely ambitious targets.

The arguments that I will make in this speech are exactly those that the previous Government made when they spoke from the Dispatch Box. There was a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Energy Minister who spoke about the dramatic rise in global energy prices following the invasion of Ukraine, the urgency of building a renewables-based system, and how critical it is for us to meet our 70 GW target for solar in the UK by 2025—the previous Government's target was a fivefold increase.

The now shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine (Andrew Bowie), pretends that that was not the Conservatives policy for 14 years, and we now hear a litany of ideas—roadside solar, rail solar, floating solar—but none of them was driven forward in the 14 years that they were in government. Forgive me if I think that it is a little bit rich for them to be oppositionist, not having driven any of it forward when they were in government.

Dr Caroline Johnson rose—
The Minister is talking about using a very small proportion of the United Kingdom. I understand his point, but when all of that small proportion falls on the best bits of agricultural land, that is not sensible. If one were looking at a strategic framework and desiring to use 0.1% or 0.2% of the country for solar, one would look at the least useful land for food security for doing that, not the best.

Michael Shanks: I will come on to that point.

Edward Morello: The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) suggests that we should utilise the least useful land going. My understanding, according to the numbers I have looked at, is that at least 2% of the UK is covered in golf courses, which are ecological wastelands. At the risk of alienating all the golfing voters out there, I wonder whether the Minister would like to use that land.

Michael Shanks: I will not be drawn on golf course membership, because I do not know how many of my constituents are members of golf courses; I can imagine how many Conservative Members are.

I come back to the point about land use, because we absolutely recognise the importance of having a framework for how we use land across the country. That is why the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs published the first-ever land use framework in March—

I recommend a read of it. It is a vision for all of England's land use, using the latest data on how much we need for housing, energy and all sorts of things to ensure that we are making the best use of land. Both that and the strategic spatial approach to planning the energy system could have been done in those 14 years, but they were not. That is why we have ended up with a haphazard approach to strategic planning, and why we are now building the grid to connect the renewables that were built all over the country without that spatial plan. It is important that we strategically plan that, and it was not done previously, so we are moving forward to do it.

Robbie Moore: I have read the land use framework. The Minister has hit the nail on the head, because its sole beneficiary is his Department—the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero—and not our farmers or our food security. Can he specifically address the issue of land quality? If we are putting ground-mounted solar on agricultural land, will he at least recognise that that will degrade the quality of the soil health, given the amount of time that those solar panels will be in situ?

Michael Shanks: I will not be able to go into the detail of everyone's points, but the hon. Member is wrong about the land use framework. Perhaps he should read it again, because it details quite clearly the different land uses across the country. There is always tension about land use—of course there is. That has been true throughout history, and that is why we are strategically planning it.

We are clear that the planning system recognises best use. Every application is considered on its merits; I am not going to be drawn on individual applications, but we have clearly said that ground-mounted solar should be used, wherever possible, not on the best-used land.

Dr Caroline Johnson rose—

Michael Shanks: I am not going to give way to the hon. Lady again because I want to come to floating solar, which the hon. and gallant Member for Spelthorne eloquently made the case for. I completely agree that it is a hugely exciting technology that we should be expanding, and I also agree that there are none of the trade-offs that there often are in other deployments and that there are huge benefits. He and I have both visited the project at the Queen Elizabeth II reservoir near his constituency. It is a fantastic example of floating solar, which has the benefits of generating clean electricity and retaining water in the reservoir. We want to see how we can also utilise that power to reduce the local demand so that there are some real benefits for local communities.

We are taking forward a number of actions. I am sorry if the hon. and gallant Member thinks that floating solar was not given a prominent enough position in the solar road map, but I assure him it has a prominent enough position on my to-do list. We are driving those key actions forward because there is no reason why we should not be doing that more quickly. There are projects in the pipeline that we will try to support wherever we can.

On the argument that there is a trade-off between that and covering rooftops, reservoirs, motorways or any other space that people can come up with, I am open to all of those ideas. I agree that we should be

doing much more on rooftops. The hon. Member for South Northamptonshire made the point about some of the complexities with landlords and tenants. It is complex, but it is not impossible and we need to work our way through dealing with that.

