

**Wednesday
22 April 2026**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 22 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

Wednesday 22 April 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

ROYAL ALBERT HALL BILL [LORDS]

Consideration of Bill opposed and deferred until Monday 27 April (Standing Order No. 20).

CITY OF LONDON (MARKETS) BILL

Ordered,

That the promoter of the City of London (Markets) Bill, which was originally introduced in this House in this Session on 22 January 2025, should have leave to suspend proceedings on the Bill from the day on which the current Session ends in order to proceed with it, if they think fit, in the next Session of Parliament, according to the provisions of Standing Order 188A (Suspension of bills).—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

ROYAL ALBERT HALL BILL [LORDS]

Motion made,

That the promoter of Royal Albert Hall Bill [Lords], which was originally introduced in the House of Lords on 23 January 2023 in the 2022-23 Session, should have leave to suspend proceedings on the Bill from the day on which the current Session ends in order to proceed with it, if they think fit, in the next Session of Parliament, according to the provisions of Standing Order 188A (Suspension of bills).—(*The Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

Hon. Members: Object.

To be considered on Monday 27 April.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Clean Energy

1. **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): What recent discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on support for clean energy projects in Wales. [908704]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): May I send congratulations to Cardiff City on the team's promotion at the weekend?

The Government are putting Wales at the heart of our clean energy mission. Just this month, Great British Energy Nuclear signed a contract with Rolls-Royce to deliver the UK's first small modular reactors at Wylfa, creating 3,000 jobs in north Wales and thousands more across the supply chain. That is on top of the £64 million Government investment to transform the port of Port Talbot into the first floating offshore wind port in the Celtic sea.

Peter Swallow: The war in Iran has put in stark relief the importance of clean energy to the UK. From Bracknell to Bangor, we have all seen the effects on our bills. Will the Secretary of State update the House on the role that clean energy is playing in Wales and its importance to the future of Wales?

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: achieving energy independence is crucial for Wales and we will be better off because of it, with more jobs created and bills brought down. That is why we have made the investments at Port Talbot and Wylfa that I mentioned. The Greens oppose the investment at Wylfa and would scrap the 3,000 jobs it will bring, and Plaid Cymru is silent on it because party members cannot agree among themselves whether they support it. Labour is the only party working to achieve energy independence, create thousands of jobs and bring down bills.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Does the Secretary of State agree that while we commend Wales for its impressive clean energy oversupply, we should focus on the lessons that offers for upgrading infrastructure across Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom?

Jo Stevens: Clearly, we need to continue our drive to invest more in energy infrastructure. We will deliver that energy independence only through the building of infrastructure. That is why we have made the announcements on grid, infrastructure and planning over the past few weeks.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Since coming to power, time and again this Government have failed to stand up for Welsh interests. Nowhere has that been more obvious than in mid-Wales, where Oliver Millican and his company Bute Energy would like to build a series of energy parks that encircle our military training bases, impede our farmers' access to their land and do great damage to our local tourist industry. Will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to tell Oliver and Bute Energy that they are not welcome in Wales, because we are fed up of being exploited?

Jo Stevens: The simple fact is that those who oppose the building of renewable energy infrastructure risk blocking investment and job creation, while at the same time making their constituents' bills more expensive. Upgrading and expanding the electricity network is not optional; is a national imperative and we cannot afford to delay—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Gentleman asked me a question, so he might want to listen to the answer.

Defence Sector

2. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Reform): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the defence sector in Wales on the UK's defence capabilities. [908705]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Anna McMorrin): We are delivering the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the cold war, investing £270 billion over this Parliament. Our £50 million defence growth deal in Wales puts us front and centre to lead the way in 21st century autonomous defence technology.

Alongside supporting our thriving defence sector, that will deliver thousands of skilled, well-paid jobs and help keep our country safe.

Andrew Rosindell: The Minister will be aware of the excellent potential of the defence sector in Wales. However, she will also be aware that the United Kingdom, under this Government, is woefully unprepared and uniquely vulnerable to global and geopolitical threats. What steps is she taking to ensure that her Department works with the Ministry of Defence in prioritising British firms in Wales over foreign suppliers so that we strengthen British capabilities and skilled Welsh jobs, rather than offshoring our security and our jobs to strategic competitors or, even worse, to our enemies?

Anna McMorrin: To be quite frank, the hypocrisy is astounding. It is—

Mr Speaker: Order. Obviously we cannot use the word “hypocrisy” against the hon. Member—he would never dream of it.

Anna McMorrin: I am incredulous that the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) questions this Government’s commitment, given that the former leader of Reform in Wales, Nathan Gill, is serving 10 years in prison for accepting Russian bribes. I am sure that Gill will be cheering on his close friends in Reform from the comfort of his prison cell as we approach the Senedd elections. Meanwhile, this Labour Government are getting on with continuing to act in the national interest.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee.

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): The Welsh Affairs Committee has a great interest in the future of the defence manufacturing industry in Wales, because the defence sector is such a major driver of Wales’s manufacturing economy and provides many well-paid jobs, including at General Dynamics in Oakdale in my constituency. The sector is also central to maintaining the UK’s national security, so will the Minister indicate how the Government plan to help to grow this vital sector in Wales?

Anna McMorrin: I thank my hon. Friend for the important work that her Committee does. Our Wales defence growth deal will drive innovation and create thousands of high-skilled jobs right across Wales. While the Opposition parties hollowed out and dismantled our armed forces for 14 years, play with Putin or plot to leave NATO, this Government are taking action and investing in defence, ensuring that Wales is leading the way on future defence technology.

Mr Speaker: May I welcome the shadow Minister to the Dispatch Box?

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I do not know whether to stand at the Dispatch Box or on it.

For want of a horseshoe nail, the kingdom was lost. The defence of our country today rests on modern nail-makers—the small and medium-sized enterprises supplying small but vital parts for frigates and fighter

jets and for our fighting men and women. The endless delay in this Labour Government’s defence investment plan means that companies have no certainty about orders, and good jobs hang in the balance, from Pembrokeshire to Prestatyn. What pressure is the Secretary of State bringing to bear on Cabinet colleagues in the Ministry of Defence and the Treasury to keep Welsh jobs, and indeed this United Kingdom, from being lost?

Anna McMorrin: Again, the cheek of the Conservatives! They had 14 years in power, and what did they do? They hollowed out our armed forces and defences and failed to develop any proper plan for our defence industry. This Government are taking action, delivering the biggest sustained increase in spending since the cold war. We are working at pace to finalise our defence investment plan, ensuring that it is robust and supports the development of current and future capabilities. As opposed to the Conservatives in their 14 years in power, we are investing in our defence.

Cost of Living

3. **Steve Witherden** (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce the cost of living in Wales. [908706]

7. **Dave Doogan** (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce the cost of living in Wales. [908711]

12. **Carolyn Harris** (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce the cost of living in Wales. [908717]

13. **Gerald Jones** (Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help reduce the cost of living in Wales. [908718]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): We know that the conflict in the middle east is placing pressure on the cost of living and household bills, including for those in rural communities. That is why this Government are providing £3.8 million to the Welsh Government to support households in Wales that use heating oil.

Steve Witherden: This month, the UK Labour Government formally lifted the two-child limit, benefiting nearly 70,000 children in Wales and 2,270 children in my constituency. I am enormously proud that Labour is lifting hundreds of thousands of children out of poverty, while the other parties in Wales promise spending cuts and tax rises on working families. Will the Secretary of State update the House on what this policy means for the future of Wales?

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is proud, as am I, of the steps that both our UK and Welsh Labour Governments have taken and are taking to support children and families with the cost of living. We have scrapped the two-child limit, provided 50 million free school meals since 2022, created 100,000 apprenticeships, and devolved £20 million to the Welsh Government to help more young people into work. Contrast Labour’s record with Plaid’s admission that it will cut child poverty budgets and plans to hike taxes on working families. Labour is the only party that is on the side of Welsh families.

Dave Doogan: In just two weeks' time, the people of Wales will have an opportunity to elect a Government who genuinely care about child poverty in Wales—Plaid Cymru. In Scotland, the Scottish Government's child payment has helped protect 407,000 children from UK poverty, and Plaid Cymru will do the same if it prevails on 7 May. Does the Secretary of State agree that Labour's flag-end Administration in Wales has come to an end and Plaid Cymru's time has come, and not a moment too soon for the people of Wales?

Jo Stevens: I do not think the hon. Gentleman can have been listening when I mentioned, in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden), that Plaid has admitted that it will cut the budget for child poverty. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has been clear that Plaid would have to make spending cuts or raise taxes to pay for its unfunded manifesto pledges, and at some point before 7 May its leader is going to have come clean on what Plaid is going to do.

Carolyn Harris: With almost 170,000 workers in Wales benefiting from Labour's successive increases to the national minimum wage and the living wage, families across the country—including many of my constituents—will now be better off. Despite resistance from Opposition parties, this Government have shown their commitment to tackling the cost of living crisis and supporting working people. Could the Secretary of State update the House on how those changes and the Employment Rights Act 2025 will benefit people in my constituency and across Wales?

Jo Stevens: We promised that we would be a Government for working people, and that is exactly what we have done. Our industrial strategy is set to support tens of thousands of new jobs across Wales. We have provided more employment support to help people get into work, increased the national minimum wage and the living wage, and strengthened rights and protections at work, making work pay, and making it more secure and fairer through our Employment Rights Act. New jobs have been created, alongside better jobs and higher wages, all because of this Labour Government.

Gerald Jones: Free school meals for children, our universal credit uplift, and up to £575 more on the state pension thanks to protecting the triple lock are all great examples of how Labour Governments at both ends of the M4 are helping with the cost of living. Can the Secretary of State update the House on the steps that the Government are taking to ensure that in future nobody gets trapped in a cycle of poverty, whether in my constituency of Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare or across the country?

Jo Stevens: Whether it is young people, families or pensioners, this Labour Government are determined to tackle the cost of living, both for my hon. Friend's constituents and for all our constituents. We inherited a broken welfare system from the Conservatives that has failed people and trapped them in a cycle of poverty. We will not allow that to continue, which is why we are helping people into work through new employment programmes and increasing universal credit for those who need support. As my hon. Friend mentioned,

700,000 pensioners are being helped through the state pension rise. We are absolutely laser-focused on tackling the cost of living.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Labour has done much to address child poverty, for example, but the issues with the price of heating oil, fuel and red diesel are the same in Wales as they are in Northern Ireland, and indeed across this great United Kingdom. The price of red diesel has increased for rural farmers and for the fishing sector, as has the price of diesel for heavy goods vehicles, so what is the Minister doing to help those three sectors and to ensure that the economy can survive? If the Government do that in Wales, they will have to do it in Northern Ireland as well.

Jo Stevens: I thank the hon. Gentleman for acknowledging the work that this Government have done on the cost of living. Red diesel continues to benefit from an 80% tax discount, which is saving farmers almost £300 million a year. We have already brought in a 5p fuel duty cut, which will last from this month until September. We have raised industry concerns about red diesel prices, and the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Anna McMorrin), has also met farming unions to discuss red diesel. We have looked at price transparency with the Competition and Markets Authority, and we are keeping everything under careful review.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): Let us have some reality: it is Labour's cost of living crisis that is hitting families across Wales. It is vital that both Governments do all it takes to ease those pressures, yet the Welsh Labour Government still choose to spend over £100 million on more politicians and tens of millions on a default 20 mph speed limit. They have set up vanity embassies abroad and spent millions on tree planting in Uganda. Those are not the priorities of struggling families. Will the Secretary of State finally condemn the wasteful spending of taxpayers' money and admit that these schemes do not address the cost of living crisis in Wales?

Jo Stevens: I am really surprised that the hon. Member has raised the expansion of the Senedd, because the accepted rationale of those who support the expansion is that it was necessary to improve scrutiny of the Welsh Government. What a terrible indictment that is of the inadequate performance of her party, whose job it has been, as the Opposition in the Senedd for the past 27 years, to carry out that scrutiny.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Families in Wales under Labour are struggling, with inflation in bills, wages flatlining and childcare costs higher than anywhere else in the UK. Plaid Cymru's universal childcare offer would be a game changer. With full roll-out, that universal offer will be worth more than £30,000 a child, and it has been independently assessed as affordable and deliverable. Does the Secretary of State recognise how Labour's chronic lack of ambition is keeping families in Wales in poverty?

Jo Stevens: Plaid's manifesto, and specifically the childcare policy to which the right hon. Lady refers, exposes the fact that Plaid is not on the side of working

people in Wales and is not serious about tackling the cost of living. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has been clear that Plaid would have to make spending cuts or raise taxes to pay for its unfunded manifesto pledges. When families are dealing with the cost of living, Plaid will be hiking taxes and slashing spending on child poverty, which will make families worse off. Families in Wales deserve better than a manifesto of economic fiction.

Liz Saville Roberts: The Secretary of State's tight-lipped quibbling is just an excuse—a shadow of an apology for what her party has failed to do, having been in power for the past 27 years. It is no surprise to anybody that voters are ready for a change. Last night's YouGov poll shows that Plaid Cymru and Reform UK are neck and neck in Wales, with Labour trailing far behind. Will she accept that a vote for Labour on 7 May risks handing power to Reform UK, which will wreck our NHS? Will she recognise that only Plaid Cymru can stop that?

Jo Stevens: The answer to that question is no.

Job Creation

4. **Feryal Clark** (Enfield North) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help create new jobs in Wales. [908708]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): Creating high-quality jobs across Wales is a priority for this Government. Wales is now punching above its weight in attracting investment, with 65 new foreign direct investment projects creating nearly 2,500 jobs in 2024-25. That includes more than 500 jobs in north Wales from Eren Holding, Knauf Insulation and Kellogg's, alongside hundreds more in south Wales driven by Vishay's £250 million semiconductor cluster investment.

Feryal Clark: One of the issues that set Labour apart from other parties is the sheer number of new jobs we are creating in priority areas such as tech, defence and our green industries in constituencies such as mine, Enfield North, as well as across Wales and the rest of the UK. Can the Secretary of State update the House on the new jobs being created in Wales and the opportunities that will provide for every family?

Jo Stevens: I thank my hon. Friend for recognising the scale of the opportunities and new jobs that this Government are creating in Wales and across the UK. Whether it is 3,000 jobs in new nuclear, 5,000 jobs in floating offshore wind, 8,000 jobs in our two AI growth zones, 12,000 jobs with our historic £14 billion commitment for Welsh rail, or 25,000 jobs in our freeports and investment zones, we are delivering generational change for people in Wales.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): In Wales, the south-west and across the UK, nearly 1 million young people are not in education, employment or training. Labour's jobs tax, failed welfare reforms and damaging energy policies will worsen that crisis. Does the Minister recognise that when the Labour Government's first response to any crisis is to tax business, businesses stop hiring, and it is young people in Wales who suffer most?

Jo Stevens: The hon. Lady might like to know that unemployment in Wales is lower than the UK average and has fallen since this time last year. Youth unemployment is also lower than the UK average, which shows that our plan to boost the Welsh economy is working. We are creating jobs and helping people into them right across Wales.

Mims Davies: The bedrock of our country's defence rests on our crucial membership of NATO. The defence industry in Wales employs more than 15,000 people in well-paid and important roles. Yet the separatist Plaid, along with the Greens, opposes full membership of this deterrent, while Reform bizarrely claims all sorts of things like blaming NATO for provoking the war in Ukraine. Will the Secretary of State stand up for NATO, for more Welsh defence jobs and for the thousands in Welsh communities who rely on growing employment in this crucial sector?

Jo Stevens: That is exactly what we are doing. I refer the hon. Lady to the earlier answers to defence questions.

Rail Network Improvements

5. **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to improve the rail network in Wales. [908709]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Anna McMorrin): The Prime Minister has announced a generational funding commitment to Welsh rail, and a pipeline of projects valued at £14 billion. This long-term plan will transform connectivity across Wales, and we will deliver it at pace, building on the strong start of at least £445 million of investment secured at the spending review.

Mr Barros-Curtis: The UK Labour Government's generational commitment to a £14 billion pipeline of rail projects in every part of Wales is a clear demonstration of what can be achieved when two Labour Governments work together. The investment from the spending review has resulted in upgrades at Cardiff West junction, which is set to double city line services, benefiting stations in my constituency. Incredibly, Plaid has promised to tear up this much-needed plan and start again. Will the Minister update the House on the impact of Labour's rail investment in Wales on my constituents and the people of Wales?

Anna McMorrin: I thank my hon. Friend for pointing that out. The UK and Welsh Labour Governments' £14 billion plan for rail unlocks and delivers the transport network that Wales needs and deserves, bringing 12,000 jobs, boosting our economy and making journeys faster and more frequent. The plan contains 43 projects for every corner of Wales, including Burns stations in the south-east, electrification to Holyhead, the Swansea metro and the Marches line. While opposition parties want to put those plans on hold, the reality is that our two Labour Governments are working together to deliver transformational change for the people of Wales.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Labour's Senedd manifesto makes no mention of the billions of High Speed 2 funding owed to Wales. Welsh Labour has

given up on the argument, as the Secretary of State did after she took office. Her words were, “HS2 no longer exists.” Will the Minister please explain why Wales is not having fair funding for rail?

Anna McMorris: I do not know if the hon. Member heard my answer just now: I talked about a £14 billion commitment across Wales. I am sure that she does not agree with her party’s plan to rip up that £14 billion commitment to rail, robbing Wales and our communities of a generation of rail investment, connecting communities and delivering jobs right across Wales.

Economic Growth

6. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support economic growth in Wales. [908710]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): This Government are creating tens of thousands of high-quality jobs across Wales. From offshore wind in the Celtic sea and nuclear power at Wylfa, to AI growth zones, freeports, investment zones, rail enhancements, a defence growth deal and the steel strategy, our vision for economic growth in Wales is unashamedly ambitious and already delivering results.

Catherine Fookes: I was pleased to see the Secretary of State and the First Minister launch the local growth fund in Wales this week, to boost jobs and investment in local economies. That is on top of the local Wales placemaking grant funding and the UK Government’s Pride in Place funding, which will give £1.5 million to my constituency and improve six Monmouthshire towns. Will the Secretary of State update the House on how our two Labour Governments are working together to invest in our Welsh communities?

Jo Stevens: My hon. Friend is right to say that this Labour Government’s more than half-a-billion-pound local growth fund will fuel economic growth in every corner of Wales. It will support people to start and grow their businesses, it will help people to secure new skills and jobs, it will revitalise Welsh communities, and it is a great example of what can be achieved with two Labour Governments working together.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): One way to support growth in Wales, and indeed in Shropshire, is to support the Wrexham, Shropshire & Midland Railway’s open access application to the Office of Rail and Road. Will the Secretary of State make a commitment, similar to that of the Transport Secretary, that the Government will not get in the way of this application and will allow growth in Shropshire, Wales and the border market towns?

Jo Stevens: I have to apologise to the right hon. Member. I did not hear the first part of his question, but I am very happy to chat to him afterwards. If he writes to me, I will give him a full answer.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister’s questions, may I extend a warm welcome to the Speaker of the Latvian Parliament and her delegation, who are with us in the Gallery today?