It is important that we recognise the scale of the challenge. The scale of our electricity demand means that we need to see more ground-mounted solar as well; it is not either/or. Rooftop solar is important in our mission, and floating solar will be important, but the deployment of ground-mounted solar will also be important in communities across the country. We want those communities to get a genuine benefit from it, so the points around locally owned power are critical.

In closing, I recognise that at this moment in particular, the lessons we have to take from the crisis in the middle east is that we need to move further and faster away from reliance on fossil fuels, but we have to take communities with us on that journey as well. That is why I want to see communities owning more of this infrastructure and benefiting from it. We also need to make the argument to everyone in our constituencies that the reason they have been exposed time and again to sky-high energy bills is because of our exposure to a fossil fuel market that we cannot control. There is no shortcut to building a system that protects us from that and there is no option to simply build another system somewhere else. At some point, infrastructure has to be built somewhere, and it is simply not a reasonable argument to say, "I'm in favour of this, but please don't build it anywhere near me." We will not embark on that.

The hon. Member for South Northamptonshire kindly referenced the size of my constituency—I do not think I have ever heard the exact number of hectares. The previous

Government built one of the biggest onshore wind farms right next to my constituency. I support that; it is the right thing to do for our energy security. If it was right under that Government, it is also right that we build the infrastructure that we need now, bringing communities with us but also being clear that it is the right path for the country and our energy security.

5.28 pm

Lincoln Jopp: I am grateful to all hon. Members who have made such powerful contributions. I love the image of the Minister under his bed clothes with a torch reading the *Hansard* report of my Adjournment debate.

I can see the turning point where floating solar went from a nascent technology to one that the Minister wants to drive further and faster. He made a crucial point about how it is all very well to will the ends, but we need to will the ways and means, and not say, "Not in my back yard". Floating solar is exactly my way of saying to the farmers in Lincolnshire and hon. Members from great agricultural land, "Yes, in my back yard. In fact, on half of London's drinking water in the four raised reservoirs in Spelthorne, and in across other raised reservoirs across the country." We can unpick this constant battle between food, water and energy security, and I am grateful to the House for giving me the opportunity to highlight that.

Graham Stringer (in the Chair): Order.

5.29 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Tuesday 14 April 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Groceries Code Adjudicator: Statutory Review

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): In line with the Government's regulatory action plan, which seeks to ensure the UK's regulatory system is targeted, proportionate and supports growth, I am today publishing and laying before Parliament the report on the fourth statutory review of the Groceries Code Adjudicator.

The GCA was established by the Groceries Code Adjudicator Act 2013. Its role is to monitor and enforce the groceries supply code of practice, which the UK's designated large grocery retailers must comply with when dealing with their direct suppliers.

The Government must review the performance of the GCA every three years, and this is the fourth statutory review since the GCA was established. The statutory review is not a review of the code or the remit of the GCA. The code is a competition measure owned by the Competition and Markets Authority as the UK's independent competition authority. It was put in place to ensure that large supermarkets do not impose unfair risks on their suppliers which would adversely affect competition and, ultimately, consumers.

The fourth review considered the effectiveness of the GCA in enforcing the code over the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2025. A public consultation was held from 13 May to 5 August 2025 to meet the requirements of the Act for the Secretary of State to consult those with an interest in the code. Responses to the consultation, evidence from the GCA annual supplier survey and annual reports and other publicly available evidence enabled the Secretary of State to make an assessment of the performance of the GCA against the measures set out in the Act. These measures were explained in the terms of reference which are included in the report on the review, and in the consultation document, which was placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament on 13 May 2025.

The review has found the GCA to be a broadly effective regulator that made good use of its powers, adopting a proportionate and collaborative approach which usually resolved issues before the need for an arbitration or investigation. However, some respondents called for greater transparency around enforcement and more frequent use of investigatory powers. Despite high awareness of the GCA's confidentiality obligations, concerns about reprisals persist, especially among smaller or harder-to-reach suppliers, leaving some still reluctant to report issues.

The Government conclude that the GCA has exercised its powers appropriately and continues to provide an important and effective regulatory function that continues to support competition and consumers, but may wish to consider the following:

Stakeholder confidence in the GCA's collaborative approach: consider the concerns expressed from some stakeholders about the GCA's limited use of its investigatory powers; and take any necessary action to ensure the basis and effectiveness of the GCA's regulatory approach in enforcing the code is well understood.

Fear of reprisals deterring suppliers from reporting matters to the GCA: continue considering the concerns of some suppliers about the consequences of raising issues for their businesses; and take any necessary action to ensure suppliers' concerns are not preventing the GCA receiving sufficient information to effectively enforce the code, with particular attention paid to harder-to-reach suppliers.

Transparency of GCA activity in practice: consider the concerns of stakeholders requesting practical examples; and ensure that suitable information is available to support the GCA's purpose of enforcing and encouraging compliance with the code. The review also found no evidence to support the need to change the permitted maximum financial penalty the adjudicator can impose following an investigation into non-compliance. It also concluded that the information which the GCA may consider when deciding whether to launch a formal investigation into non-compliance should not be restricted.

The review also examined wider developments in the food supply chain, including the establishment of the Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator and the sector-by-sector roll-out of fair dealings regulations. While the GCA model remains effective and its independence is valued, respondents raised concerns about confusion between the GCA and ASCA's remits, and the need for improved co-ordination, as well as emerging supply chain practices not covered by either regime.

The Government have therefore decided that sponsorship responsibility for the Groceries Code Adjudicator will move from the Department for Business and Trade to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. This will streamline oversight, strengthen coherence between the two adjudicators, and support clearer communication with stakeholders.

The report on the fourth statutory review of the GCA has today been placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

[HCWS1504]

CABINET OFFICE

Infected Blood Compensation Scheme

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): Today, I have laid the Government response to the public consultation on proposed changes to the infected blood compensation scheme. I have also published the accompanying report by the technical expert group.

We consulted on seven specific areas of the compensation scheme and gave respondents an opportunity to tell us what else they thought should be changed. I am pleased that we are now making substantial changes in all seven areas, and making an additional change based on feedback we heard. These changes will increase the levels of compensation available for infected and affected people.

I am grateful to the infected blood inquiry, and would like to pay tribute to Sir Brian Langstaff and his team for the sensitivity and care with which they carried out their work. The Government have now fully responded to all of the inquiry's additional report recommendations on the design of the compensation scheme.

[HCWS1510]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Proposed Sale of The Telegraph: Axel Springer

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): On Friday 6 March 2026, I was informed by representatives of RB Investco Ltd that RB Investco Ltd intends to sell its call option to purchase the Telegraph Media Group Holdings Ltd, owner of *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sunday Telegraph*, to the German media company Axel Springer SE. They have asked for my written consent to allow RB Investco Ltd to derogate from the Public Interest Merger Reference (Telegraph Media Group Limited) (Preemptive Action) Order 2024 (the “2024 order”) to sell its option.

Today, I gave my written consent under the 2024 order to RB Investco Ltd to sell its call option to purchase the Telegraph Media Group Holdings Ltd to Axel Springer.

In my quasi-judicial role I have also assessed the proposed merger between Axel Springer and the Telegraph Media Group Holdings Ltd under the public interest media mergers regime and the foreign state influence regime as set out in the Enterprise Act 2002. I am currently not minded to intervene in this merger under either regime on the basis of the evidence available to me at this time. This is without prejudice to my ability to intervene in this merger within the applicable statutory time limits, if new or additional information comes to my attention.

I am pleased to be able to take these positive steps, which give greater certainty to *The Telegraph* and its staff.

[HCWS1508]

EDUCATION

Technical Excellence Colleges

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Further education colleges are the bedrock of technical education and training in England. They are critical to delivering growth across the industrial strategy sectors and can transform lives by offering young people and career-changers routes into fulfilling careers. This is why we are transforming further education colleges that demonstrate specialist excellence into technical excellence colleges. Building on the appointment of 10 construction technical excellence colleges in August of last year, today we are announcing 19 new technical excellence colleges in England. These TECs are specialists in the advanced manufacturing, clean energy, defence, and digital and technologies sectors. TECs will work with employers to ensure that the education and training on offer addresses skills gaps in key growth-driving sectors. They will also work with other skills providers aligned with their specialism to improve the quality of the provision on offer across England, ensuring that more learners are able to benefit from technical excellence at their local college.