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [908789] **Mike Wood** (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 22 April.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): Queen Elizabeth II devoted her life to public service. As we mark the 100th anniversary of her birth, I am delighted that her extraordinary reign will be marked by a permanent memorial.

In recent days we have seen a series of despicable antisemitic arson attacks. With additional funding to deploy specialist officers, a fundamental reset of how we counter extremism and action to tackle the poison of antisemitism in our schools, our colleges and the NHS, we will do everything in our power to keep British Jews safe, and I am sure the whole House will join me in standing with our Jewish community. There is no place in British life for antisemitism.

Today my thoughts are also with the family of Stephen Lawrence, murdered in a racist attack 33 years ago today. We honour his legacy in the fight against racism and in providing opportunity for every young person.

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

Mike Wood: Can the Prime Minister deny that Downing Street considered appointing Matthew Doyle to a diplomatic position?

The Prime Minister: Matthew Doyle worked for many years in public service for me as Prime Minister and other Ministers. When people leave roles in any organisation, there are often conversations about other roles that they want to apply for, but nothing came of this.

Q2. [908791] **Mr Calvin Bailey** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Today marks the anniversary of the racist murder of my friend’s brother, Stephen Lawrence. Tomorrow is St George’s day. Does my right hon. Friend agree that now, more than ever, we need to tell the positive story of Englishness, founded in who we are and not in who the far right would like us to be?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this. Of course, it was 33 years ago today that that awful murder took place. I am proud to have worked alongside Baroness Lawrence for many years. She is an incredibly courageous and inspiring campaigner, notwithstanding all the injustices that have been thrown at her in the last 33 years. We do celebrate St George’s day. We fly our flag, and we celebrate this country’s values of service, generosity and respect. They are English values, which is why I love this country so much. There are those who seek to divide us, who tell us that people are not welcome and try to rip our communities apart. We will never let them. We stand together united and against any challenges that we may face.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): Does the Prime Minister stand by his statement at the Dispatch Box on 10 September last year that

“full due process was followed”—[*Official Report*, 10 September 2025; Vol. 772, c. 859]

in the appointment of Peter Mandelson as our ambassador to Washington?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I do. Let me make it clear at the outset that the appointment itself was a mistake. It was my mistake. I have apologised to the victims for it, and I do so again. What I set out to the House on Monday is that Foreign Office officials granted security clearance to Mandelson against the recommendation of UK Security Vetting. Yesterday, Sir Olly Robbins was asked if he shared that decision with me, No. 10 or any other Ministers. He gave a clear answer: no. That puts to bed all the allegations levelled at me by those opposite in relation to dishonesty. I believe—[*Interruption.*] Last week, they were all saying that it must have been shared with me; Sir Olly was very clear yesterday it was not. I believe not sharing it was a serious error of judgment. That information should have been shared with me and other Ministers, and if it had been, Mandelson would not have been committed to post.

Mrs Badenoch: It has not put to bed anything. On 11 November 2024—long before any vetting had happened—the Prime Minister received advice from Simon Case, the then Cabinet Secretary. The advice said the appointment would require

“the necessary security clearances...before confirming”

the Prime Minister’s choice. This advice was ignored, so how can the Prime Minister still believe that confirming Mandelson before the security clearances was following “full due process”?

The Prime Minister: This was looked into by Sir Chris Wormald. I asked him to review the appointment process, including the vetting. He confirmed—his words—“appropriate processes were followed”. The Leader of the Opposition has put great weight on the order of events. I remind her what Sir Chris said last November in evidence to the House. He said that

“when we are making appointments from outside the civil service...the normal thing is for...security clearance to happen after appointment but before the person signs a contract and takes up post.”

That is what happened in this case. Sir Olly Robbins himself also gave evidence, and he said that

“as is normally the case with external appointments”

in his Department,

“the appointment was made subject to obtaining security clearance.”

On top of that, Sir Olly Robbins has made it clear that the fact that developed vetting was after the announcement made, in his words, no material difference to the conclusion that was reached. I add this: what Sir Olly Robbins wrote to the Committee yesterday was this:

“When the Prime Minister informed the House that the proper process had been followed in respect of”

national security vetting,

“he was correct.”

Mrs Badenoch: It is very interesting that the Prime Minister mentions Chris Wormald. He is relying on advice given to him after Mandelson was sacked by a Cabinet Secretary the Prime Minister then sacked. That is not relevant. I am talking about the advice he was

given before the appointment. He keeps mentioning Sir Olly Robbins. Sir Olly Robbins told us that the Prime Minister even sought clearance from His Majesty the King before the vetting. He had already got agreement from the US Administration—the Chair of the Select Committee said that. Mandelson was a done deal. Yesterday, Sir Olly Robbins said that the

“focus was on getting Mandelson out to Washington quickly.”

He said the Prime Minister’s team showed a “dismissive attitude” to vetting, and they even argued Peter Mandelson did not need any vetting at all. This clearly was not proper process. Why was due process not followed?

The Prime Minister: Let me deal with this directly, particularly this question of pressure in relation to the decision to appoint Peter Mandelson and to put him in place. Sir Olly Robbins could not have been clearer in his evidence yesterday. He said that

“I didn’t feel under...pressure personally in terms of my judgment”—his words. He went on to say:

“I...have complete confidence that...recommendations to me and the discussion we had and the decision we made were rigorously independent of”

any “pressure.” On top of that, he was asked if any “conversations...led” him

“to believe that...Mandelson needed to take up this role regardless of”

the vetting outcome. He said:

“I can say with certainty that it was never put to me that way.”

No pressure existed whatsoever in relation to this case. What is unacceptable is that the recommendation of UKSV was not given to me before Mandelson took up his post.

Mrs Badenoch: We all heard what Sir Olly Robbins said yesterday. The fact of the matter is that the Prime Minister spent a lot of time telling us just how furious he was to learn that Mandelson failed the vetting—the same Prime Minister who was trying to get him to Washington without any vetting at all. It’s just unbelievable. The reason the Cabinet Secretary advised the Prime Minister to carry out full vetting before the appointment—this is common sense, Mr Speaker—was to protect our national security. The due diligence document said that Mandelson remained on the board of the Kremlin-linked defence company Sistema long after Putin’s first invasion of Ukraine in 2014. The Prime Minister told us on Monday that he had read that due diligence report. Why did the Prime Minister want to make a man with links to the Kremlin our ambassador in Washington?

The Prime Minister: Let me deal with the first allegation the right hon. Lady put in that question. It was always the case that there would be developed vetting in this case. That was the understood process. That was carried out. It was reviewed by Sir Chris Wormald, and he said it was the appropriate process. Sir Olly was absolutely clear that nobody put pressure on him to make this appointment, whatever the sequence of developed vetting. In relation to what was in the due process, any issues of national security are dealt with in the developed vetting process. I knew that. Peter Mandelson received clearance through that process.

The problem, as I said to the House, was that I was unaware that UKSV recommended against clearance. That is information that should have been brought to my attention. It recommended, with red flags, that there

should not be clearance and that it was high concern. That information should have been made available to me at the time and subsequently. The fact that it was not was a very serious error of judgment.

Mrs Badenoch: I do not know what planet the Prime Minister is on. Appointing someone with known links to the Kremlin is not full due process. If anybody had brought that sort of name to me when I was a Secretary of State, I would have said, "No way." The Prime Minister thought someone with Kremlin links was still probably okay—"Let's do some vetting." Why does this matter? He keeps leaning on Sir Olly Robbins, a man he sacked—he keeps leaning on him. Sir Olly Robbins said yesterday that Peter Mandelson was given access to highly classified briefings even before he had received clearance. That was a clear national security risk. How can the Prime Minister still maintain that full due process was followed?

The Prime Minister: As a Member of the House of Lords and Privy Counsellor, and in accordance with guidance, documentation could have been provided to him and was provided to him. STRAP material comes after developed vetting, but because he was a Privy Counsellor he could have access to other material before developed vetting.

Mrs Badenoch: This is a joke. The Prime Minister says a Member of the House of Lords. Does he mean people like Matthew Doyle? *[Interruption.]* I am amazed at the level of chuntering from Labour MPs. The Prime Minister promised them probity. What he has given them is cronyism and an old boys' club, where Matthew Doyle is being proposed as an ambassador. It is ridiculous.

We all heard Sir Olly Robbins' testimony yesterday. The head of the Foreign Office was sacked for the Prime Minister's own failings. His Back Benchers know that is not fair. Even his most loyal Cabinet members will not defend it. The Prime Minister did not follow the process the then Cabinet Secretary set out in November 2024. He knows he did not follow due process, yet he told the House he had.

Mr Speaker, I cannot accuse the Prime Minister of deliberately misleading the House, but everyone can see what has happened here. This was not due process. Everyone knows the price of misleading the House. Will the Prime Minister finally take responsibility and go?

The Prime Minister: Let us be absolutely clear. Before Mandelson took up his post, UKSV recommended with red flags that clearance should be denied, and there was high concern. That that was not brought to my attention, or to the attention of the Foreign Secretary at the time or subsequently, is a very serious error of judgment, and anyone in my position would have lost confidence in the former permanent secretary. The Leader of the Opposition claimed on Friday that Mandelson could not have been cleared against security advice, but she was wrong about that. She said that Ministers must have been told, but she was wrong about that. She claimed there was deliberate dishonesty, but she was wrong about that—wrong, wrong, wrong. She rushed to judgment, as she always does, just like with the Iran war. I was elected by the British people because the Opposition let the country down for 14 long years.

[Interruption.] Whatever she says—whatever noise they make—nothing is going to distract me from delivering for our country.

Q3. [908792] **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): In contrast with the preoccupations of the Leader of the Opposition, my constituents are more concerned with the NHS and waiting lists. Thanks to this Government, across England, waiting lists are coming down. In my part of the country, waiting lists have fallen by 13,000 in the past year alone. After years of Tory failure, we are getting the NHS back on its feet. Will the Prime Minister share with me what further plans we have to get waiting lists down even more, and to make sure that we once again have a health service to be proud of?

The Prime Minister: The Opposition should hang their heads in shame at the state they left our NHS in. I am proud that this Labour Government are fixing our NHS across the country, with waiting lists at their lowest in three years, the best A&E waiting times in five years, the fastest ambulance response times in half a decade, and cancer patients getting diagnosed in the shortest time on record. Lots done, more to do. That is why we are delivering neighbourhood health centres in every community to speed up care. We did that because we invested. What did the Opposition do? They broke the NHS, and then opposed the investment that we put in.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I associate myself and my party with the comments of the Prime Minister on our wonderful late Queen. I agree with him on the need to confront antisemitism wherever it is in our society, and on remembering Stephen Lawrence and his family.

I am sure many of us in this House were shocked by the revelations from Olly Robbins yesterday. He said that No. 10 told him to find a plum job for Matthew Doyle, another Labour crony who is friends with a convicted sex offender. The Prime Minister was asked on Monday whether No. 10 had proposed any political appointments other than Mandelson. Perhaps the past few hours have jogged his memory. Will he confirm today whether he knew that his office was lobbying for a diplomatic job for Matthew Doyle, and whether they were doing it on his authority?

The Prime Minister: As I said earlier, Matthew Doyle worked for many years in public service, both for me as Prime Minister and for other Ministers. When people leave roles in any organisation, there are very often conversations about other roles they may want to apply for. In this case, nothing came of it.

Ed Davey: The House and the public watching will note that the Prime Minister failed to answer my questions.

The chaos in this Government must not stop us focusing on the cost of living crisis hitting our country. President Trump's idiotic war with Iran has already pushed up inflation in our country to 3.3%, and the Prime Minister knows there is far worse to come for the British people from here on in. They need help now. Will the Prime Minister follow other countries and use

the Treasury's extra revenue from higher fuel prices to cut rail and bus fares, and slash prices at the pump by 12p a litre?

The Prime Minister: Everybody can see that the conflict is causing serious economic damage in this country and countries around the world. The right hon. Member's claim of a windfall for the Government is politically misleading and economically illiterate.

Q5. [908794] **Dame Meg Hillier** (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Poor housing and temporary accommodation is having a devastating impact on families, their life chances, our schools and communities. Will the Prime Minister put the full weight of Government behind ensuring that new developments in London are delivering for Londoners, not private investors and landlords, including on the Billingsgate market site in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum)?

The Prime Minister: We inherited a housing crisis in London, including record numbers of children living in temporary accommodation, because the Conservatives failed to build the homes that we need. We are building those homes, and I am looking forward to next week, when Labour will deliver more security for tenants, through our Renters' Rights Act 2025. I commend Hackney council, my hon. Friend's council, on getting on with building affordable homes. What a stark contrast to the Green party, which has opposed 42,000 new homes across the capital and counting.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Mr Fenton-Glynn, I am glad you have found your feet, because I could hear you shouting earlier. We will not be doing that next week. I call Dr Ellie Chowns.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The Prime Minister appointed Mandelson in a desperate and doomed attempt to pander to Donald Trump, despite knowing about Mandelson's friendship with the paedophile Epstein, and his links to foreign states. The Prime Minister resisted vetting, and then took a "dismissive" and extraordinarily incurious attitude to it, compromising national security, and now he has thrown a civil servant under the bus to save his own skin. All this from a Prime Minister who pledged to restore trust and integrity in Government, but who has repeatedly betrayed the trust of voters and let the country down. Does the Prime Minister not recognise that the best thing that he can do to restore trust and integrity is to take true responsibility and resign?

The Prime Minister: Let me correct what the hon. Lady said. There was no dismissive attitude to developed vetting. I knew that the post was subject to developed vetting, and it was subject to developed vetting. What did not happen was me being told of the UKSV recommendation. That was a serious error of judgment. Had I been told, the appointment would not have gone ahead.

Q6. [908795] **Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): People in Summerston in my constituency are experiencing antisocial behaviour. They tell me that what makes the greatest difference is visible local police officers on the beat. However, since 2017, local police numbers in Glasgow have fallen by 9%, leaving 214 fewer local officers serving communities. Does the Prime Minister agree that visible local policing is essential to tackling antisocial behaviour and restoring confidence in our communities?

The Prime Minister: Scotland deserves safer streets and more visible policing. In England and Wales, Labour has put 3,000 more neighbourhood police officers on our streets, delivering a named police officer for every neighbourhood. The SNP Government have already had two decades and record funding to invest in public services. If they knew how to do it, they would have done it by now, but they have not.

Q4. [908793] **Ben Obese-Jecty** (Huntingdon) (Con): We know that the Prime Minister has been playing fast and loose with ministerial appointments in his chumocracy, so I want to ask him about the first one. [*Interruption.*] Labour Members' boos mean nothing to me; I have seen what makes them cheer. Jonathan Powell was appointed the Prime Minister's special envoy to the British Indian Ocean Territory on 6 September, but throughout August he held meetings with Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office officials and was given access to classified information, including a minute of a meeting between the Prime Minister and the then Foreign Secretary, who is sat next to him on the Front Bench. My question is very simple: when was Jonathan Powell appointed the Prime Minister's special envoy to the British Indian Ocean Territory, and what security clearance did he have upon that appointment?

The Prime Minister: Let me say that Jonathan Powell is doing an excellent job for this Government. He is respected across the world, and is playing a significant part in dealing with the huge challenges that we face.

Q9. [908798] **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter** (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): Fertiliser prices are spiralling, and it is not just down to the war in the middle east; it is also because of the choices of the previous Conservative Government, who allowed the UK's last ammonia plant, based in Billingham, to close in 2023. They failed to see it as a nationally critical site for the UK's food production, and now we are more reliant on volatile imports. If we do not tackle this head-on, higher fertiliser costs will mean higher food prices in the UK. What are the Government doing to support British farmers, and does the Prime Minister agree that all options for bringing down the cost of fertiliser should be on the table, including securing British home-made ammonia once again?

The Prime Minister: Clearly, the middle east conflict is placing real pressure on farmers; that is why it is important that we de-escalate. Today, the UK is hosting military planners, as work continues with France and other countries to help get the strait of Hormuz open, once the ceasefire holds. We have instructed the Competition and Markets Authority to look more closely at fertiliser and red diesel to ensure that farmers are getting a fair

deal, and we are overhauling fertiliser regulations to diversify supply. On my hon. Friend's particular case, we have also taken the decision to open the carbon dioxide plant on Teesside to protect supplies, because we will always act to secure our economy.

Q7. [908796] **Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Leaders can delegate responsibility but cannot delegate accountability. Lord Carrington learned that in the Army, and he lived it as Foreign Secretary when Argentina invaded the Falklands. In 1982, he held himself accountable for the failures of Foreign Office officials and resigned, even though he was later cleared of responsibility. Does the right hon. and learned Member not believe in ministerial accountability?

The Prime Minister: I have set out in terms what I was not told in relation to the process. It is clearly information that I should have been given. A UKSV recommendation with a double red flag should have been brought to my attention; it was a serious error of judgment that it was not. Anyone in my position would have taken exactly the decision that I took in relation to the permanent secretary.

Q10. [908799] **Vicky Foxcroft** (Lewisham North) (Lab): Housing is one of the biggest issues in my constituency. Lewisham council is working hard to improve things, and is bringing its housing stock back in house. Non-decent homes have fallen from one in four to one in 10, the repairs backlog has reduced by almost two thirds, and call waiting times have fallen from 70 minutes to four minutes. However, leaseholders and those with cladding issues still need support. Will the Prime Minister update the House on what the Government are doing in those two vital areas?

The Prime Minister: We are tackling the injustice of leasehold and fixing building safety, as my hon. Friend rightly highlighted. I thank her for campaigning on this over many years. We are capping ground rents at £250 to cut costs for almost 4 million leasehold properties. We are investing over £5 billion to remove dangerous cladding, including over £1 billion for social housing. In Lewisham and across the country, I am determined that everyone should have a safe and secure home.

Q8. [908797] **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): Last Thursday, a man was arrested in Laleham in my constituency. He had been approaching children at the primary school, having been warned by the police not to do so. He was taken into police custody and, after further examination, detained under the Mental Health Act. Unbelievably, he was living in an unlicensed house in multiple occupation, supported by the Home Office, a stone's throw from the primary school. What I would like to know, Prime Minister, is: who is responsible for the risk assessment that put him there? Was it the Home Office, or was it Spelthorne borough council? Who screwed up? Who can I hold accountable?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for his question. As he will appreciate, there is a live police investigation, and I know that the Minister for Border Security and Asylum is looking closely at the case; obviously, I can provide the hon. Member with any further information as that emerges. I reassure him that

all accommodation must meet contractual standards, and the Home Office works with the police to manage all sites safely. Local authorities are consulted prior to any accommodation being procured and can object to any proposal. When there is strong evidence that a site is not suitable, it will not be proceeded with.

Q11. [908800] **Luke Akehurst** (North Durham) (Lab): One of the main concerns that North Durham residents raise with me is the vitality of local high streets, so I am delighted that in the last year, a series of new independent businesses has opened on Chester-le-Street's Front Street, including Willow's Bake House, Paper & Park bookshop, Pretty Busy Blooms, Kira Sushi & Poke restaurant and, just this weekend, the Black Rabbit bar, which I am looking forward to visiting. Will the Prime Minister join me in congratulating those new businesses, and outline the measures that he is taking to support further regeneration of our high streets?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted to hear about the new businesses in my hon. Friend's area. Our high streets strategy, backed by £301 million, will set out further plans to rejuvenate high streets across the country. We are putting power into the hands of local communities through our Pride in Place scheme, including £20 million for Stanley South in my hon. Friend's constituency. That is only possible because his community has a hard-working Labour MP and a Labour Government.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Some six months ago in this House, I mentioned a little boy called Teddy Johnson. Sadly, Teddy will be forever seven, because he died last week from metachromatic leukodystrophy. MLD is a horrendous condition that stole Teddy's ability to walk, talk and even smile. What makes this tragedy more profound is that here in the UK, we have a treatment—we have a cure—but it is only effective if the condition is identified by a simple heel prick at birth and treated immediately, because when symptoms appear, it is too late. Just a few weeks ago, the UK National Screening Committee recommended the condition remain excluded from the heel prick. We have a treatment and we have a commissioned service in the Royal Manchester children's hospital, yet children like Teddy are still dying prematurely. Despite all that is going on in the world, I know that the Prime Minister is in politics to make a change. Prime Minister, in Teddy's memory and in the memory of all those who have died prematurely: make the change and add MLD to the simple heel prick test.

The Prime Minister: I remember the hon. Lady raising Teddy's case very well. I am very saddened to hear of his passing, and my thoughts—and, I am sure, those of the whole House—are with his family and his loved ones. I will do precisely as she asks: I will make sure that we look at this again in the light of the information that she has given to me in the course of this session.

Mr Speaker: I call the birthday boy, Oliver Ryan.

Q12. [908801] **Oliver Ryan** (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker—and a happy St George's day for tomorrow too.

In Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield, we have a large number of ex-industrial, derelict land sites crying out for regeneration and redevelopment. They are blighting communities and many are a fire risk. Our area of Britain needs housing—social, affordable, family, aspirational. We have the sites if the Prime Minister has the will, so will he back my campaign for a new regeneration house building programme for Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield, tackling these derelict sites to get us building, growing, and housing local people?

The Prime Minister: May I start by wishing my hon. Friend a happy birthday? [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

I will make sure that Ministers meet my hon. Friend to hear more detail about his particular proposal. We are committed to delivering 1.5 million homes this Parliament. We are prioritising the development of brownfield sites, ensuring that the default answer to brownfield proposals is a yes. We will go further and faster now that our Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 is law, despite being opposed by every Opposition party—a coalition of blockers.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): The Prime Minister may be aware that in December, for the first time in over three decades, Defence Ministers met the families of those killed in the 1994 RAF Chinook crash on the Mull of Kintyre. The Ministry of Defence promised “ongoing dialogue” with them. Is he also aware that, despite receiving pages of new evidence presented at that meeting that show the Chinook was not airworthy, the MOD chose not to keep its word and contacted instead the Press Association, saying that no new evidence had been presented about the cause of the crash? The Prime Minister knows, because the families have written to him, as the MOD knows too, that the families are seeking not a public inquiry into the cause of the crash, but to know the reason why their loved ones were placed on board an aircraft which, according to the MOD’s own test pilots and engineers, was described as “positively dangerous”, “unairworthy” and “not to be relied on in any way whatsoever”? Will he agree to meet the families, to rebuild trust and to offer the promised dialogue that the MOD clearly finds so difficult to achieve?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this case; I will make sure that is looked at again in the light of what she has said, and that the families get the relevant meeting.

Q13. [908802] **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Stepney) (Lab): Between 2010 and 2024, the number of children living in poverty increased by 700,000, with Tower Hamlets having one of the highest rates in the country. This Labour Government’s child poverty strategy will lift over half a million children out of poverty. Given the economic pressures caused by external shocks and their impact on the cost of living, there is a long way to go. Does the Prime Minister agree that the Government should also look at setting a clear target to end child poverty for good?

The Prime Minister: May I start by thanking my hon. Friend for her long record of campaigning against child poverty? Child poverty stifles opportunity, it makes it

harder for kids to get on in life and we in this Government will not stand by. This is a moral mission for this Government. We will make sure that no child or family is left behind, through lifting the two-child cap, expanding free school meals and free breakfast clubs, and extending free childcare. More than 6,000 children in my hon. Friend’s constituency alone will benefit from the action that we are taking. And what would the Tories and Reform do? They would plunge those children straight back into poverty. That is a disgrace.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): Today, vigils are being held across Westminster for the 22 women who are diagnosed with lobular breast cancer every day, and I think we are privileged to say that some of those extraordinarily brave women are in the Gallery this afternoon. When I raised this issue with the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, she promised to take action and not just commit words, so will the Prime Minister today commit to the Lobular Moon Shot Project’s plan to fund lobular breast cancer?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for drawing the attention of the House to the vigils and the campaign, and I acknowledge those who are here in the Gallery today. I will make sure that this is looked at to see what further we can do, and that any relevant meetings are set up.

Q14. [908803] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): In 1777, Bootham Park hospital was given in trust to the people of York. Since it closed in 2015, NHS Property Services has squandered £5.5 million—almost its sale price—keeping the building empty, and threatened to sell it for a luxury complex our city does not want. This much sought-after community space for charities and services would significantly benefit York residents, so will the Prime Minister now release this site so that public land can be used for public good, and we can get Bootham back?

The Prime Minister: I know that the site is of huge significance to the people of York, and I understand that the site is under offer. Ministers are happy to work with the council and my hon. Friend to find the right deal for the site, taking into account the points she has made.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Every day that the Prime Minister fails to act on or even acknowledge Pakistani grooming gangs that rape and torture vulnerable white girls, more victims continue to suffer. Instead of spending his energy forcing friends of paedophiles into top jobs, why not use that energy to stop this national disgrace?

The Prime Minister: I spent many years prosecuting paedophiles who are now in prison, so I really do not need lectures from Reform about this.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): In 2022, my constituent Masi Sibanda dropped her 14-month-old son Noah off at nursery, like any other day. Tragically, it would be the last time Masi would see her son alive. A staff member at the Fairytale nursery tried to get him to sleep. When Noah resisted, she covered his face with a thick blanket

and used her leg to pin him down. The pressure applied to his tiny body was so extreme that it ruptured his colon. No parent should have to endure such unimaginable loss. The sentencing has taken place. Will the PM meet Masi to discuss how we can ensure that tragedies like this never happen again?

The Prime Minister: The case my hon. Friend raises is utterly tragic, and as she went through those details, I think we all will have felt as I do: it is impossible to fathom how the family must feel in relation to this awful and tragic case. I will make sure that all the necessary meetings are set up in the way that she has asked for.

Government Procurement Strategy

12.39 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on the Government procurement strategy.

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Ward): Every year this country spends around £400 billion of taxpayers' money on procurement—and, if we are honest, under the current complex system, we do not always spend it as wisely as we could. That is why just before the Easter recess I announced a major package of reforms to the procurement system, on which I am grateful to have the chance to update the House today. Behind these reforms are three principles: first, that procurement should do much more to protect national security and support British businesses; secondly, that it should deliver a fairer economy; and, thirdly, that it should be simpler, fairer, and open doors to small businesses and charities. Let me address those principles in turn.

This Government believe it matters where things are made and who makes them, so we will issue new guidance for all Government Departments to make use of the national security exemptions in the Procurement Act 2023 to direct procurement to serve the national interest. We will start with four sectors critical to our national security: steel, shipbuilding, energy independence and AI. That will give a clear sign that this Labour Government will back British business, and will use both the weight of our procurement budget and the powers in the Procurement Act to do so. We will also take two further steps to back British businesses. First, Government Departments will now be required to confirm whether prime contractors are using UK steel, and if they are not doing so, they will have to explain why. We will also develop a new shipbuilding framework to restrict Government contracts to British firms where this supports our national security interests.

The second principle of these reforms is that procurement should build a fairer economy, and the truth is that for decades, under successive Governments, we have had a policy that essentially adds up to outsourcing by default. Under this Labour Government, the age of outsourcing will end. We will, in line with our manifesto, introduce a public interest test, which will apply to all Government Departments. They will now be required to assess whether a service can be delivered more effectively in-house, and if it cannot, a clear explanation must be published. Departments will also for the first time be required to publish robust insourcing strategies, setting out how, over the medium term, they will build the capacity to make the biggest wave of insourcing in a generation a reality. This marks a step change in how and who our public services are run by and for, and I am proud that this Labour Government are delivering it.

We will also strengthen the role of social value in procurement. Too often, this has become a mere tick-box exercise and a barrier, not an opportunity, for SMEs and start-ups. Working with trade unions, businesses and others, we will create a new definition of social value that will underpin all Government procurement.

The third principle of these reforms is to make the procurement system simpler and fairer. I have heard too many times how the complexity, duplication and endless form-filling of the current system is among the biggest barriers to SMEs and charities, so we will undertake a rapid review of all existing requirements in the procurement system, and we will see which burdens and duplications can be removed. If they are not essential, we will scrap them. We will enforce a “tell us once” principle—

Mr Speaker: Order.

Chris Ward *rose*—

Mr Speaker: No, you do not look at the clock. You look at me, and you sit down. Ministers have three minutes for responses to urgent questions. I do not know who may have told you differently; there is something wrong in the advice being given. It is three minutes. I presume you are now going to conclude immediately.

Chris Ward: Yes. My apologies, Mr Speaker. I was told it was five minutes, but I completely apologise.

Mr Speaker: Order. When I stand up, please sit down—do not remain standing at the Dispatch Box. I am sorry that you were told five minutes, but I think that Ministers should know by now how long they get for a statement or a UQ. It is becoming an impossible situation, where Ministers try to change the rules of the House. These are not my rules; they are the rules of the Back Benches. Please adhere to them.

Chris Ward: I can only apologise, Mr Speaker.

In conclusion, these reforms will back British businesses and workers, build a fair economy, and simplify and open up our Government procurement system. There is still much to do, but this is a big step forward and I am grateful to have had the chance to set it out to the House today.

Leigh Ingham: Through a change in procurement policy that is more focused on backing British businesses, investing in Britain to help secure thousands of good, unionised jobs, and remaining community-focused, the Government will make sure that local people are reaping the full rewards from this move. I welcome it, and I welcome the Minister's response to my urgent question. Could he please outline the first steps to deliver this procurement reform, and what it will mean for manufacturers in my constituency and in constituencies around the UK?

Chris Ward: My hon. Friend has raised the importance of changing the procurement rules with me a number of times—she is a tremendous champion on this. On next steps, the Cabinet Office is working on new guidance that we will put before the House very shortly—I hope before the summer recess—which will make flesh the commitments I have made today. As I say, it has three big principles behind it: backing British businesses, creating a fairer economy and making the system simpler and fairer for all.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) on securing this urgent question—I know how rare it is for a Government Parliamentary Private Secretary. *[Interruption.]* She is not any more—I apologise. I welcome the Government's ambition to modernise public procurement, but ambition, as ever, must be matched by delivery. There are a number of questions that the Minister must answer today.

The Government promised transparency through a new online register of commercial agreements. When precisely will that register be live, and will it be comprehensive from day one? Ministers often speak of backing small business. Will the Minister publish in a single, accessible place every Department's SME target, its latest outturn and whether it is on or off track? On prompt payment, how many suppliers have actually been excluded from major contracts for failing to meet the required standards? If this strategy is truly about value for money, why have the Government still not resolved the fragmentation, poor-quality frameworks and poor use of data and technology that were identified by the National Audit Office?

On national security, contracting authorities are now required to assess risks not just from prime contractors, but from associated persons and subcontractors. How many procurements have been referred for national security consideration, and how many suppliers have been excluded or challenged as a result? What assurances can the Minister give that public contracts are not still flowing into supply chains with links to hostile states? What assessment has the Minister made of the EU's emerging "Buy European" policies? Is that not a protectionist barrier by the European Union?

Finally, if social value is now mandatory at 10%, what assessment has been made of the risk that it adds cost and complexity, particularly for SMEs? I know that the House will want clear answers.

Chris Ward: I thank the hon. Member for those questions—let me try to answer a few of them.

First, on SMEs and Department spend, as I say, part of the aim of this package is to support SMEs and ensure that they have a greater chance of winning contracts. We did publish the departmental spends the day before recess. I know that there was a lot going on, but we have published them; they are there. They show an ambitious step forward. I believe that around £7 billion of Government contracts will go to SMEs as a result of those changes. I am proud of what we are doing; it is the first time that the Government have done it. We have helped drive that through and have worked hard on that.

The hon. Member asked about "Buy European". That is not in conflict with any of our international agreements or, obviously, with our negotiations with the EU that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office is leading on, and we work closely on that. At the heart of this package is a recognition that we need to use our procurement budget within international law and international regulations to do more to support our industries. That is the right thing to do, and I hope that we can get cross-party support.

The hon. Member asked about social value. Again, I think he was implying that we are making this mandatory. It is already mandatory and it is already weighted at

10% within the contracting system. I am not changing that; what I am saying is that I am changing the definition of social value so that it does more to support communities and to ensure that it really works, so there is no change on that.

The hon. Member asked me a couple of specific questions about national security. I will get back to him if that is okay, but in general terms, I hope that we can get cross-party support on this. The Procurement Act 2023 was passed with cross-party support and was a step forward, but this is the next big step in trying to ensure that we do much more with that budget to support Britain.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I applaud the Government's move to use the £400 billion of public procurement—almost one eighth of British GDP—in the interests of the British people and the British economy. The Science, Innovation and Technology Committee has often heard that a Government contract is worth more than a Government grant to the start-ups and spin-outs that are so important to our economy. Will the Minister confirm that this approach will be joined up with our strategy for sovereign capability, so that we do not find ourselves once again in the position where the Ministry of Defence awards a contract without competition to a large US artificial intelligence company, as happened with Palantir, when there are UK companies that are desperate for that kind of investment?

Chris Ward: My hon. Friend brings a huge level of expertise and background experience to the issue. I reassure her that part of the package that I announced before Easter is aimed at helping our sovereign AI industry and our science and technology industries, and boosting start-ups. In the time that I have been doing this job, a lot of the stories that I have heard are about how the procurement rules work fine for companies that have a large procurement department to try to win the contracts, but they are not so good for start-ups or voluntary businesses that are trying to win their way into Government contracts. We should be doing much more to help those companies and, yes, we are joining this up across Government, including through the industrial strategy and the steel strategy that I spoke about earlier.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): We need to do far more to back British small businesses through public procurement, both to boost growth and to ensure our national security. Public procurement amounts to hundreds of billions of pounds a year. The Procurement Act was meant to ensure that more of that money reached British small businesses, but in practice many report that it has made things worse. Payment rules are being flouted by middlemen who face no consequences, suppliers who complain are threatened with losing future work and bad debts are mounting. Public money is disappearing into a vacuum and there is a security risk. There are businesses that are asking, "What is the point of legislation that rogue traders can ignore with complete impunity, while loyal British SMEs are being pushed out of the

[Lisa Smart]

market they built?" Does the Minister agree that the target for Government spending with small businesses should be far higher than the current level? Will he explain when the payment reporting transparency will be implemented?

Chris Ward: I basically agree with the hon. Lady's assessment of the procurement system and how it does not do what it should do. As I say, £400 billion of taxpayer money is being spent. We need to ensure, as far as we can, that every pound that is spent supports British industry, supports jobs and delivers fairness, and it must also support SMEs. The Procurement Act made progress towards helping SMEs, but it does not go far enough. It is not the job of this Government to defend the status quo; it is the job of this Government to change it, so we will do that. I will come back to her on the specific point about payment thresholds.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), my Staffordshire neighbour, on securing this urgent question. The Government are taking the right steps towards this procurement strategy, but there is a lot more that could be done if they wanted to truly buy British, back British and build British. That could start with the Government Car Service. The Minister will know from the answers that he has sent to my written parliamentary questions that one third of the Government Car Service uses foreign cars, and that police services in this country use foreign-made cars. He will know that we import bricks to build houses that are paid for by Homes England, which is funded by taxpayers. Will he look at the easy wins that he can make by looking at how the Government are a consumer of products? He could reorientate that spend towards British companies this week.

Chris Ward: There are few greater champions of the buy British agenda than my hon. Friend, although there are a few of us in the Government as well. We are trying to make progress on that agenda. What I am setting out today is what I can do with Government guidance and by using the exemptions that already exist in national security restrictions. We have not jumped to legislation; I am trying to use the powers that I have. The point that he is making is about a bigger agenda that I hope we can get to, in order to drive forward more support for British industry. This is the start of it but it is not the end, and we will work with him on doing that.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Too often consumers buy products that, when they get to examine them, turn out to have been manufactured in places like China. What safeguards do the Government have in their new procurement strategy to ensure that there are no concealed foreign supply chain components in the contracts that they intend to award? Why are the SMEs—or any companies—that are bidding having to demonstrate trade union recognition if they might have a workforce that do not require that?

Chris Ward: On the right hon. Gentleman's first point, we have robust processes in place on supply chains, which the Department for Business and Trade

leads on. The announcement that I made before Easter does not change that; the strategy sticks with the existing protections that we have under the Procurement Act regulations. What I am talking about here is how we can use those powers to direct Departments and use Government buying power to do more.

On the right hon. Gentleman's point about union recognition, I am sorry but I missed the very end of his question. There is nothing in the strategy that changes union recognition within the procurement system—that can already be weighted within the social value requirement—but it takes an important step on insourcing for Government Departments. I am incredibly proud that this Government are doing that and it is part of the manifesto on which we were elected.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for the changes, which are a welcome vote of confidence in UK business and industry. I welcome the rapid review of existing requirements that we know can slow down the procurement process, leading to frustration and inefficiencies all around. Ahead of International Workers' Memorial Day, will he commit to having inclusive personal protective equipment as a specification in any new public sector procurement contract, and lead the way on improving workplace safety?

Chris Ward: This is not the first time that my hon. Friend has raised this issue and we have met to discuss it. She is championing this important matter that addresses an inequity that is felt by many workers. The Cabinet Office is working on this point. At the moment, our view is that mandation is not the right way forward and that we can work with industry to try to roll this out. Equalities law already offers protections and should ensure that such PPE is delivered, but I accept that that is not always happening—my hon. Friend has made that case incredibly powerfully—and I am keen to keep working with her, the GMB and others on this issue.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Some £400 billion was spent on public procurement last year, so I would like to ask the Minister a question that I asked his predecessor over a year ago, which she was unable to answer then: what is the Government's precise savings target from that budget?

Chris Ward: What an excellent question! I am afraid that I will have to get back to the hon. Gentleman as I do not know the answer—[*Interruption.*] None of the measures in the announcement that I have made require additional Treasury funding—they are within existing budgets—but the point that he makes is a good one, so I will come back to him, if that is okay.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Will the Minister join me in congratulating Bedworth company Toye, Kenning and Spencer on its proud history of ribbon weaving and supplying ribbons for insignia and medals to the Queen, the King and the Government for many years? Will he tell me how the procurement strategy will help other local manufacturers in North Warwickshire and Bedworth?