Backed by £175 million of investment, TECs will help support the Prime Minister’s ambition of delivering two-thirds of young people engaged in higher-level learning by age 25 and access to well-paid jobs for British workers and support delivery of our ambitions for the skills system as set out in the “Post-16 Education

and Skills” White Paper. Around 65,000 learners will benefit from studying at a TEC over the next four years, as TECs increase the volume and quality of specialist education and training and boost skills provision that meets local and national needs, supporting specialisms in priority city regions and clusters as set out in the industrial strategy. They will also break down barriers to opportunity, by supporting people to enter key growth-driving sectors whether at the start of their careers as apprentices, or as established workers getting new skills for better paid jobs.

TEC appointments

Today we are announcing the following TECs:

Advanced manufacturing

City of Wolverhampton College
New College Durham
Newcastle and Stafford College Group
Weston College of Further and Higher Education

Clean energy

Colchester Institute
South Bank Colleges
The City of Liverpool College
The Education Training Collective
University Centre Somerset College Group

Defence

Blackpool and the Fylde College
City College Plymouth
Lincoln College
RNN Group
Yeovil College

Digital and technologies

Birmingham Metropolitan College
Capital City College Group
Gloucestershire College
LTE Group
Milton Keynes College

[HCWS1505]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Independent Reviewer for National Security Arrangements: Report 2025

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn):

The role of the independent reviewer of national security arrangements in Northern Ireland is to monitor compliance with annex E of the St Andrews Agreement 2006, reviewing the relationship between MI5 and the Police Service of Northern Ireland in handling national security matters.

Dr Jonny Byrne, the independent reviewer of national security arrangements in Northern Ireland, has sent me his report for 2025. Due to the classification of the report, I am unable to lay a copy in the Libraries of both Houses, but I am able to provide the House with a summary of its content. What follows is a summary of the main findings of the report covering the period from 1 January 2025 to 31 December 2025. I am very grateful to Dr Byrne for his report.

Dr Byrne states:

“My role is to monitor compliance with Annex E of the St Andrews Agreement (2007) reviewing the relationship between MI5 and the PSNI in handling national security matters. The role seeks to provide assurance that MI5 and PSNI operate together within the letter and the spirit of the St Andrews agreement.

In order to meet the terms of reference I have reviewed documents, and had a series of meetings with senior members of the PSNI and MI5 along with political and policy-maker stakeholders.

There were no national security attacks in Northern Ireland in 2025. This is compared to none in 2024, and one in both 2023 and 2022. There were none in 2021 and 2020, five in 2019, one in 2018 and five in 2017. Although it is important to recognise that armed groups retain the intent and capability to conduct national security attacks.

Throughout 2025 there were no security related deaths, compared to one in 2024. There were 12 bombing incidents and nine shooting incidents in 2025, compared with six bombing and 17 shooting incidents in 2024. There were 21 casualties of paramilitary style assaults, compared with 23 in 2024. There were three casualties of paramilitary shootings, compared to five in 2024. There were 21 security related arrests under section 41 of the Terrorism Act 2000, with eight persons subsequently charged. This is compared to 67 arrested with nine charged in 2024.

On 6 March 2024 the Northern Ireland-related Terrorism (NIRT) threat level in Northern Ireland was lowered from SEVERE—an attack is highly likely—to SUBSTANTIAL—an attack is likely. Prior to this the threat level was SEVERE from September 2010 to March 2022, lowered to SUBSTANTIAL between March 2022 and March 2023, and then rose to SEVERE until March 2024.

Through my discussions and review of documents I would like to make the following observations.

For the reporting period I requested PSNI data relating to the use of schedule 7 to the Terrorism Act 2000, specifically relating to its use by PSNI Ports Examining Officers. The power allows an examining officer to stop, question, search and detain a person at a port or the border area in Northern Ireland for the purpose of determining whether the person appears to be someone who is, or has been, involved in the commission, preparation or instigation of acts of terrorism. It also allows for the examination of goods for the purpose of determining whether they have been used in the commission, preparation or instigation of the acts of terrorism. The data revealed that there had been 40 examinations and 51 detentions over the reporting period. These 91 examinations and detentions related variously to domestic extremism, NIRT, International Counter Terrorism, Crime and other (no clear ideology attributed to the usage of the schedule).

The data suggests that the PSNI are dealing with, and responding to, a range of threats, with only 34% of the power being used on those specific to Northern Ireland. However, I believe there remains a public view that National Security and terrorism more generally is a localised and narrow issue, similar to what people experienced throughout the Troubles.

Alongside this, on 16 October 2025 the Director General of MI5, Ken McCallum, in his annual threat update noted the following: ‘Finally on terrorism, Northern Ireland. Communities there are now living through the longest period without a national security attack since the start of the Troubles. We will continue, with the police, to bear down on residual threats and degrade terrorist capabilities.’

Furthermore, in December 2025, the PSNI in their written evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, policing and Security Inquiry noted the following: ‘Any reduction in the threat is wholeheartedly welcomed by the PSNI but in practical terms, there is no difference in the operational policing response during periods of SEVERE or SUBSTANTIAL threat. It will take years of continued progress in driving down the threat and degrading terrorist capabilities before the threat reduces to an extent where the Police Service is able to make significant changes to how it operates to keep people in Northern Ireland safe’.

In May 2025, Deputy Chief Constable Singleton stated that ‘Northern Ireland is one of the safest places to live, work and raise a family’.

Why is all this relevant? There is a mixed, often contradictory narrative around Northern Ireland’s security status. There are two points worth making. Firstly, there is a lack of public debate or focus on what ‘normalisation’ is or how it should be measured. There is some optimism that the Northern Ireland threat level may be reduced to MODERATE at some point in the future. Inevitably, once sustained, this must have implications in terms of how the public view security alongside a reassessment of financial costs incurred to keep the public safe. However, there has been a distinct lack of debate and focus around what normal means in a society approaching the 30 year anniversary of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement (1998).

Secondly, the topic of national security is rarely discussed at a Northern Ireland political level and institutions such as the Northern Ireland Policing Board rarely (if at all) engage constructively with the subject. Overall, this is concerning. Threats and risks are constantly evolving and given Northern Ireland’s unique status in terms of borders there should be a more mature and transparent discussion around managing, preventing and addressing current and future national security issues.

Platforms for this conversation could involve the Northern Ireland Policing Board along with the Northern Ireland Justice Committee.

Annex E sets out five key principles identified as crucial to the effective operation of national security arrangements between PSNI and MI5. My conclusions in relation to these are as follows:

a. All Security Service intelligence relating to terrorism in Northern Ireland will be visible to the PSNI.

It is evident that the PSNI have sight and access to all Security Service intelligence relating to terrorism in Northern Ireland. It is clear that PSNI and MI5 value the relationship and recognise the importance of working collectively to achieve the same goals. There is compliance.

b. PSNI will be informed of all Security Service counter terrorist investigations and operations relating to Northern Ireland.

It was evident from the discussions that both operational and strategic approaches to security were underpinned by the need for joint-working arrangements and co-ordinated processes. There were no independent terrorism investigations taking place in Northern Ireland. There is compliance.

c. Security Service intelligence will be disseminated within PSNI according to the current PSNI dissemination policy, and using police procedures.

All Security Service intelligence is disseminated within PSNI according to the current PSNI dissemination policy, and using current police procedures. All of the material passes through the intelligence branch hub using PSNI grading and intelligence briefing documents. There is compliance.

d. The great majority of national security CHISs in Northern Ireland will continue to be run by PSNI officers under existing police handling protocols.

According to both PSNI and MI5 the majority of ‘national security Covert Human Intelligence Sources’ (CHISs) in Northern Ireland continue to be managed by PSNI under existing handling protocols. The PSNI is regularly audited by the Investigative Powers Commissioner’s Office around HUMINT compliance. There is compliance.

e. There will be no diminution of the PSNI’s ability to comply with the HRA or the Policing Board’s ability to monitor said compliance.