Chris Ward: I certainly can. I thank my hon. Friend for raising that company. It is exactly the kind of British company that we want to help and back, and such

communities should have a real stake in how procurement money is used. I hope that we can do more on that, and I am happy to take up this specific point and this specific company with her.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): On the Business and Trade Committee, we have heard time and again that if we want to transform the economic health of small and medium-sized enterprises, we need to direct a greater share of public procurement towards them. However, the British Chambers of Commerce has said that we are “stuck in a rut” at 20% of spending going to SMEs. What is the Minister doing to join up the approach across Whitehall to ensure that a greater amount of spending goes to SMEs?

Chris Ward: I agree that more money from the procurement budget should be going to SMEs, and we are already taking steps to do that. We have announced powers so that contracts can be reserved in local communities and we have increased the amount of Government spending. As I have said, the spending targets across Whitehall mean that for the first time over £7 billion of Government money will now go to SMEs. I am working closely with the Federation of Small Businesses and lots of small businesses on that. I thank the FSB and others because the reforms announced today, which are aimed at supporting SMEs and voluntary sector organisations, have been designed in collaboration with them. They know that the system is not working, just as I know it is not working, and we need to get more money down to those businesses. So we have done a bit—we have done a lot of stuff—but there is a lot more to do, and the strategy is part of that.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): As the Member for Amber Valley, I represent Denby Pottery, which sadly is in administration and I am desperately trying to save it. It is a joy in this House to use crockery made in the UK, and I welcome the Minister’s recent announcement on procurement, but I have written to ask him to go further by including ceramics—I look forward to receiving his response in due course. May I take this opportunity to repeat my request so that we do not lose a whole sector by degree?

Chris Ward: I appreciate how important Denby Pottery is to my hon. Friend’s constituency and how difficult it will be for workers there at the moment. I understand that Government officials have been working with Denby Pottery in recent weeks to ensure that support is in place as the administration process unfolds, and I hope that will support the workers affected as much as possible. I think she will have some support from Members on the Bench behind her on the broader point about the ceramics industry. In this package I have announced that we will look at the four sectors that are immediately critical to national security using the existing powers we have. That is not where I want to stop, but it is what I can do at the moment. I want to go further, and I am very happy to work with my hon. Friend and others to try to do so.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The Minister is right to try to support small businesses by cutting red tape, but will he explain why, while he is saying this at the Dispatch Box, another part of Government is requiring

any business seeking a Government contract to demonstrate trade union recognition? Does he accept that that is completely irrelevant as to whether a business provides a good service and good value for money? Does he appreciate that that only imposes additional costs on businesses?

Chris Ward: Trade union rights are not inconsistent with what I am setting out. I am sorry, but I do not know what point the hon. Gentleman is making, because there is no requirement to have trade union recognition in Government contracts in the procurement system. I am not changing that or how that plays out; I am trying to simplify the system and remove burdens where I can. I am trying to look at the procurement system from start to finish, strip out all the duplication and erroneous stuff that has crept in and made it like a Christmas tree over time, and make it simpler and fairer. That will happen at the same time as ensuring that we deliver the generation of insourcing that this Government were elected to do, which can bring to an end decades of outsourcing by default.

Ben Goldsborough (South Norfolk) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. An important aspect of Government spending is food procurement in the NHS, on which £500 million is spent every year in England alone. May I stress to the Government that we must ensure that we back British farming and British food and ensure that the processes we are undertaking support our British farmers?

Chris Ward: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. There is a link between food security, national security and economic security, which is an increasingly important part. The reforms that we have announced deal, in the first instance, with the four sectors that we feel are the most immediately available with the powers we have, but that is not where we want to end. I am happy to work with him, the farming industry and others to see what more we can do.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I appreciate much of the statement that the Minister has made regarding procurement. I will deflect his attention to textile procurement, especially as the Ministry of Defence has contracted £37 million-worth of military gear to foreign factories, including in China. Some £23 million-worth of NHS personal protective equipment is manufactured abroad. All the while, my constituency has factories and a workforce, and we are ready. We are suffering with a cost of living crisis, so can I ask the Minister to consider onshoring textile procurement?

Chris Ward: Yes, the hon. Gentleman can. As he can clearly detect from what I am trying to say, the thrust is that I want to do more to support British businesses and industries, and I want to ensure that we are doing everything we can within the existing powers to do that. We have set out four sectors in which we feel we can do that straightaway, and I am sure there are others that we can look at. I am happy to work with him on that.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Like me, many in Portsmouth will welcome today’s announcement, particularly the new shipbuilding framework and the commitment to reward bids that deliver local jobs and

[Amanda Martin]

skills. Will the Minister outline today—and meet me to discuss—how these reforms will help to ensure that cities such as Portsmouth, from which shipbuilding was removed by the Tories, can once again share in defence, maritime and energy infrastructure, and benefit from AI procurement opportunities?

Chris Ward: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Obviously the shipbuilding industry is incredibly important for her constituency and for others around the country, and specific points in this package are designed to support that. To re-emphasise, we will work with the National Shipbuilding Office to try to work on a specific framework to ensure that we can direct procurement to British companies to deliver shipbuilding. For too long that has not happened, and we have seen in recent weeks and months the importance of having a sovereign capacity to do that. Portsmouth is a fine place to try to do so, as are other places around the country—I should not get too far into that. That is one of the reasons we picked shipbuilding early on and why we will work with the NSO to try to do that, and I am happy to meet with my hon. Friend.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): PVL is a SME in Burgess Hill that fabricates high-visibility livery, supplying 80% of police vehicles and 40% of ambulances. It is being hammered by the rules enacted in the Procurement Act 2023. Converters are the middlemen who take a regular vehicle and turn it into an emergency appliance. The 30-day payment terms set out in the Act are not enforceable. New tendering requirements cost time and money, but converters are under no obligation to use approved suppliers, and converters often go out of business owing money to the rest of the supply chain. That is a colossal waste of public sector money. Will the Minister agree to visit PVL, which is just over the border from his constituency, so that we can discuss these challenges?

Chris Ward: It is always nice to have a kind invitation to come up the road to Burgess Hill. The hon. Lady raises a really good point. I do not know the specifics of the company, but she raises exactly the kind of case that we should be trying to support. I am happy to meet, and if she sends me the details of the company, I will look into that.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Minister's statement. For many years it has seemed to me that while our European partners have been able to have significant sovereign procurement programmes, we have so often tied ourselves up in knots and been unable to do the same. My hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Ben Goldsborough) slightly gazumped me with his question. The Government have a commitment to ensure that half of all food purchased across the public sector is locally produced or certified, so what can we do to connect the Minister's plans with cutting out the middleman and ensuring that farm-gate produce is essential to our procurement programme?

Chris Ward: Building on that previous point, it is really important that we do as much as we can to support British farming and have a national plan for

food security. I am happy to take up the specifics and to work with my hon. Friend and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on that.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Is there an expectation that the procurement principles enunciated today will be followed through with local authorities? If so, can we expect to see an end to the scandal of bodies such as Transport for London buying Chinese buses, rather than British-made buses? Are we going to do anything about that?

Chris Ward: I would very much like to do so. I have spoken with the Department for Transport about this. This is a broader issue about how we work with regional authorities and within our system of devolution, because that is where the power lies for some of these decisions. I am working with the Department for Transport on this matter, and I am happy to keep the hon. and learned Gentleman updated on it.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) on securing this important urgent question, and I thank the Minister for his statement. Businesses in my constituency—a manufacturing town—strongly welcome this new approach, and we should be unashamedly proud to back our British businesses. Can the Minister reassure me that he is speaking to small businesses, local authorities and our trade union colleagues on defining social value so that we get this right and truly and proudly back British businesses for the future?

Chris Ward: Absolutely. We should be much prouder, as a Government and as a political party, about supporting British businesses and local communities. That is what I am trying to do with this statement. On working with others, I have been working on this matter for many months, as did my predecessor—we have worked on this matter with trade unions, businesses, voluntary sector groups and charities. The proposals that I have brought forward are an amalgam, but they are not the end of the road. Work will be done with the unions, businesses and so on to try to get the guidance right and put these through. I should also say that one of the reasons I am particularly proud of some of this work is that it has been welcomed both by trade unions and by businesses. It is not often that that happens these days, and I am particularly pleased that we have managed to achieve it.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I also welcome the Minister's response to the urgent question and the proposal to go British first in our procurement strategy, with over £400 billion spent per year. The Minister is no doubt aware that Members across this House, including myself, have repeatedly raised concerns about Palantir's ethics, its record of complicity in human rights abuses, including the genocide in Gaza, and the way it has secured extremely large public contracts here in the UK. Can he explain how awarding hundreds of millions of pounds—in many instances with no full, open tender process—to a single US surveillance and technology firm, which over the weekend released a dystopian manifesto for world domination, is compatible with a modern procurement strategy that claims to have transparency, value for money and the public interest at its heart?

Chris Ward: The hon. Member is right to say that part of what I am trying to do is support British businesses and reduce our reliance on others. On his specific point about Palantir, the two contracts to which he refers are NHS and Ministry of Defence-led contracts, so his questions are probably best directed at those Departments. If he wants to write to me, I am happy to try to pick that up as well, but they are NHS and MOD contracts. They did go through the procurement process, but those were the lead Departments.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I very much welcome what the Minister has said about the principles behind how we will use £400 billion of Government procurement to back companies up and down this country, and the workers behind them, by buying British. However, of course, many billions of pounds more are spent across the wider public sector, including by local authorities, the NHS and the police. Can the Minister tell me more about what he will be doing to bring those other bits of the public sector on board as he develops this process, especially to back the automotive trade?

Chris Ward: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. To clarify, the guidance that we are bringing forward and the reforms that I am talking about today will apply to Government Departments, not to the broader public sector. That is because Ministers and the Government do not have the power to direct beyond Government through mere guidance—I would need primary legislation to do so. That is something we are pushing very hard on, and I hope that legislation will come forward in a future Session. However, what I hope everybody notes, including the market and local authorities, is that the reforms I am announcing today are the reforms that I want to see rolled out across the public sector, working with local authorities as well. We want to test and learn in Government and roll out these reforms more widely, but that would require primary legislation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I want to ask the Minister a very specific question about Northern Ireland. In light of the recent Public Accounts Committee report that has highlighted the fragmented nature of procurement in Northern Ireland, with nine separate centres of procurement expertise, what steps can he take to ensure that SMEs, which he mentioned earlier, are not further disadvantaged by conflicting administrative requirements across those bodies? How will the promised Tell Us Once digital platform be successfully integrated with Northern Ireland's existing eTendersNI system to prevent duplication of the bureaucratic burden on small firms that are struggling?

Chris Ward: The hon. Gentleman raises a really good point. As I said, one of the three principles behind this strategy is to reduce duplication, reduce burdens and simplify the system. My feeling in general is that over the years, the people who have held my job have added more and more bits to the Christmas tree, making it more and more unwieldy, and I want to try to strip that back. If it is okay with the hon. Gentleman, I will ask him to write to me about his specific points, and I will pick them up. I am very happy to meet him to discuss those points as well.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I congratulate my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), on securing this urgent question.

In Newcastle-under-Lyme, we make excellent British bricks at Ibstock in Chesterton, and I draw the Minister's attention to my ten-minute rule Bill on British bricks. Will he take the opportunity to confirm today that the changes he has outlined will result in a "British brick first" approach to public contracts as we build the homes, community centres, schools and hospitals that our communities desperately need?

Chris Ward: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his ten-minute rule Bill. He has raised an important issue, one that is obviously incredibly important to his constituency and many others. As I say, we are starting with the four industries I have set out today, but we will look at others going forward, and I would be happy to talk with him and see what more we can do in future.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his answer to the urgent question. It is common sense that we use the Government's procurement power to support British jobs, but sadly that common sense is lacking in Scotland, where the Scottish Government are buying ferries from Poland, Turkey and China. Yesterday, Unite highlighted that the Scottish Government have given a grant to private bus companies in Scotland to buy 166 buses from China; meanwhile, publicly owned Lothian Buses is using its share of the grant to buy buses from the fantastic Alexander Dennis Ltd. Does the Minister join me in hoping that on 7 May, Scotland will vote Labour to elect a Government who put British jobs first?

I have a Fox's Burton's Companies UK biscuit factory in my constituency, which makes a delicacy known as the Jammie Dodger biscuit. Will this change make it more likely that when I next visit the Minister's Department, Jammie Dodger biscuits will be available to me?

Chris Ward: I have to say that of all the questions I was mulling over when I was going through this, the impact on Jammie Dodgers was not top of my list, but maybe it should have been—I will think about that. My hon. Friend makes a good point about how the Scottish Government have not used their procurement powers well enough over the years, and the fiascos he highlighted demonstrate that. It is a shame that no one from the SNP is in the Chamber to hear what he says, but it is good that Labour MPs are present to make the case for doing more to support jobs in Scotland.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his response to the urgent question tabled by the hon. Member for Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham). Can the Minister tell the House how this Labour Government's reforms to public procurement will unlock hundreds of millions of pounds for our SMEs and, in particular, how they will benefit SMEs in Harlow?

In response to other hon. Friends, the Minister mentioned food security. Sadly, we do not make Jammie Dodgers in Harlow—maybe we can have a conversation about that—but although it is important that we support our farming industry, I also draw to the Minister's attention

[Chris Vince]

the Lea Valley growers in my constituency, who are glasshouse growers, and Wright's Flour, which is our flour mill.

Chris Ward: I thank my hon. Friend for his question—he has raised a number of points. He talked about supporting SMEs, which is incredibly important to what the Government are trying to do more broadly, and specifically to what these reforms are trying to do.

If you will permit me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I also want to point out that we should do more to support the voluntary sector. In my opinion, the charitable sector does not get a fair enough crack at this, and the system is weighted against it. In particular, I have in mind a visit I made to a women's centre in my constituency, in Brighton, a fantastic charity that has been doing amazing work for a long time. It told me that it was spending £30,000 to £35,000 on a procurement process, having to divert resources that should be used to support people in real need in order to compete in a procurement process that is stacked against it because the big companies and the big providers have the money and expertise they need. We cannot defend that kind of status quo, and I will not do so, which is why we are trying to introduce this strategy.

Mr Joshua Reynolds: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Parliamentary Secretary to the Cabinet Office was asked several times about trade union requirements in public procurement contracts, yet *Hansard* records him as saying on 4 December that

“The Government's social value model provides opportunities to reward suppliers that recognise a trade union”.—[*Official Report*, 4 December 2025; Vol. 776, c. 1144.]

Could I seek your guidance as to how I could ask the Minister to confirm those two points together?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Minister, would you like to respond?

Chris Ward: I would just point out that an opportunity is not a requirement. The question I was being posed was about a requirement to recognise trade unions—that is not the same as an opportunity to reflect that within the system. That is the difference between those statements, and as I have said, nothing in the strategy changes the status of trade unions within the procurement system. What it does is deliver on our really important manifesto commitment to end the age of outsourcing and bring more work in-house.

Pension Schemes

1.19 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I wish to provide the House with an important update on key pension, contractual and commercial decisions.

The security and dignity of those who have dedicated their careers to our public services are not negotiable, and they deserve a pension service that is reliable, efficient and secure. For those principles to be more than just words, they need to be underpinned by rigorous accountability and a refusal to accept second best. We recognise that for our public servants, these services are the foundation of their financial security. When the standards they deserve are not upheld, the Government will not hesitate to act decisively to protect their interests. It is in that context that I want to give the first update to the House on the Royal Mail statutory pension scheme.

Following a failure to meet critical transition milestones and a lack of confidence in Capita's ability to implement and transition to the new operating model in a timely fashion, I am announcing today that I have terminated the new Royal Mail statutory pension scheme contract with Capita. Capita had an 18-month planning window to prepare for the transition. It failed to deliver numerous milestones, including a failure to implement the required IT automation. The Cabinet Office repeatedly flagged delays in transition milestones and that IT automation, ultimately issuing formal correspondence to reaffirm the mandatory requirements. To ensure members are protected, we will ensure continuity of the existing contract, but let the message be clear: I will not and we will not tolerate delivery failure from contracted partners. Public services require high-quality delivery, and public money should not be used to fund performance that falls short of the standards we expect.

I also want to address problems in the administration of the civil service pension scheme. The transition process from the previous provider, MyCSP, was not satisfactory. We are investigating the respective liabilities for those failures as between Capita and MyCSP. Given the criticality of these services, the Cabinet Office permanent secretary and I discussed transition with the chief executive officer of Capita. We sought and were given explicit personal assurances that the transition would be handled with the utmost care and that any backlogs would be managed effectively. I am sorry to say that those assurances have not been met.

It is clear in any event that the delivery of the service to civil servants since the transfer on 1 December last year has fallen far short of the required standard. The delays that civil servants have faced in accessing their civil service pensions are unacceptable, especially in view of their many years of dedicated public service. That is why I established a specialist pensions recovery taskforce, led by the second permanent secretary at His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, Angela MacDonald, to take strategic oversight of the scheme's management. That intervention, which includes a circa 140-person Government surge team to bolster operational capacity, is delivering results, including helping Capita to clear 15,000 inherited unread emails. Telephony wait times that averaged more than 90 minutes earlier this year have been successfully brought down to an average of under two minutes.

The stories we have heard of members missing mortgage payments and falling into hardship are distressing and entirely unacceptable. No one should have to face such financial anxiety after a lifetime of dedicated public service. That is why I took immediate action to ensure that no member was left to face these challenges alone while these service issues are being resolved. To mitigate the impact on those most affected, we have already provided more than £7.2 million in interest-free transitional support loans to more than 1,300 members. We are proactively driving the uptake of those loans to ensure that no member in need of support is missed, and I encourage all hon. and right hon. Members to ask their eligible constituents to reach out to their civil service employers for these loans, so that we can provide the vital support they deserve.

I can tell the House that Capita was explicitly instructed in July 2025 to prepare for the volumes it is now seeing. It knew the scale of the challenge, but failed to deliver the IT automation and portal functionality required when the service went live. The result, I am afraid to say, is a backlog of around 24,000 outstanding pension quotations. There is also a backlog of more than 1,500 open MP complaints. That is totally unacceptable. I have instructed officials to speak to Capita about how we can ensure that MP correspondence is dealt with quickly and efficiently, noting the importance of the fact that Members across the House were speaking up for their constituents. These are not just numbers on a spreadsheet; they represent thousands of individuals who are unable to plan for their futures or retire with dignity.

Service delivery is about more than just speed; it is also about the absolute security of member data. The breach we saw on 30 March, which saw personal information compromised on the pension portal, represents a fundamental failure in data protection. To be clear with the House, I will not tolerate these lapses. The Cabinet Office has formally notified the Information Commissioner's Office of this breach, and we have written formally to the chief executive officer of Capita to demand a full technical account of this failure and a guarantee that it will not happen again.

Across the civil service pension scheme, we have taken direct action on all commercial levers. We are withholding milestone payments where deliverables have not been met, and we reserve every right to take further formal action. The Cabinet Office has mandated a clear recovery target on service levels. Capita must clear all inherited arrears by the end of this month and restore service levels to standard, contractually required levels by the end of June this year. We will continue to use every commercial lever at our disposal to ensure that these standards are met.