There has been no diminution of the PSNI’s responsibility to comply with the Human Rights Act or the Policing Board’s ability to monitor said compliance throughout 2025. The PSNI ACC for Crime Operations meets regularly with the board and members have the opportunity (with support from the Board’s Human Rights Advisor) to probe, ask questions or seek clarification on police approaches, tactics, processes and operations relating to national security. There is compliance.

I wish to note the full co-operation extended to me by both MI5 and the PSNI and the support of the NIO in compiling this report.

It is my conclusion that there is full compliance with Annex E of the St Andrews Agreement between MI5 and PSNI.”

[HCWS1507]

PRIME MINISTER

Machinery of Government

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): I am making this statement to bring to the House's attention the following machinery of Government changes.

First, the management of the Integrated Security Fund, and associated funding, has permanently moved from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to the Cabinet Office. The Integrated Security Fund is the UK's cross-Government national security fund, which works to address major threats to the UK and its interests. This change consolidates the management of the fund within the Cabinet Office, simplifying the fund's leadership and delivery structures. By centralising these functions, the Government will improve its ability to respond to an evolving domestic and international threat landscape.

This change took effect from 1 April 2026.

Second, responsibility for the Groceries Code Adjudicator will move from the Department for Business and Trade to the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. This will enable greater alignment across the policy framework for fair treatment of businesses in the agricultural and groceries supply chain, while maintaining the Groceries Code Adjudicator's statutory purpose and independence. The groceries supply code of practice will continue to be owned by the Competition and Markets Authority.

This change will take effect from 1 July 2026.

[HCWS1506]

TRANSPORT

East West Rail: Consultation

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): East West Rail is central to the Government's economic growth mission and plans to unlock the potential of the Oxford to Cambridge growth corridor. By delivering new east to west connectivity, EWR can support up to 100,000 new homes, connecting new and established communities with improved access to employment, training, and education. By 2050, EWR is expected to boost the regional economy by £6.7 billion every year.

Strong alignment across Government to positively plan for development will help to capitalise on the transformational growth opportunity presented by EWR. Where development is near to existing or proposed EWR stations, the Government expect local and strategic authorities and developers to maximise housing densities to unlock economic growth. This should be in a way that promotes sustainable transport modes and improves connectivity to jobs and services, consistent with "Better Connected: A Strategy for Integrated Transport".

The first phase of EWR is nearly ready for opening to regular services. Contracting with the train operator, Chiltern Railways, was delayed by the general election in July 2024, and since its appointment in March 2025, it has been pursuing rolling stock modifications, the completion of the intermediate station, and staffing and training for service introduction. Freight and charter trains are already making use of the connectivity that this new route provides to the wider rail network.

On 14 April, East West Rail Company will launch a route-wide public consultation on future stages of the project as part of preparations for its application for a development consent order in 2027. This follows its "You Said, We Did" report from November 2025 and is expected to be EWR Co's final public consultation ahead of submitting its DCO application, which will give it the authority to build the railway.

The updated proposals in the consultation reflect ongoing engagement with local communities and recent developments in the corridor such as the new Universal theme park at Stewartby. They include:

- new station locations along the route, including at Tempsford, Cambourne, Cambridge East and on the Marston Vale Line, supporting opportunities for local growth;

- a new approach to sequencing the project to bring forward transport and economic benefits at the earliest opportunity;

- plans for more frequent services along the whole route, with up to five trains per hour in each direction and the potential for services to destinations further afield;

- electrification of the railway between Oxford Parkway-Bicester Village and Bletchley-

- Tempsford to support faster and greener services on EWR using hybrid battery-electric trains;

- enhancements to existing stations on the route to improve facilities and access for local communities;

- a road underpass to replace the level crossing at London Road in Bicester, subject to securing third party funding;

- detailed changes to infrastructure design across the route responding to local feedback and updated proposals on maintenance depots to support future operations.

These proposals underline the benefits EWR will bring to communities along the route. The launch of this consultation reinforces the Government's commitment to their growth mission, realising the full potential of the Oxford to Cambridge growth corridor by supporting jobs, housing and economic activity.