The security and dignity of all those who have dedicated their careers to our civil service and the Royal Mail are not negotiable. They deserve a pension service that is reliable, efficient and secure. We will continue to use every lever at our disposal to ensure that those standards are met and that members receive the service they have earned. I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.26 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I begin by paying tribute to our fantastic public servants, civil servants and postal workers. The vast majority give so much in service of our country and the general public. This week, perhaps more than any other, is a reminder that it is Ministers' responsibility to provide the political leadership so that those workers can deliver. The Minister's decision to terminate the Royal Mail statutory pension scheme is enormously consequential and will be welcomed by many in this House, but more so by our many retired postal workers.

While I appreciate being given advance sight of today's statement, it does seem that the Minister, particularly in regard to the civil service pension scheme, has come to the House with more of a plan than a statement. It is clear that the current situation, as the Minister said, is the culmination of a series of entirely unforced errors by Capita. Its failure to adequately administer the CSPS has caused significant financial distress to thousands of former public servants, such as my constituent Chris. He has found himself without the pension he was relying on at just the time that his wife has had to step back from work after a cancer diagnosis.

These people worked hard and planned responsibly for retirement, on the basis that the CSPS would be there for them when they needed it. Capita's failures have left them anxious, frustrated and, in many cases, desperately out of pocket, but in all too many cases that I am aware of, Capita has been utterly unresponsive. Sadly, the constituents and others from around the country who have contacted me about Capita simply would not recognise the Minister's claim of answer times being down to two minutes. This is not the way to reward a career of dedicated public service.

Last year, the National Audit Office highlighted that Capita had failed to meet three of the six key transition milestones that had been due by March 2025. All those milestones related to scheme design and operational readiness. In October last year—two months before Ministers had to make a final decision on the transition to Capita—the Public Accounts Committee noted that Capita had missed milestones to deliver its IT systems. The Committee called on the Cabinet Office to fully develop contingency plans before making a final decision about whether Capita should take over administration on 1 December last year.

The Minister's Department confirmed that—four months after the transition was completed—Capita had still not met three transition milestones, while one was only partially met. It is only at this point that the Minister has brought forward the contingency plans—the same contingency plans that the Public Accounts Committee recommended months before—but the warning signs were there, and they should have been clear and obvious. Despite that, last November, a full year and a half after the Government took office, they wrote to trade unions, confirming that Ministers were pressing ahead with Capita's contract..

We all agree that it is in everyone's interests that the operational stability of the CSPS be restored as quickly as possible. After all, Capita won the contract because of the failure of the previous MyCSP contract, and clearly a further change would mean more disruption, causing further harm to those who have already been so

[Mike Wood]

badly impacted. Ministers must ensure that Capita meets its contractual obligations consistently, and that any penalty clauses in the contract that can be enforced are enforced, to allow compensation to be paid.

The Minister has some questions to answer. For those who are missing out because of Capita's failings, will the Minister unequivocally commit to delivering a functioning service in the timeframe that he has set himself? Will he confirm that his Department has delivered the standardised mitigation letter that CSPS members can share with lenders to explain their temporary financial difficulties? That was promised last month; has it been delivered? I understand that there will be a commercial session on 28 April to discuss the penalties that Capita is facing, and what officials have called the "wider commercial position". Will the Minister be attending in person? Will he commit to updating the House at the earliest opportunity, following that meeting? Will he elaborate on exactly what his officials mean by Capita's "wider commercial position"?

Finally, and most importantly, what contingency plans has the Minister put in place in case it becomes necessary to terminate Capita's contract for the CSPS, just as he has today terminated its contract for the Royal Mail scheme?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First of all, I echo the shadow Minister's tribute to public servants, including his constituent Chris; I am very sorry to hear about his wife's cancer diagnosis. I welcome what I think was his support for my decision to terminate the Royal Mail statutory pension scheme contract. On the civil service pension scheme, he asked about a plan; I have been implementing a plan, and I have come here to update the House on its implementation. He also talked about the contract. The Capita pension scheme contract was awarded by the previous Government in November 2023 on a long-term basis. That is what I inherited and have been trying to deal with. He talked about the point of transition; what I did at the point of transition was get in the Capita chief executive and the Cabinet Office permanent secretary to go through these matters, and to seek assurances. I am afraid to say that the assurances given have not been met.

The shadow Minister talked about not meeting milestones; I can assure him that milestone payments have been withheld, and I will not hesitate to use the commercial levers in the contract to drive performance. I am absolutely clear about the restoration of service by the end of June; that is what I am holding Capita to. He also talked about MyCSP. I have said that we are reserving rights under both these contracts, with regard to the backlog that was left by MyCSP and how Capita has dealt with it since. In relation to MyCSP, there is also an option to pursue a parent company guarantee, and he can be assured that I will explore all possible legal options to ensure that the service that public servants rightly deserve—not just in retirement, but in very difficult circumstances, such as death in service—is being provided sensitively.

The shadow Minister asked about forthcoming meetings and updates. I will consider the appropriate steps to take, and will update the House, and Members from across the House when they write to me.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Public Accounts Committee has had a number of hearings on this issue, and I am sure the Chair, the hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), will want to ask some questions. First of all, there is a shared responsibility here. MyCSP has responsibilities, but I have to say that the Cabinet Office oversaw this, and there are real questions that the Minister should be asking officials in the Cabinet Office about their degree of responsibility.

We have had so many assurances on this. Are the June assurances really going to be kept to? This is not a one-off issue, is it? The civil service pension scheme has had at least three different problems with three different providers in the past. We have had the teachers' pension scheme, the Royal Mail pension scheme—an awful lot of them. We asked the Cabinet Office permanent secretary whether she would go away and look at having an in-house team built up to administer public sector pensions in a way that might prevent these recurring problems with a variety of private sector providers, whose arrangements always seem to go wrong.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend can rest assured that I have interrogated officials on the situation that I inherited. On the point about assurances and promises not being met, I think the House can say today that when assurances are not met, I take decisive action, including commercial action. My hon. Friend will have seen that with regard to the Royal Mail statutory pension scheme, but also in our withholding milestone payments from Capita. He talked about whether we are looking at insourcing more things. That clearly is the Government's pledge, and our policy going forward. With regard to the Royal Mail statutory pension scheme, we will look at a range of options in both those categories to ensure that we get the very best possible service for those who deserve it and rely on it.

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

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): I thank the Minister for his statement. We have learned today that this contract was awarded two and a half years ago. Capita had two and a half years to prepare for taking on the administration of the civil service scheme. As has been mentioned, the Public Accounts Committee warned in October that Capita was not ready, yet it took on the contract regardless on 1 December. Today we learned also that the Government have terminated another Capita contract, for the Royal Mail pension scheme.

My constituents would like answers to the following questions. How many people on the civil service pension scheme, as of now, have not received payments that they should have had? Why should taxpayers be paying for the surge in His Majesty's Revenue and Customs staff? A hundred and forty staff have come in to sort this out. Surely Capita should be paying for its incompetence. What is the timeline for Capita to clear up all inherited arrears, and is it prioritising hardship and bereavement cases? With regard to the Royal Mail pension scheme, now that Capita has been terminated, what is the plan?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: As I said in my statement, there is a backlog of around 24,000 outstanding pension quotations. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the taxpayer not having to pick up the tab for

Capita's failures. There has been an offer from Capita to cover the costs of the surge team, which I will consider in my broad consideration of all the commercial issues in respect of this contract. My priority is for taxpayers not to have to foot the bill for issues that have been caused by the provider and are not the fault of the scheme beneficiaries.

With regard to the Royal Mail statutory scheme, as I have said, we will now ensure continuity of service, because that is very important. I think the hon. Gentleman will see that I have been very decisive on the future of that contract today. We will look at a range of options for that, but continuity of service is obviously a priority in the short term.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I declare an interest as the chair of the PCS trade union parliamentary group. The Minister just said that there was an offer from Capita. It should not be an offer; it should be a requirement that it covers the recovery costs.

It was outrageous that the civil service scheme was given to Capita after its failure on the teachers' pension scheme, its failure with regard to the NHS data releases, and the failure on the military contract. This failure has affected so many civil service pensioners. It has caused real harm, suffering and stress. It is equally outrageous, I have to say, that its performance has not warranted the removal of the contract altogether. The Minister has today terminated the contract with Royal Mail. Why has he not terminated this contract?

My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) raised the issue of the preparation of in-house provision of the civil service pension scheme. The Minister did not refer to those preparations. Will he meet the trade unions and discuss how we bring the administration of the civil service pension scheme in house, because as sure as night follows day, Capita will fail on this contract, as it has done on every other?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I certainly echo what my right hon. Friend says about it being imperative that taxpayers do not foot the bill for what has gone wrong. On the different contracts, each obviously has to be considered on its own merits, but the House can be assured that on each of the contracts for which the Cabinet Office is responsible, I keep all contractual options open. With regard to his point about optionality and going in-house in future, I will certainly ensure that the PCS trade union gets the appropriate ministerial meeting.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement, and for meeting me to discuss this issue. As he is aware, the Public Accounts Committee has held multiple sessions with Capita on the broader civil service pension scheme and the problems that scheme members are having accessing their pensions. As numerous colleagues from across the House will have experienced, some of these cases are tragic and deeply distressing. People have not been able to get statements, or even payments, at the most important points of their life. Does the Minister have confidence that his team will be able to manage Capita and rapidly provide civil service pensioners with the scheme that they deserve? Secondly, what reassurance can he give

Royal Mail pensioners that their pension scheme will be managed properly during the transition and afterwards, either in-house or by an external provider?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I can certainly give an assurance to Royal Mail pensioners, who may be worried about the uncertainty, that we will do all we can to ensure continuity of service. I certainly have confidence in my team, and the surge of about 140 officials into Capita has made a significant difference. Equally, I will clearly have to consider very carefully what the position is at the end of June 2026, and how important that team's remaining in place, for whatever length of time, is to the level of service.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I should declare that I have preserved benefits in the CSPS, and that I am a member of the PCS trade union.

I thank the Minister for his decisive action in terminating the contract for the Royal Mail pension scheme, and for the ongoing work that he is doing with regard to the civil service pension scheme. He has flagged that there are hard-working public servants who have given their service to the state for many years, and who have been failed when they have looked to retire and to get their pension benefits. I hope that he will hold Capita's feet to the fire; many of us will be keeping our eyes on the Minister as he does. Will he prioritise those who are entitled to bereavement payments under the death-in-service part of the CSPS? This is a very difficult time for them, and they may not have actually been employed; it is dependants, and sometimes children, who are entitled to these payments.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on the importance of bereavement payments, because they are made at such a vulnerable time in people's lives. The House should be fully aware that I will hold Capita robustly to account on its various contracts. As I am sure that the House will appreciate, in the case of the civil service pension scheme, I have inherited quite a long-term contract, but I will continue to make sure that I reserve all contractual rights on the contracts that we oversee at the Cabinet Office.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Like other MPs here, I have constituents who have dedicated years to public service. One, a prison officer, was stabbed and assaulted in his work, and then had the privilege of being at Camp Zeist to supervise the imprisonment of the Lockerbie bomber while they were on trial. I have another constituent who is caring for her mother, who is the beneficiary of a pension and is having palliative care for stage 4 cancer. The Minister has given a very good overview of what is happening, and he talked about the changes that have been made to call times, but one of the themes coming through is about accessing the portal. That issue is leading to a real erosion of trust. If people cannot even get access to the system, it is a real problem. Could he give us an update on that?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Lady speaks powerfully about the very vulnerable situations in which her constituents find themselves, and I entirely share her concerns about the portal. I referred to the statistics on call times in my response to the shadow Minister, and to

[*Nick Thomas-Symonds*]

the average call time. I regularly monitor performance. Where there are particularly egregious examples of poor service, Members should write to me and draw them to my attention. I have mentioned the June 2026 deadline for the resumption of normal service, which includes having a functioning portal. There are people who may not have reached the end of their career, but want to access their updated benefits, and they should be able to do so.

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): A few weeks ago, I raised in this Chamber an issue affecting my constituent, Andrew Mackay, whose wife Katy passed away at the end of September. Both Andrew and Katy worked for Border Force for 40 years, and Andrew has been in contact with Capita numerous times, but with no luck. I have written to the Minister, and I thank him and his team for their engagement with me. After making numerous attempts over several months, my constituent Andrew is still waiting for Katy's pension. We hear about the prioritisation of bereavement cases, but this has not happened in my constituent's case. What would the Minister say to my constituent, and to Capita, to get this case resolved?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First of all, I say to my hon. Friend's constituent, Andrew, that I am very sorry to hear about the loss of Katy, and I thank them for their decades of important service to Border Force. In order to take this case forward, it would probably be sensible for my hon. Friend to share the details in a meeting with the Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Test (Satvir Kaur). We would be delighted to facilitate that.

Charlie Dewhurst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Like colleagues from across the House, I have constituents—veterans and former public servants—who have been treated appallingly by Capita, and who have been unable to access the money that they paid in. The Minister previously promised a standardised mitigation letter that those individuals could take to lenders, so that they did not necessarily have to lend at a commercial rate. I appreciate that there is £7.2 million in interest-free loans as well. Has the Minister delivered on his promise of a standardised mitigation letter, and will he go further, if required, on the £7.2 million in interest-free loans?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, more than £7.2 million is available. I think the standardised mitigation letter was raised previously by another Member. I will certainly take that away and see what progress has been made.

Emma Foody (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement, for his engagement with me, and for the extensive work that has been done to recover from the mess that MyCSP and Capita have made of the CSPS. Civil servants have dedicated their lives to public service, only to be let down in their retirement, and Members from across the House all have absolutely appalling examples of the real-world impact. First, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that nothing like this can ever happen again? Secondly, is there any scope for extending the compensation arrangements to individuals who have been unable to retire, through no fault of their own?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I, too, am grateful for the engagement with my hon. Friend, and we are certainly looking at how we learn the lessons of this matter. On her second point about the specific issue of compensation, a complaints procedure is available, as I think I have discussed with her previously, but there is also a very broad point here: I am determined that we will pursue every contractual lever to ensure that the taxpayer does not pick up the tab for the failure of MyCSP or Capita.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I have constituents in Boston and Skegness who have suffered because of the ridiculous and appalling failures of Capita under these two contracts, and they are not the only contracts on which it is failing. To what extent has the Minister looked at the bigger financial picture at Capita? Last year, it earned revenue of almost £1.5 billion from the Government. It has contracts worth over £7 billion, yet it has just disclosed in its results that it has lost over £150 million. It has debts of £140 million, and its market cap is only £350 million. Given how much outsourcing work it does for so many British citizens, to what extent are the Government preparing for plan B in case of a financial crisis at Capita?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: To be fair to the hon. Gentleman, he raises a reasonable point, and we are certainly monitoring Capita's general position. Capita holds a total of 85 contracts across the public sector—39 with central Government and 46 with the wider public sector. He and the House can be assured that we monitor performance across the whole portfolio, and we obviously consider each contract individually. As he says, it is hugely important always to be looking at providers' financial position, because continuity of service is so important for those who, in the case of the civil service pension scheme, have paid in their own money over decades and deserve dignity in retirement.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I have been contacted by several constituents who have experienced challenges and delays in accessing their pensions via the scheme that Capita has managed, or should I say mismanaged, for some time, including Bindu, Duncan and Ann-Marie. Tony, a civil servant for 40 years, should be looking forward to a well-earned retirement this year, but he has not been able to access his information on the portal. He cannot get through on the phone, and one occasion spent four hours trying to speak to an adviser before giving up.

I am sure the Minister agrees that people find it extremely worrying not to be able to plan for their retirement and understand what is ahead of them. Does he agree that this situation is completely unacceptable? Can he outline what quick action will take place to hold Capita to account, bring about improvements and ensure my constituents can look forward to their well-earned retirement?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is right that this is totally unacceptable, and that is why I have put in place the recovery plan and why the Cabinet Office is withholding milestone payments. On the four-hour wait, I would be very grateful if, with his constituent's permission, he gave me the details, including the date, because I would like to take that up.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I am delighted to hear the determination with which the Minister intends to approach this and the messages he is sending to Capita, because like many others, I have a mailbox full of civil service pensioners unable to access their funds, many of them in hardship. One woman at the moment fears she may lose her home simply because she cannot get a response from Capita—I have asked for a meeting. Is the Minister aware of any plans to prioritise those in severe hardship, or has he asked Capita to do so, because there seems to be no attempt on its behalf to do that?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The surge team of about 140 officials who have gone into Capita are certainly looking at prioritising the most urgent and vulnerable cases. On the hon. Member's specific case, I would be very grateful if she wrote directly to me about it, and I will certainly look at it.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I welcome the statement from the Minister. The way that Capita has treated my constituents, such as Jill and the many others who have contacted my office, who have dedicated their lives to public service is nothing short of shameful. This is yet another example of how this Government are sorting out the mess created by the last Government. Can the Minister update the House on the number of hardship loans that have been issued by the Government and the number of civil service pension scheme members who have already received the maximum amount, and how the Government will continue to help them?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the contract we inherited. On the hardship loans, we have already provided over £7.2 million in interest-free transitional support loans to more than 1,300 members, but that is in no sense a cap. We continue to proactively drive uptake, and I encourage all Members across the House to do the same.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): I thank the Minister for his statement. Teresa and Alistair cannot get information or statements on their pension, while Nicola's payments keep being delayed, damaging her finances. Can the Minister reassure my constituents that no civil servant will be left without timely pension payments? How will the Government restore civil servants' confidence that the pensions they earn are secure and will be managed fairly?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The situations that the hon. Gentleman's constituents have faced is exactly why the dedicated recovery team was put in place. I will be holding Capita to account on the timetable in the recovery plan for restoring service by the end of June this year. On the cases he has raised, I would be very interested if he could write to me with the details and dates of exactly what happened.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's statement, especially the news of the termination of the Royal Mail pension scheme contract to Capita. As he knows, Capita's management of the civil service pension scheme has been an absolute shambles. I have constituents who cannot meet their mortgage payments,

are having to defer their retirements and are not receiving the compensation they deserve. This is one in a very long list of failures, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) outlined. Can the Minister explain why we keep awarding contracts to Capita, how it represents value for money for the taxpayer and how we are meeting our manifesto commitment of the biggest wave of insourcing in a generation?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We are very committed to delivering that manifesto commitment, and the Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister will be setting out more about that in due course, following his speech earlier in the year.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the poor performance under this contract. I have taken a decision to terminate the contract for the Royal Mail statutory pension scheme, and she and Members across the House can be assured that, under this contract, we will robustly be holding Capita to account. As she rightly says, when people have missed mortgage payments or other things have happened to them through no fault of their own, that is completely unacceptable.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Capita has failed time and again, yet it is constantly awarded more contracts. Sally, one of my constituents, had been told multiple times that her lump sum payment was coming or had already been paid, but it was not paid. She and other civil servants would have been worried to hear in March that Capita is to be awarded a £700 million contract for the civil service payroll. Is that not just another example of how when Capita fails, the Government award it yet more of our money?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: It is absolutely essential that I make the point that each individual contract has to be considered on its own merits, which is exactly what I have been doing. On procurement by other Departments, one thing I am certainly doing is ensuring that the Cabinet Office shares the lessons learned from the recent transition of the civil service pension scheme, and I will be ensuring that those lessons are certainly made available right across Government.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I thank the Minister not only for the statement, but for his engagement with us over the last six months. A constituent of mine applied for her MyCSP pension quote back in August and finally got the quote last week, but she is still a considerable distance away from actually getting money into her bank account. Will the Minister consider ensuring that the recovery team is in place until all the people caught up in this backlog have money in the bank?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, I agree. I will clearly have to make a judgment, but I do not intend to withdraw the team if that would result in a deterioration in service. I will obviously make that judgment very carefully, but having said that, I have been very clear about the June 2026 deadline for the restoration of the proper service under this contract, and I will be holding Capita to it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers on the statement—no one doubts his commitment to try to find a solution. The statement outlined some 1,500 complaints from MPs about their constituents' pensions being withheld, and a number of those complaints are mine. He highlighted the availability, for people awaiting their pensions, of an interest-free loan of £5,000, or more in exceptional circumstances. Those who have been waiting 16 months for their pensions and are more than £5,000 behind on their mortgage are in a precarious situation, so will the Minister uplift the amount of the interest-free loans and make payments available immediately?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On that final point, if the hon. Member could write to me about precisely what that situation is, I would be more than happy to look at it. Performance on MP correspondence is appalling, and I am not willing to tolerate it. Members across this House are speaking for their constituents who are in very vulnerable situations. I have given very clear instructions about this being dealt with, and in my view it must be dealt with out of respect for this House and the people who work here.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Before I ask my question, I would just like to welcome back Andy. He gives us a great deal of service in this Chamber. It is good to see him back. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."]

I welcome the action the Government have taken and the Minister's statement today. I thank him for his engagement with me over the past six months. It is clear that Capita has shamefully failed many Portsmouth North civil servants. Kirsty is still waiting for ill health compensation. Christine is waiting months for her widow's pension payments. Louise submitted request forms and, since November, has heard nothing. Anne, after 48 years of public service and following the sad death of her husband, has been unable to get any clarity on her pension forecast. These are not numbers on a spreadsheet,

but real people and real lives. On behalf of these women, I ask the Minister: when will the civil service pension scheme finally be stabilised?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I, too, welcome back Andy and thank him for his service.

I say to my hon. Friend and those four constituents that what I have said in the recovery plan and what is part of the recovery plan is for the contractual level of service to be back by June. If that is not delivered, I reserve all rights under this contract with Capita.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) in welcoming Andy back to the Speaker's Office. He is a shoulder to cry on after Harlow Town's recent results.

I thank the Paymaster General for his statement, which is hugely important to residents of Harlow, including veterans and those who have worked tirelessly over the years in the postal service and the civil service. In one of my previous roles working for a homelessness charity, I have seen the devastating effect that late pension payments can have on people's lives. We should not forget the human impact of these issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts) recognised the issues with teachers' pensions. My constituent, Carol, constantly comes to speak to me about the issues she is having with her teacher pension. I recommend that the Minister looks at that as well. What will the Paymaster General do to ensure we get these pensions right and to hold Capita to account, and will he consider insourcing these pensions if necessary, to show that this Labour Government are on the side of hard-working pensioners?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: We are absolutely on the side of those pensioners. The important thing in the immediate term is the stabilisation of the service. That is why I will be holding Capita robustly to account on the recovery plan.

I am afraid to say to my hon. Friend that I cannot help him with the results of Harlow Town!

Point of Order: Rectification Procedure

2.2 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Alberto Costa on a point of order in connection with the code of conduct, to rectify a failure to declare.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to apologise to the House for failing to declare an interest during a debate on 16 July 2025 about the Committee on Standards' third report of the 2024-25 Session, which concerns the Register of Interests of Members' Staff. During the debate, I inadvertently failed to declare a relevant interest: I employ my wife, who is subject to the rules about the Register of Interests of Members' Staff. This was in breach of the House's rules and I apologise to the House for this error.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. There will be no further points of order on this issue.

Point of Order

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I first associate myself with the comments made with regard to our colleague who stands at your left-hand shoulder?

Madam Deputy Speaker, you may recall that a number of weeks ago, in my capacity as the secretary of the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group, I raised the allegations of the smearing of journalists by the organisation Labour Together during the period when the hon. Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons) was the director of that organisation. At that point, the Prime Minister referred the matter to the ethics adviser, Sir Laurie Magnus. I have been in correspondence with Laurie Magnus, after he produced his report to the Prime Minister very quickly after the reference.

I was in correspondence with Sir Laurie Magnus because I was informed that he failed to call any witnesses during that inquiry, even though written evidence was

submitted to him by one of the journalists who was the victim of the smears. I wrote to him as he had informed the victim that he had not seen the evidence because his secretariat had not provided it to him. The journalist had written to Sir Laurie Magnus in advance to say he was submitting evidence. He submitted that evidence and it was not provided to him by his secretariat. The secretariat to the inquiry is the Cabinet Office. I wrote to express my concerns to Sir Laurie Magnus that his inquiry could not be complete, as he had not seen that evidence. I therefore urged him to withdraw the conclusions of the inquiry and to consider the evidence that has been provided to him. He has refused.

I have kept the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee informed, but of course it cannot take up individual cases. It appears that the only route for me to secure the truth of this whole episode is for the Government to set up an independent inquiry. I have requested that in correspondence with the Prime Minister and others at least five times. We have tried the formal routes. We now need a full inquiry.

The reason I raise this issue on behalf of the NUJ is because smearing journalists in that way destroys their careers. For at least one of the journalists concerned, I think it has put his safety at risk as well—it is as serious as that. We have Members on the Treasury Bench today. I want to put this issue on the record. In addition, through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to ask those on the Treasury Bench to take this issue back to the Prime Minister; I urge them to press upon him the importance of this issue and the need for an independent inquiry.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the right hon. Member for his point of order. I understand that he has informed the hon. Member for Makerfield (Josh Simons) in advance. The right hon. Member raises a serious and important issue. He has, I know, already followed up directly with the Prime Minister's ethics adviser on this matter, and he has now placed on record his request that the Government consider establishing an independent inquiry. That is a matter for the Government, rather than the Chair. If he requires any further advice on pursuing this issue, he may wish to seek guidance from the Clerks.

Criminal Proceedings (Juror Absence)

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

2.7 pm

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to provide that any criminal proceedings set down for trial may not be adjourned by reason of absence of or discharge of a juror where the number of members of the jury is not reduced below nine; and for connected purposes.

I am introducing a Bill today that seeks to address a gap in our justice system—one that has caused profound and lasting harm to victims. The Bill proposes that any criminal proceedings set down for trial should not be adjourned solely due to the absence or discharge of a juror, provided that the number of jurors does not fall below nine. It is a practical and measured reform, but one rooted in a deeply human story. The reason for the Bill comes from the truly harrowing experience of one of my constituents. I will not name her today, but she has consented to me sharing her story so that others might be spared the same injustice.

At a young age, she was the victim of an appalling crime—one that no person, let alone a child, should ever have to endure. In time, she came to realise that she was not alone. There were many other victims: children who had suffered at the hands of a man in a position of power and trust—a man who abused that trust in the most abhorrent way.

Years later, my constituent and others showed immense courage. They made the brave decision to speak out and to relive their trauma in pursuit of justice. Eventually, a trial date was set. That date represented more than a legal proceeding. It was their chance to be heard, their chance for accountability and their chance for justice. When the day of the trial finally arrived, all the victims attended. It was, as Members can imagine, an emotional and deeply traumatic step. They had waited years for that moment. The defendant by then was elderly and in poor health, but he was also present.

On the first day of the trial, one juror fell ill. However, there were still enough jurors for the trial to proceed because the legal minimum was met. My constituent

recounts that the judge consulted the defendant, who unsurprisingly stated that he did not wish for the trial to go ahead. What is more troubling, though, is the fact that the views of the victims were not sought or considered; they were not asked whether they wanted it to proceed, despite everything they had endured to reach that point. Instead, the judge ruled that the trial would be postponed. A new date was set, but that was over a year later. Five weeks before that date arrived, the defendant died.

In this case, justice delayed was justice denied. My constituent will now never have her day in court. She will never stand to testify to the horrors she endured and will never see the man who caused her such unimaginable pain face justice. She is not alone; many other victims in this case were also let down.

The Bill seeks to ensure that such an injustice does not happen again. The Government are rightly working to reduce court delays and progress is being made, and I congratulate the Minister for Courts and Legal Services for all the work she is doing to see change in this area. However, as things stand, there remain victims and, indeed, defendants on remand whose cases risk being delayed unnecessarily for reasons like this, and that must change.

Of course, there will always be exceptional circumstances in which a judge may need to exercise discretion and delay proceedings. The Bill would not remove that judicial judgment, but it would establish a clear presumption that where the minimum number of jurors remains, the trial should proceed. At the heart of this issue are not procedures, but people—people who have already waited too long, suffered too much and deserve better from our justice system. This is a modest reform, but it carries significant consequences. It is about efficiency, fairness and, above all, justice.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Sally Jameson, Joe Morris, Emma Foody, Anneliese Midgley, Laurence Turner, Shaun Davies, Katrina Murray, Alex McIntyre, Adam Thompson, Jonathan Hinder, Andrew Cooper and Sarah Russell present the Bill.

Sally Jameson accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 June, and to be printed (Bill 430).

Pension Schemes Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Clause 40

CERTAIN SCHEMES PROVIDING MONEY PURCHASE BENEFITS: SCALE AND ASSET ALLOCATION

2.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): I beg to move,

That this House insists on its disagreement with the Lords in their amendments 15 to 24, 27, 30 to 34, 36, 38 to 42, 83 and 88, insists on its amendments 88A and 88C to the words restored to the Bill by that disagreement, does not insist on its amendment 88B to the words so restored to the Bill, but proposes amendments (a) to (j) to the words so restored to the Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): With this it will be convenient to consider the following Government motions:

That this House disagrees with Lords amendments 37B and 37C but proposes amendments (a) and (b) in lieu.

That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 35B but proposes amendments (a) and (b) in lieu.

That this House insists on its disagreement with Lords amendments 77 and 85 but proposes amendments (a) to (c) in lieu.

Torsten Bell: I thank Members and peers for the continued scrutiny of the Bill before us. Our task today is to focus on the limited outstanding areas of disagreement, although that should not detract from the consensus behind this Bill—behind the case for a better pension landscape that sees bigger, better pension schemes focused on delivering stronger returns for savers. On the issues that remain before us, I hope that Members and peers will see that we have listened to the points they have raised and brought forward amendments that directly address what we have heard, while of course holding to the core principles of delivering against the Labour manifesto, which was clear on our policy intent around scale and productive investment.

First, I turn to the reserve power on asset allocation. Last week I set out the Government's case for such a power at some length, and I will spare the House a full repetition today—*[Interruption.]* I know, I know, but there is so much more to discuss. We will not have time to discuss the hair of the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) if I offer a full statement.

In brief, since hon. Members have asked, there is a well-evidenced collective action problem in the defined-contribution pensions market. Providers want to diversify their asset allocations in their members' long-term interests and in the interests of better pensions for savers, but they are clear publicly—and even more emphatically in private—that market dynamics, which focus on minimising cost rather than maximising long-term value for savers, are the single biggest barrier to doing so. That is not a theoretical risk; it is exactly why so little progress was made against the Mansion House compact under the last Government. The reserve power exists for the sole purpose of solving this problem.

Last week, we brought forward changes to make that absolutely explicit by writing the industry-set Mansion House accord targets into primary legislation through

the 10% and 5% caps, and requiring any regulations to operate neutrally across asset classes. These were designed to make it clear in the Bill that the power can be used only in line with what the industry itself has committed to. The cap prohibits any move beyond the accord targets and the neutrality requirement rules out the possibility that any Government could direct investments into a particular asset or asset class.

As is plain, however, we have not yet reached agreement across the two Houses. Rather than simply restating our position today, the Government are bringing forward a further package of changes.

First, we are bringing forward the current sunset date for the reserve power from 2035 to 2032. The Mansion House accord commits the industry to reaching its targets by 2030, and bringing forward the sunset clause aligns the power more closely with that timeline. If the power has not been exercised by the end of 2032, it falls away entirely. Secondly, because the power has only one purpose, we are providing that it may be exercised only once.

Thirdly—I want the House to understand the significance of this—we are providing for not just the power but any effects of it to fully fall away at the end of 2035. That goes beyond the sunset clause I have just described and means that even if the power has been used, the entire framework and any requirements on schemes will fall away at the end of 2035. This timeline reflects the fact that once the cultural shift has occurred and the impacts of the Mansion House accord are embedded, the collective action problem falls away. At that point, other elements of the Bill—greater scale and the impacts of the value for money framework—will help to sustain the change.

I want to return to a point made by the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) in our previous debate. She observed correctly that the Bill referred to assets held in default funds as a whole, whereas the Mansion House accord applies only to main default funds. As the policy is intended to reflect the accord, the legislation would ideally use the same language, so we have tabled amendments to ensure that that is the case throughout the relevant provisions and have retabled the percentage cap with the same wording. I am grateful to the hon. Lady for pressing that point last week.

Let me be clear that the House today is being asked to consider a reserve power that is highly constrained and narrowly focused on solving a very specific problem. It is capped at the accord targets and provides for absolute neutrality among private asset classes. The Government cannot direct investments. The power explicitly applies only to main default funds, more explicitly matching the language used in the accord. The power's timeline also matches tightly that of the accord. It can be used only once and lapses entirely in 2035 if not used; even if used, which is unlikely, the entire regime is repealed at the end of 2035. On top of all that, it remains subject to the savers' interest test, the affirmative procedure and the statutory reporting requirements, both before and after any regulations are made.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on stewarding the Bill with such expertise, and I very much hope that the cultural change that he is hoping for sticks and that we do not just get an unwinding of the repatriation of

[Liam Byrne]

UK investment. A necessary corollary of what he is proposing is a fiduciary duty and a fiduciary code that give pension fund trustees real clarity in investing in a wide range of investments that are good for the long-term health of the savings they are stewarding. It was unfortunate that the other place rejected the Government's amendment that would have allowed a new statutory code to be implemented. Will the Minister confirm that the technical working group that he has set up to revise that code will proceed, and will he commit to bringing forward further amendments to future legislation to give effect to the ambition that he set out in response to my new clause 17?

Torsten Bell: I share my right hon. Friend's frustration about developments in the Lords on those matters, not least because some of those who voted against amendments that would have introduced statutory guidance, as he says, have spent years calling for exactly that—but that is a matter for them. The Government will proceed on work to draft that guidance. The technical working group is well under way and is doing good work to provide clarity to the industry. We will come forward with proposals to put the guidance on a statutory footing in the months and years ahead.

As I was saying, the timeline tightly matches that of the accord. I hope that everybody can see that the framework is a long way from the characterisation of this power that we have occasionally heard. I understand that some Members of this House and the other place would prefer it if the power did not exist at all. I respect that view, but I do not share it. The evidence for the collective action problem is clear—we have lived it—and I have listened but heard no alternative proposal to address it. The consequences of not addressing it fall on pension savers—the people who rely on their defined-contribution savings for a comfortable retirement. That is not a risk that the Government are prepared to take.

The elected House has now considered this question twice. On both occasions, it has overwhelmingly endorsed the case for the reserve power to deliver our manifesto commitments in this area. The Government have listened to the concerns raised in the other place, and have responded not with warm words but with real concessions, through changes to primary legislation that directly address the arguments made. I hope that MPs and peers will now accept that the Government have moved significantly and provided the assurance they have been seeking.

Lords amendment 35B would require the Secretary of State, when making regulations across the scale measures and those for default arrangements, to have regard to

“the benefits of competition among providers of pension schemes”. The Government of course support the importance of competition as the market moves towards scale, and have done so in the Bill's provisions. The market is already highly competitive, and the new entrant pathway is designed to ensure that it remains so. The same goal is reflected in a scheme's ability to open new default arrangements.

However, we have heard the arguments that have been made during debates, and I recognise the desire in the other place to see that commitment in the Bill. This is why I have tabled amendment (b) in lieu of Lords

amendment 35B. It sets out that the Secretary of State, in setting regulations in respect of both the scale measures and those relating to default arrangements, must have regard to the importance of competition and innovation. The amendment in lieu delivers on the proposals from the other place, but with an appropriately holistic approach to the issues to which a Secretary of State will need to have regard in the years ahead. That reflects that our ultimate focus is, of course, on delivering the best outcomes for members, of which competition in the market is one important driver. Under the Government's amendment, regulations must have regard not just to scale, but to competition and innovation, alongside effective governance. The explanatory notes will make that clear.

On Lords amendment 37B, the case for scale has been made, and both Houses have broadly agreed with the benefits that it brings. Indeed, all main parties are on the record as recognising the key role of scale in delivering better outcomes for savers. We all made those arguments, recognising that moves towards scale would always mean some schemes exiting the market because we collectively prioritise the need to deliver for those who work hard to save for retirement, and we must ensure that they are saving into schemes that can deliver better outcomes.

Scale drives lower costs, better governance, investment expertise and a balance sheet that can provide a more diverse portfolio for savers, improving overall outcomes for them in the longer term. That focus on scale was explicitly laid out in our manifesto, and the evidence for the approach we are taking was detailed in the pensions investment review. The Lords amendment pays too little regard to that evidence and that manifesto. It would also be unworkable in practice, as it would enmesh regulators in years of legal proceedings while leaving providers and savers in limbo.

However, I have listened to the argument made in this House and the other place that the innovation some smaller schemes offer members should not be dismissed. I absolutely agree, which is a key reason our approach to ensuring that scale is achieved has been so pragmatic.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I do not claim to be a huge expert on pensions, which may be why, rather than focusing on the point last week, I made comments about the hair of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier). I will not do so again—but it is fantastic hair.

Pensioners in my constituency are passionate about ensuring that they get the best return on their savings—that is hugely important—and that their pensions are secure, as the Paymaster General said in his statement. What reassurance can the Minister give them that the provisions he has set out today and last week will give them the best returns and security?

Torsten Bell: As always, my hon. Friend asks an important question. As I have said, the entire focus of the Bill is on ensuring that we drive up returns for savers. I am sure that he has already read all 200-odd pages of the extensive impact assessment, which sets out clearly that we would expect an average earner who saves over their lifetime, in line with auto-enrolment levels, to see higher returns of around £29,000 to their pension pot when they head towards retirement. That is

not an inconsequential amount when we want to ensure that future generations can trust the system to deliver them a comfortable retirement in the years ahead.

As I was saying, the Lords amendments in this area are unworkable, but we must recognise the importance of innovation. That is why we have taken our pragmatic approach. The evidence suggests that the benefits of scale are achieved once a threshold ranging from £25 billion to £50 billion of assets is reached. The scale requirements in the Bill not only target the bottom end of that range—£25 billion—but provide a long timeline for schemes to reach it, especially given that this is a fast-growing market. Smaller schemes require only £10 billion of assets in 2030 to qualify for the transition pathway.