[HCWS1502]

Better Connected: Integrated Transport Strategy

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): On 2 April the Government published "Better Connected: A Strategy for Integrated Transport" to deliver simpler, more reliable and better joined-up journeys for people across England.

For too long, the transport system has been fragmented, inefficient and difficult to navigate. Better Connected is a call to action for everyone who works in transport across England to work together to deliver a system that works for people, no matter their need, and one that supports our ambitions for economic growth and access to opportunity. Drawn from extensive research and engagement with the general public, transport workers, councils, businesses and transport organisations, Better Connected establishes a shared vision for transport, for it to work well for people, for it to be safe, reliable, affordable and accessible so they can get on in life and make the journeys they need to easily.

The vision is supported by three guiding principles that will underpin how transport is designed, built and operated. We will ensure that people are at the heart of everything we do, so the transport system serves them no matter their need or background. We will use transport

to create better connected places across the country to ensure that communities can thrive. We will work in partnership across Government, with local leaders and the transport sector so that decision making is effective, collaborative and delivers the right outcomes for people and places.

Based on what people told us matters most to them, the strategy sets out our eight priorities for improving the transport system. These are simplifying payments and information, providing safer and more dependable journeys, making travel more accessible and affordable, creating healthier communities, aligning transport and development, championing data and technology, empowering local leaders and optimising decision making and appraisal. By delivering on these priorities with our trusted partners across the country, we want to create a transport network that works for people and places.

To support progress towards Better Connected's vision, the strategy includes 40 new, fully funded commitments supported by the £30 billion settlement secured in the 2025 spending review. These actions will help modernise ticketing in more places, provide local leaders with the tools to deliver better transport for their areas, improve the quality of travel information and support smoother journeys for drivers. Delivery of these commitments and progress towards the vision and priorities will be monitored and evaluated with a progress update published during this parliament.

Better Connected builds on the major action already being taken to modernise transport and make it work better for people, including the creation of Great British Railways, investment in local roads and rolling out more electric vehicle charge points. As a step towards the strategy's vision, we have already published updated local transport plan guidance aligned with the principles of Better Connected to help local leaders deliver the transport that is right for their communities. Together, working through a people-focused lens, the transport sector will give people across England a transport network that is reliable, accessible and fit for the future.

[HCWS1503]

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

EHRC Code of Practice: Services, Public Functions and Associations

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): This Government have always supported the protection of single-sex spaces based on biological sex. The Supreme Court's ruling last year brought clarity for women and service providers such as hospitals and refuges, and made it clear that protections for trans people remain in the Equality Act.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission is the independent equality regulator and ensures compliance with the Equality Act 2010. Their code of practice on services, public functions and associations covers all nine protected characteristics and the steps service providers should take to comply with the law. We share the EHRC's commitment to ensuring duty bearers have accurate and up-to-date guidance on the Equality Act 2010 including in the light of the recent Court rulings.

We are grateful to the EHRC for their work on the updated draft code following engagement and further legal analysis. The EHRC is rightly focused on ensuring the updated code is robust, accessible and ensures duty bearers can be confident that it is a clear and accurate explanation of the law.

The Government received the updated draft on 13 April. The code will apply across Great Britain and as we are currently in the pre-election period for the devolved Administrations, we are unable to make further announcements on this matter at this time. However, we are taking urgent action to meet our intention of laying the code in May and as soon as practicable after the election period, for parliamentary scrutiny.

We are getting it right, showing leadership by implementing the clarity the Supreme Court ruling delivers.

[HCWS1509]

Written Correction

Tuesday 14 April 2026

Ministerial Correction

TREASURY

National Insurance Contributions (Employer Pensions Contributions) Bill

The following extract is from consideration of Lords amendments to the National Insurance Contributions (Employer Pensions Contributions) Bill on 23 March 2026.

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.

[*Official Report*, 23 March 2026; Vol. 783, c. 95.]

Written correction submitted by the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell):

Torsten Bell:... He claimed that the impact was largest on those on low earnings. That is nonsense; **87%** of contributions over £2,000 are **forecast to be** from **higher and** additional rate taxpayers. Those are the facts.

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WRITTEN CORRECTION

Tuesday 14 April 2026

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**not later than
Tuesday 21 April 2026**

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