To provide further reassurance, I have tabled amendment (a) in lieu of Lords amendment 37B to require the Secretary of State to publish a report about the effects of pension schemes consolidation and the extent to which innovative product designs are adopted or maintained following consolidation activity, as well as any barriers that may exist to preserving those features. The timing of the report, which is required to be published within 12 months, will ensure that the Government are then able to take necessary action in advance of the scale measures being commenced in 2030.

On Lords amendments 77 and 85, the Government agree with the points made during the Bill's passage regarding the importance of transparency around, and clear accounting for, public service pensions. I discussed those issues yesterday with Baroness Neville-Rolfe, who tabled the amendments. I completely agree with her that it is crucial that the future cost of payments from unfunded pension schemes is understood and taken into account in Government decision making. That applies to the Treasury in aggregate, as well as to individual organisations making decisions about the nature and level of staffing. We will continue to ensure that accounting and budgetary processes support this.

The Government invite the House to accept our amendment (a) in lieu, which recognises the important principle that Parliament, policymakers and the public should be able to see clearly the long-term cost of unfunded public service pension schemes. The amendment requires the Government Actuary to produce within 12 months a document setting out its analysis of the long-term impacts of public sector pensions, covering both expenditure on benefits and income from member contributions. The document must be provided to the Treasury and the Office for Budget Responsibility, and the former is required to make it available to Parliament. That approach is focused on the evidence base, using the Government Actuary to produce impartial numbers to aid understanding and debates on this issue.

I hope that Members will have heard our serious engagement with the issues raised by peers and by Opposition parties in this House. We are committed to delivering the policy intent in the Bill, given its crucial role in driving better outcomes for savers and the important place given to these pension reforms in our 2024 manifesto. We have tabled significant amendments to address the specific issues raised, aiming to further reinforce the consensus on the Bill that has been evident since its Second Reading in this House. On that basis, I hope that Members will be happy to support our amendments.

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

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What a difference a week makes. When the hon. Gentleman rose to conclude our debate last Wednesday, he delivered from the Dispatch Box what I can only describe as a tirade. Serious and considered concerns—not just from me and my hon. Friends, but from noble Lords and many respected people across the industry—were met with accusations. We were told that those concerns were “nonsense on stilts”. He said that I had been “infected” by my party. If by that he meant that I have strong opinions—that I believe in a smaller state because Governments do not have all the answers and often need to get out of the way—then I must break the news to him that I have held those views for many years. I came to Parliament after a career in business. I knew my views then, and I still know them now.

Last week I thought that the Minister could and should do better, and I am glad that since then he has. His tone has shifted, and I am grateful for the discussions he has had with me and my team. His engagement has been constructive, and we have indeed made progress.

Turning to the amendments tabled since our last debate, I first welcome the Government's commitment on the local government pension scheme. A faster and wider review of the triennial valuation by the Government Actuary's Department is sensible and significant. If the review is to be meaningful, it must focus on what actually drives employer contribution rates, and we welcome that the Government have now recognised that.

Secondly, the Government have committed, in their amendment in lieu of Baroness Neville-Rolfe's amendment 77, to examine the costs and sustainability of public sector pensions. That too is welcome. That review should consider questions of intergenerational fairness, long-term sustainability and how best to protect the benefits already promised to people, particularly at a time when demands on the state are rising and taxpayers are being asked to contribute more than ever.

2.30 pm

Now to the question of scale, the Bill assumes that if schemes offer a strong proposition and good member outcomes, there is nothing to stop them growing. We disagree; it is not that simple. For instance, it is exceptionally difficult to win new business in today's market without already being an incumbent or large insurer. Market structure, capital requirements and regulatory constraints all act as significant barriers to growth.

While pursuing the objective of scale, the Government must avoid entrenching advantage at the expense of performance. That would not serve the interests of members. It is on that basis that we tabled our amendments in the other place. The intention behind the amendments—indeed, the intention of the other place—was to preserve the Government's policy objective and connect it to the underlying aim, which is not scale in its own right but improving outcomes for members. Scale is a means to that end, but it is not the only means.

Size alone does not equal success. Take football clubs as an example: a larger club may have greater resources, a bigger stadium, more expensive players and larger crowds, but none of that guarantees results on the pitch. I am told that one need look no further than Tottenham Hotspur to see that. We welcome the Government's amendment to ensure that when regulations are developed,

member outcomes will be placed front and centre, and returns, not just scale, will count. What the Government have brought forward today is not perfect, but it is a significant step in the right direction.

The review amendment is also welcome. It introduces a post-legislative reporting requirement on scale, which will allow this House to hold the Government to account for the real-world impact of these reforms.

Unfortunately, that is where our agreement ends, and I suspect the Minister knows that, so let us turn directly to the elephant in the room: mandation. The Minister has advanced a number of arguments in its defence, and I will address them in turn. First, he said that this is a natural extension of the Mansion House agreement. It is not. A voluntary agreement between willing participants is one thing; a legal requirement imposed across an entire sector is another.

Secondly, the Minister has said that this is merely a reserve power—and one that the Government have no intention of using. But a reserve power does not sit harmlessly on the shelf. It shapes behaviour, and I think, in truth, the Minister accepts that. He has said as much to me before—that the power will achieve its ends without even needing to be turned on, so to speak, because the moment that a voluntary agreement is backed by the threat of law, it ceases to be voluntary in any meaningful sense.

That leads us to the Minister's central claim that mandation is necessary to solve a collective action problem—that while the sector recognises the case for higher return investments, no individual scheme is willing to move first. Now, that is a serious argument, but mandation is the wrong conclusion. He says that industry agrees with him on mandation, but that is not the case. The industry agrees with the diagnosis—the problem I have just set out—not his solution. A collective action problem is not in itself a justification for state compulsion. It is a signal that incentives are misaligned, and when incentives are misaligned, the answer is not to override the system but to fix it, to make it rational to be the first mover or an early adopter.

The truth is that parts of the solution to this problem are in the Bill. The pensions dashboard will give savers visibility and, with it, agency. The value for money framework will help employers choose schemes that they can justify to their employees on the basis of returns, not just fees. Those are ways to tackle the problem through informed choice, competitive pressure and a market that works, not through direction from the centre by the dead hand of the state.

Today we have also heard the Minister reach for one last defence—and strangely late in the day. He claimed that mandation was in the Labour party manifesto. It was not. There is no mention of mandation, no reference to a reserve power, no suggestion of asset-allocation powers of this kind. The Labour manifesto did talk about adopting reforms to workplace pensions to deliver better outcomes, but let us be clear: mandation does not do that. It undermines fiduciary duty, puts trustees in an impossible position—forced to choose between their legal duty to members and direction from Ministers—and could lead to lower returns.

The Minister may be planning to say in his wrap-up that the Government already intervene and that there are all manner of regulations shaping trustee behaviour,

and of course there are, but there is a fundamental difference: regulation protects the process; mandation dictates the outcomes. That is the line that this Bill crosses. This cannot be justified, still less legitimised, by a manifesto commitment that was, in fact, never made.

I do appreciate the Minister's attempt to offer an olive branch on mandation—several olive branches, in fact. Last week an amendment was tabled to constrain his originally unlimited and undefined mandation power that would have meant he could direct up to 100% of default pension fund savings to be invested in assets of his choice. It was extraordinary. He recognised that and amended the power to limit it to up to 10% requirement for investment in private markets and up to 5% in the UK. He also took some steps to limit the Government's ability to cherry-pick specific sectors or geographies.

This week we have seen a flurry of concessions. There have been revisions to the sunset clause. First, the date when the mandation power lapses, if it has not been used, is being brought forward from 2035 to 2032. Secondly, the entire regime will be repealed at the end of 2035. So, as drafted, the mandation threat will not hang over the sector indefinitely, but the fact is that once this power is on the statute book, amending it—for instance, to extend those dates—is a whole lot easier than if the Government had never even crossed this Rubicon.

The Minister has also introduced an amendment to limit the Government to only exercising the mandation power once, giving them just one opportunity to set the asset-allocation requirement. I recognise that that gives more certainty to industry, as there is less risk of moving goal posts. He has also updated from last week the amendment to constrain the scope of mandation to main default funds, rather than all defaults. That was a problem that I set out last Wednesday. I believe it was inadvertent, and as he acknowledged in his remarks earlier, he has amended it, so I appreciate that.

Like last week's amendments, the amendments before us today make the mandation power in the Bill less bad. They constrain it in terms of timing and scope, but they do not solve the problem, because the problem is not the percentage, the threshold or the duration of the power but the principle. If something is wrong in principle, it does not become right in smaller doses.

Mandation will not guarantee better returns, contrary to what the Minister continues to claim. It may force trustees to take decisions that are not in savers' best interests—decisions driven not by judgment or duty but by direction. When fiduciary judgment is replaced with political instruction in this way, it does not strengthen outcomes but puts them at risk.

The Minister and I agree that we want to see more investment by pension funds in the UK, and we want to see better returns for savers. The industry backs that aim too; that is why it did the Mansion House Accord. But to be clear, when he says that he has industry backing for this, there is a distinction to be made between the industry saying that it agrees that there is a problem and is willing to work to solve it and the solution that the Minister is seeking to impose. He put the fear into the industry that this Bill may fall and made all manner of threats to pressure it to come into line. But I say to him this: I will not be cowed by him, and I have been told to my face that the pensions industry does not back mandation.

I say to the Minister yet again that pension pots belong to the people who have worked, earned and saved. It is their money, not the Government's. Ministers in Whitehall should not have the power to dictate what people's pension savings are invested in. As Ronald Reagan once put it, the nine most terrifying words in the English language are:

"I'm from the Government, and I'm here to help."

This is an extraordinary bill for the Minister to choose to die on. Mandation was never put to voters, it never had the backing of industry, and it should not be forced through Parliament now. I urge the Minister to think again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I will now announce the result of today's deferred Division on the draft Energy Prices Act 2022 (Extension of Time Limit) Regulations 2026. The Ayes were 380 and the Noes were seven, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division list is published at the end of today's debates.]

Liam Byrne: I rise to say a couple of things in support of the Minister, who not only has done a heroic job in laying out the intellectual architecture for the legislation before he got to the House, but is so expertly steering it through the House. I wish him all the very best this afternoon in finishing the job.

I want to make three points. First, the measures that the Minister has set out are essential if we are to pursue the long-term interests of pension savers in this country. It is in their fundamental interests that they live and retire in an economy that is growing faster in the years to come. The only way in which we can collectively achieve that is by raising the investment rate in this country. For a long time, our investment rate was the lowest in the G7; it is improving and is now the second-lowest in the G7. It is for exactly that purpose that hon. Members on both sides of the House made the argument that we need to repatriate investment saving.

The fact is, we have got to resolve the paradox that, on the one hand, we have £3 trillion-worth of pension savings and, on the other hand, while we have some of the world's best life science, best universities and best entrepreneurs, we do not have the investment institutions and systems that connect long-term savings to that brilliant tradition of entrepreneurial genius. Unless we fix that long-standing paradox, this country will not grow faster. That is not a Labour analysis; it is an analysis that was first advanced by the former Conservative Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt).

If we manage to get that right, the investment rate in the country will go up and the economy will grow faster in the years to come. Therefore, there is not a cost to the savings of Britain's pension savers—it will actually be to their advantage.

Helen Whately: As I think the right hon. Gentleman will have heard in my speech, there is widespread agreement that we want to see more investment by pension funds in the UK; the debate is about whether mandation is the way to achieve that. Actually the Minister's main argument for the mandation powers is not about investment in the UK; it is about solving a collective action first-mover problem in trying to improve returns and the risk that

that will put up costs to pension funds and for savers. That is what he's really arguing, rather than the point made by the right hon. Gentleman about investment in the UK.

Liam Byrne: I am grateful for that intervention, because the hon. Lady made my second point for me. It is just not good enough to will the ends and not the means. The reality is that, after all the heroic work of the former Conservative Chancellor, built on ably by the current Chancellor of the Exchequer to advance the Mansion House accord and the Sterling 20, the repatriation of long-term savings into our country is going at a snail's pace. If we want to deliver it by a timetable on which we are both agreed, we will need to give a little bit of encouragement to the industry. That is exactly what the Minister's proposed provision would do.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): The right hon. Member raises many really important points, much of which we agree with. That is why, I think on Report, the Opposition tabled an amendment to try to understand what the problem was. It specifically asked, "Why are these pension funds not investing in the UK? Is it legislative, is it regulatory or is it cultural?" The Government voted against that. They voted against exactly the work we need to do to understand what the problem is. Could he possibly explain why?

Liam Byrne: I can advance only my own analysis of what will be needed. Indeed, it is part of a wider Business and Trade Committee inquiry, which will produce a report in a couple of weeks, on how we transform the investment environment. The reality is that there is a shared ambition on both sides of the House to ensure that we fix this long-standing paradox. My judgment is that the measures the Minister is proposing are essential if we are to deliver on that by the early 2030s. It is just not good enough to try to persuade Britain's pension funds through sheer mind powers alone to repatriate the investment they are proposing. By taking the Minister's approach, we stand a better chance.

2.45 pm

My last point, as I mentioned in my intervention, is that I was heartened to hear the Minister's commitment at the Dispatch Box that we will proceed with reform of that clarification of fiduciary duties. Too many pension fund trustees today lack the legal certainty that they can make strategic, long-term investments that are in the best interests of their pension savers and will create a higher return on investment in this country by investing in things such as net zero infrastructure and other virtuous investments that are good for the long-term growth of the economy. It is disappointing that Lib Dem peers and others voted against the provision in the other place and prevented the Government from bringing in the necessary amendments. However, I am reassured by the Minister's commitment that he will seek a further legislative opportunity at the earliest point in the next Session. With that, I add my support to the Minister's ambitions.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): The Liberal Democrats broadly support the proposals before us in the Bill as a whole. I know from conversations with residents in

[Steve Darling]

Torbay that there are some challenges within the pensions market, and the Bill as a whole addresses an awful lot of them. However, I suggest that the Minister has been studying his Greek history, assumed the position of Odysseus and developed a Trojan horse, which he has sneaked into the Bill. The Trojan horse is, of course, mandation.

While the Minister may have cut off a couple of the Trojan horse's legs, it remains a Trojan horse before us. Clearly, as Liberal Democrats, we welcome that as a step in the right direction, but the Government should be shaping the market appropriately through policy so that there is a pipeline of opportunities for investments—that goes across to the Mansion House accord—so that the market has those opportunities and can invest in them appropriately.

There is an element that we need to touch on. Since 2008, there has been risk aversion in the market, which stifles profits; we need to be alive to that. Risk is a good thing when investing, but investments should be sensible and with appropriate spreads. The Bill does elements of that, but I fear that some of the monitoring could stifle risk and therefore stifle returns.

The Liberal Democrats are keen to ensure opportunities. The Government should be ensuring that there are baskets of opportunities to invest in things that matter to our communities, whether regenerating our town centres or social rented housing. We know that people such as Legal & General lead the market in those investments; we need to think about how we can enhance those opportunities. We must also ensure that we are investing in net zero, which is close to the heart of several parties. Again, the Government should be shaping the market in that way rather than dictating. While the Minister alludes to this as a one-shot opportunity, other colleagues are fearful that mandation is the thin end of the wedge.

Finally, I would like to reflect on the changes that the Minister has proposed. We welcome the changes allowing greater innovation and greater development of the market, which are significant steps in the right direction. However, as Liberal Democrats we are not prepared to see the dead hand of Government directing here. We continue to oppose mandation in whatever form it may take.

Torsten Bell: I thank the Members from across the House who have contributed to the debate today. Let me respond directly to a few of their comments. I welcome much of the shadow Secretary of State's remarks. I am glad that she welcomed many of the Government's amendments, including those on public sector pensions and around innovation and competition—I appreciate that. I hope, when those issues are debated in the Lords in the near future, that there will be similar consensus across that House.

The shadow Secretary of State raised the question of scale. Again, I am glad that she has welcomed the review that will happen within 12 months of the Bill's commencement. On scale, I am a bit more confident than she is on the role of small schemes to grow, because we can see significant growth right across the market, including among small schemes, partly because the market itself is growing so fast in the

current climate. However, I offer no comment on her pessimism about Tottenham Hotspur; that is for others to speak on.

To be fair, as the shadow Secretary of State set out, the main area of disagreement that remains is around the reserve power. She raised the question of the accord and whether it applied to the whole industry. She is correct; it does not apply to the whole industry, but it does cover 90% of defined contribution assets held within the industry. We are therefore talking about not just a majority but the overwhelming majority of the industry.

The hon. Lady mentioned the Labour manifesto, which set out two focuses on pensions. One was around the question of scale, on which we have just touched and which I think is a matter of cross-party consensus; the second, which, again, I think is a matter of cross-party consensus, is on the importance of delivering change in terms of investment in productive assets in private assets. That is exactly the focus of both the Mansion House accord and the reserve power.

The hon. Lady said the power was about directing specific outcomes. As I have been setting out, it absolutely does not do that. It will not allow any direction of savers into particular assets or particular asset classes, and it offers no ability for Government to take control of pension savers' pensions. Indeed, I think it is actually dangerous to have members of the public hearing remarks like that when that is categorically not the case.

The shadow Secretary of State is right to say, though, and this maybe gets to the crux of where we are, that the money belongs to savers. That is what this is about and that is what we all agree about; we want to see higher returns to savers. The industry is telling us that diversifying their range of assets is in their savers' interest and it is admitting that it has not done so to date. [Interruption.] No, that is what the industry is saying. Savers are not saying that, because savers do not have that choice and they are intermediated by providers, some of which have trustees and some of which do not. That is the underlying point: they need to see that change happen, that it has not happened and that we have seen it not happen. Implicitly, what that is saying is that members are losing out from the status quo, and what I am not hearing from the Conservatives is a serious engagement with that reality that has let down savers. [Interruption.] I will come to the point about the previous amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) shortly.

I now come to my right hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne), not least because he admirably set out the big challenge facing Britain, which is to turn this country back into a country that invests in its own future once again. That means higher investment. It is not acceptable that Britain saw both the second-lowest public investment in the G7 and by far the lowest business investment in the G7 under the last Government—and not for some years but for almost every single year. That is the challenge that I think we all want to see addressed. Part of the issue being raised about whether this is about UK assets or private finance is overdone, because what we see around the world is a higher home bias among private asset investments than among public asset investments, for all the obvious reasons about the comparative advantage of different investors in those situations.

My right hon. Friend also rightly says—I think this is, again, part of a cross-party consensus—that moving to that high-investment world is overwhelmingly not about pensions, but much wider changes and about making sure that actual investment happens so firms can actually get things built. That is why this Government have come in and provided the go-ahead for solar farms, wind farms, national grid investments and nuclear power stations that have been held up for too long. That is what a higher-investment country looks like and that is what we need to be getting on with, and I have a nugget of good news to bring my right hon. Friend on that. If hon. Members go and look at the investment levels in the national accounts—I know everybody in this room spends their time doing that—they will see that, since the election, Britain has seen the fastest investment growth of any country in the G7. That is what we are starting to deliver against what we set out as our core objective, which is turning Britain back into a higher-investment country.

The hon. Member for Wyre Forest mentioned his previous amendment, which asked for the reasons why schemes say the change would be in savers' interest but have not done it. The problem is that we have had a lot of reviews. The Association of British Insurers has written some and published them, explaining why the previous Government's attempt with the Mansion House compact did not work. We have the answer; I am afraid the hon. Gentleman just does not want to engage with what he is being told.

Mark Garnier: Both sides of this House are going with the grain of what is intended on this. There is a fundamental problem—we all agree on that—but let us get the issues out of the way that are blocking it. We cannot force people into a minefield if the mines are still there; we have to clear the mines and allow them to do it. This is the most fundamental point. The Government should not be telling pension fund managers how and where to invest their money. If there is a problem that they are going to encounter, we should get those problems out of the way and managers will go into those assets.

Torsten Bell: I am afraid the hon. Member has just revealed his lack of focus on what is going on. Pension schemes from around the world are investing in British private assets; it is UK pension schemes that are not. The hon. Member implied that there were minefields when investing in Britain. It is that kind of talking down Britain that is the problem. We are making sure that there is a robust pipeline of investments, which is absolutely right.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): I think all of us on the Opposition Benches would be keen to understand why, if the Minister is so confident that pension funds will invest, he does not make it a choice rather than a mandate.

Torsten Bell: I fear the hon. Lady has not sat through enough of these sessions. Earlier, those on her own Front Bench engaged exactly with some of the arguments that I have made, explaining exactly the points she has raised. I will just say that she should go and have a look at what Australian pension schemes are doing investing in UK infrastructure and go and look at what is happening when US investors are investing in UK venture capital. Why is that happening? It is not because of differential

tax breaks—there are very strong tax incentives. No, it is because of a history of not having the collective action problem that we have set out, and the fact that those on the Conservative Front Bench do not wish to engage with that is holding us back.

Helen Whately: On the ABI report that he referred to—he has referred to it before—yes, the ABI has agreed with the diagnosis of the problem, as I set out, as a collective action problem. However, it does not agree with mandation as the remedy. The Minister needs to be clear about that.

Torsten Bell: The truth is that there is a range of opinion among ABI members about that. However, there is agreement across the industry about the need to deliver change.

I turn to some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) who, again, kindly did not refer to the Lib Dem manifesto, which called not just for reserve power, but for the direction of pension scheme assets into certain asset classes. I gently say that it is a shame to not see him engage with the substance, rather than taking the easy option of offering high-level, throwaway comments about a thing that he had in his own manifesto. On the plus side, however, he is right to say that the investment pipeline is important. The issue there is that that is different in different sectors. Within the infrastructure sector, it is obviously about having a country that is delivering actual infrastructure. Within venture capital, it is about making sure that there is easier intermediation for pension schemes into a market of which they have less experience. We are doing exactly that and that is what the Sterling 20 process is doing. I see very good engagement between pension schemes right across the board on that and every chief executive I speak to is engaging with exactly those questions that the hon. Member for Torbay raises.

The Bill has received detailed scrutiny over the past year, and it is a better Bill for it. We have brought forward amendments that, subject to delivering the core pension reform programme of the elected Government, respond to the detailed points raised by peers in the other place. With those improvements, this is a Bill that industry worker representatives and charities wish to see passed into law. The TUC said:

“It's vital the Bill is passed so workers can start to benefit.”

Age UK has said the measures in the Bill will help both the pensioners of today and the pensioners of tomorrow. It is important that these can be implemented as soon as possible. Aviva welcomed today's amendments and said:

“We hope this is enough to build the consensus needed for the Bill to be passed”.

The ABI has said that it and its members are “clear that we want the Bill to pass”.

They are right, and I commend the Government's position to the House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 272, Noes 149.

Division No. 502]

[3 pm]

AYES

Abbott, Jack	Akehurst, Luke
Abrahams, Debbie	Aldridge, Dan
Adam, Shockat	Alexander, rh Heidi
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Al-Hassan, Sadik

Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Callum
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Botterill, Jade
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, Juliet
 Carling, Sam
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cox, Pam
 Creagh, Mary
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat

Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Flynn, rh Stephen
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter

Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew

Rayner, rh Angela
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turmaine, Matt
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitby, John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Deirdre Costigan and
 Taiwo Owatemi

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bacon, Gareth
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter

Bennett, Alison
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex
 Cane, Charlotte
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibson, Sarah
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia

Lowe, Rupert
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 Mierlo, Freddie van
 Miller, Calum
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Roome, Ian
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Vickers, Martin
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
James Wild and
Rebecca Smith

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the House insists on its disagreement with Lords amendments 15 to 24, 27, 30 to 34, 36, 38 to 42, 83 and 88, insists on its amendments 88A and 88C to the words restored to the Bill, does not insist on its amendment 88B to the words restored to the Bill, but proposes Government amendments (a) to (j) to the words so restored to the Bill.

More than one hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Lords message, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, 15 April).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83G).

Resolved,

That this House disagrees with Lords amendments 37B and 37C but proposes amendments (a) and (b) in lieu.—(*Torsten Bell.*)

After Clause 57

SECTIONS 40, 42 AND 44: REGULATIONS AND

COMPETITION AMONG PROVIDERS OF PENSION SCHEMES

Resolved,

That this House disagrees with Lords amendment 35B but proposes amendments (a) and (b) in lieu.—(*Torsten Bell.*)

Clause 122

COMMENCEMENT

Resolved,

That this House insists on its disagreement with Lords amendments 77 and 85 but proposes amendments (a) to (c) in lieu.—(*Torsten Bell.*)

Helen Whately: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The last Division we voted on was on a motion proposed by the Government that grouped a series of amendments with which we agreed, alongside amendments on mandation, with which we had strong disagreements. What steps can be taken to bring about a separate Division on the mandation clauses, with which we disagree?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for her point of order. The content of the motions is a matter for the Government. I can reassure her that they would not have appeared on the Order Paper unless they were in order. Those on the Government Front Bench have heard what she has said. If she would like any further advice on procedure, I recommend that she contact the Public Bill Office.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank you for granting my point of order and apologise for not giving you due notice of it. Given the events of recent days and some of the debates that have been called, when can we get an update from the Intelligence and Security Committee on the work it is undertaking and on its findings regarding the Mandelson papers?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. That is not a matter for the Chair; it is a matter for the Committee.

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I must inform the House that Lords amendment 38X engages Commons financial privilege. If this Lords amendment is agreed to, I will cause the customary entry waiving Commons financial privilege to be entered in the *Journal*.

After Clause 26

POWER TO REQUIRE INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDERS TO
RESTRICT OR PREVENT ACCESS BY CHILDREN TO
INTERNET SERVICES

3.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey): I beg to move,

That this House insists on its amendment 38J and disagrees with Lords amendments 38V to 38X to amendment 38J.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following Government motions:

That this House insists on its disagreement with Lords amendment 102, but does not insist on its amendments 102C to 102G and proposes amendments (a) to (d) in lieu of the Lords amendment.

That this House insists on its disagreement with Lords amendment 106, but does not insist on amendments 106C to 106E and proposes amendments (a) to (c) in lieu of the Lords amendment.

Olivia Bailey: I am pleased to speak on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill for our third consideration of Lords amendments. The Bill is the biggest single piece of child protection legislation in a generation, and it will put in place a package of support to drive high and rising standards throughout our education and care system, so that every child can achieve and thrive. Today, I ask the House to again reaffirm its support for this landmark legislation.

I turn first to Lords amendment 102 on the circumstances in which the independent adjudicator can specify a lower published admission number following an upheld objection. In this age of declining roles, it is important that these powers exist to ensure that every child has the opportunity to have a great school place. But the Government have been clear throughout this process that school quality and parental choice must be at the heart of PAN decisions. As committed to by my noble Friend Lady Smith in the other place, we have tabled amendments in lieu reflecting this. These amendments place a requirement on the face of the Bill for adjudicators to take account of school quality and parental preference before deciding a PAN following an upheld objection. They will also require the adjudicator, before making a decision to reduce the school's PAN, to consult key parties about alternatives to lowering the school's admissions number. Those parties are the admissions authority, the local authority and the Secretary of State, which in practice means consulting the relevant Department for Education regional director.

We are also taking a power to make it clear that we can require the adjudicator to consult additional parties in line with commitments in our policy paper. Through

the Bill, we will ensure that a robust decision-making framework is in place to protect high-quality education and parental choice, and we will continue to engage with stakeholders, such as the Confederation of School Trusts, on this measure, including on proposed changes to regulations and the school admissions code.

I now turn to Lords amendments 38V to 38X on children's access to social media. There is a clear consensus across this House on the need to protect children online, but our consultation goes further than these amendments, considering a wider set of options, including risks beyond social media, such as gaming and AI chatbots. Hon. Members should have no doubt that it is not a question of whether the Government act but how they act to deliver strong and enduring protections for children online. The House should also be clear that the Government will act quickly.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): Can I thank my hon. Friend for the Government's work on this important matter, which is much appreciated by many parents—in particular the work of looking ahead at what further measures might be taken to tackle online harms?

Olivia Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for his important intervention and for all his work for his constituents in Reading Central.

To underline the fact that we will act quickly, we have committed to responding to the consultation by the summer and have made a legislative commitment to report to Parliament within six months.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for giving way; she is being generous with her time, as always. I declare an interest as a member of the Select Committee. I hope that I do not steal the thunder of the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who is sitting next to me. Yesterday we received evidence from representatives of social media companies and from academics, although we were all hugely disappointed that one social media company did not provide representation. Does the Minister agree that whatever the Government decide when it comes to social media—whether it is restricted, banned or an age restriction is put in place—it is hugely important that young people learn about the dangers? We must ensure that goes into the expanded school curriculum, as discussed in the White Paper.

Olivia Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for his work. I do agree with him; this is an important point. The issue is a part of our revised national curriculum and also the relationships, sex and health education curriculum.

I am grateful for the engagement of peers and Members across the House on this vital topic. As a result, we have made a number of other changes that strengthen our position, including clarifying that this power can only be exercised to protect children from online harm and that we will share draft regulations with Select Committees and Opposition spokespeople. I welcome the constructive engagement from Lord Nash and the Conservatives as we come to a solution on our small areas of difference. I can assure the House that we intend to return to these matters on Monday in the other place and put beyond doubt the Government's plans to act and to do so swiftly.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): It seems to me as though the Government are just kicking the can down the road. We have an opportunity in the legislation before us, and particularly in Lord Nash's amendment—which we are not being allowed to vote on as I understand it—to limit the use of social media outlets to those who are over 16. We also have the opportunity to tighten very seriously the regulations relating to the use of mobile phones in schools, but again, there is a loophole. Why are we being so wishy-washy?

Olivia Bailey: I reject the right hon. Member's characterisation that we are kicking the can down the road. In fact, we are having a wide-ranging consultation—much wider than the amendments before us—that enables us to act swiftly and decisively. We guarantee that we will protect our children from harm.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Olivia Bailey: I am going to make progress.

Let me turn to Lords amendment 106 on our shared objective on banning phones in schools. As the House knows, at the start of the year the Government took decisive action to ban phones in schools. We strengthened the Conservatives' weak guidance, including making it clear—to directly quote the guidance—that we expect schools

“to implement a policy whereby pupils do not have access to their mobile phone throughout the school day including during lessons, the time between lessons, breaktimes and lunchtime.”

We wrote to every headteacher in the country to make it clear that the Government have their back when it comes to banning phones in schools. We asked Ofsted to enforce the ban, which it started doing this month, and we have rolled out a targeted programme of support to ensure that any struggling school gets the help it needs so that this ban is fully in place.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Will the Minister give way?

Olivia Bailey: I will finish this section of my speech and then give way.

As the Government have consistently said and as sector leaders have repeated, this is a challenge of enforcement, and I genuinely believe that the package of measures we have already put in place will ensure effective bans of phones in schools.

I have the greatest of respect for colleagues across the House who have argued that placing this guidance on a statutory footing could support enforcement, and we have tabled that amendment today. I am thrilled to see that the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), has indicated her support for this position.

The Bill before us contains vital measures to keep our children safe online and offline. These measures are desperately needed, yet this Bill has been languishing for 15 months. The time has come to stop playing political games and get this Bill on the statute book.

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

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): I want to start with some good news. After a year of resisting—insisting that a statutory ban on smartphones in schools was, to quote the Prime Minister, “unnecessary”—the Government have finally given in and we have got what we have been asking for: a statutory ban on smartphones in schools. Ministers have told me over and over again that there is not a problem. They said that the vast majority of schools have a phone ban and that a statutory ban was, to quote the Education Secretary, a “headline-grabbing gimmick”. At one stage, I was told—by an Education Minister during Education questions, no less—that I needed something better to go on than a smartphone ban in schools. But we have kept fighting, because I know and my party knows that there is a problem.

The Department for Education's own evidence says that phones are still disrupting almost half of GCSE classes every day. We know that children are still seeing porn at school on their friends' smartphones, and it is affecting behaviour. We have tried guidance to fix the problem, but it has not worked. There is a phones crisis in schools, and only making the guidance statutory could possibly fix it. After various contortions from the Government Front Bench, I am glad that they have finally listened.

In the face of a Government who until recently refused to accept that there is a problem, I pay tribute to the incredible campaigners—SafeScreens, Mumsnet, Parentkind, Will Orr-Ewing, Generation Focus, Health Professionals for Safer Screens, Phone Free Education and Smartphone Free Childhood. Their relentless focus and pressure has helped to give voice to the frustrated teachers, parents and students who were desperate for change—change that we have now delivered in the Bill.

While that is good news, I want the Government to make it crystal clear that a “not seen, not heard” policy is not allowed under these rules. The statistic that Ministers constantly give—that 80% of schools already have a smartphone ban—includes schools that have a “not seen, not heard” policy. Such policies do not work: children still use their phones, they are allowed them in their bags, they still go to the loos and message their friends, and they are still exposed to nasty content on phones during the school day. The real number of schools with a full smartphone ban, where phones are not allowed to be with children at all during the school day, is only 11% according to Policy Exchange. It is vital that the Minister is explicit that a “not seen, not heard” policy, where children are free to carry their phones in their bags during the school day as long as the phones are silent, is prohibited under the guidance.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: I had intended to speak in the debate but I am afraid I have to leave by 4 pm, so I would not have been able to be in the Chamber for the wind-ups. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the crux of the matter is that although it is all very well for the Government to now accept what the Conservatives have been pushing for—a ban on phones in schools—it is simply not good enough for them to say that it is the responsibility of the pupil to not use their phone? Young people are easily influenced and they may well come under peer pressure to keep their phones and to use them to communicate, as my right hon. Friend has said. Will she push the Government to say how they are going to support schools, as the Minister said that they will do, to ensure that the ban is effective?

3.30 pm

Laura Trott: As ever, my right hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why we need an explicit commitment from the Minister today. I will be delighted if she is able to give that—it would be fantastic. If there is agreement from Members across the House, everyone will be very relieved.

We have gone through the Government guidance and while that commitment could be read from the guidance, it is important for headteachers that it is made explicit. The Education Minister in the other place could not give that categorical assurance—[*Interruption.*] No, not this Education Minister—the Education Minister in the other place. It is important that the Minister gives that assurance today, and I am sure that she will. The Conservatives have shown that we can come together in the best interests of children, we can force change and we can make a difference.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): Given the importance that the Conservatives are placing on the ban, why did they not impose it during the 14 years that they were in government?

Laura Trott: The hon. Gentleman will know that we put guidance in place, but we have been explicit that it was not effective and that we needed to put it on the statute book, which is what we have been fighting for throughout the passage of the Bill.

Turning to the Government amendment on pupil admission numbers, I am grateful that progress has been made in recognising the importance of school quality and parental involvement in decision making. This is a victory to protect school standards in the face of an onslaught against them in the Bill. Parental preference and choice are fundamental to healthy competition and higher school standards, and we welcome the belated acknowledgment of that by the Government. It is the right thing for parents, who would be dumbfounded at the idea that the local authority could unilaterally cut the places at a high-quality, over-subscribed school at the end of their road, which was exactly what was originally suggested in the Bill.

The Government amendment is not perfect. It will still allow good school places to be cut as the adjudicator is required to take in account only the quality of education provided at the school in question and parental preference. That does not mean that school places are protected as they should be, but given that the Government have moved their position and taken into account some concerns, we will not vote against the amendment today. However, I would appreciate the Minister reassuring parents from the Dispatch Box that as the Secretary of State will be consulted on these decision, successful academies will not be penalised by local authorities merely by dint of not being run by them.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: The GORSE Academies Trust runs schools in my constituency that have a very firm policy on the use of phones. Indeed, there was a security incident last year that put one of its schools under threat, but no pupil knew that that was happening because of that firm policy. Does my right hon. Friend agree that there are academies and institutions that the Government should consult to understand exactly how they are enforcing a very strict policy?

Laura Trott: That is absolutely right. Enforcing a very strict policy is what now needs to happen off the back of the new statutory guidance.

Let me now turn to the issue of social media and the Government's approach. One of the biggest safeguarding challenges facing children today is social media. If we are serious about protecting children from the extreme and violent content that they encounter online every day, the Government should do what the Prime Minister says he wants to do—protect children online—by voting for change tonight.

Parents are watching and they will not forgive the continued delay. Twice already, Labour Members have voted against a ban. Parents will be forgiven for not only feeling deeply let down, but being quite frankly baffled by what is going on. They have heard the Prime Minister promise action, yet once again he is preparing to lead his party through the Lobby to vote against it. If the Government truly wanted change, they could deliver it today. Instead, they have chosen to vote against a ban for a third time.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I know that this is an important subject for the right hon. Lady personally, but Labour MPs have not voted against a ban; they have voted for a consultation. They have voted to listen to parents, young people and charities and to learn lessons from what has happened in places such as Australia and Greece. Surely basing this policy on evidence is the right thing to do.

Laura Trott: I respect the hon. Gentleman, but he will know that the Government consultation is not on how to implement a social media ban, but on whether to do one at all. That is not good enough. It also says in the consultation that TikTok is good for children because they can post dance videos. I do not believe that that is taking the issue seriously, and I do not believe that it commits to firm action. That is why Labour MPs who care about this issue should vote with us today.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): Does the right hon. Lady not recognise that action and a ban will not necessarily be the same thing? This is a really nuanced policy area. Quite recently, there was a huge online joint letter published by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the Molly Rose Foundation, the Internet Watch Foundation and many others. It argued that although serious action is needed to tackle addictive features, safeguarding problems and violent content online, as we all agree and as she is saying, a blanket ban has significant drawbacks. It is right that we really look at the evidence, consult nationally and get this right.

Laura Trott: There is a huge coalition of charities backing a ban. We have tried to police content online, and it has not worked, but we know that policing age will work and make a difference. This is urgent; there is no time for delay. Real harm is happening and children are dying. We must act, and a ban is the most effective way to do that.

Sir Roger Gale: Let me try again with the question that I put to the Minister. We have the opportunity today to carry a motion tabled in the other House that

would introduce the ban. The can is being kicked down the road. We cannot have consultation indefinitely. The question on the consultation paper is not, "How do we do this?", but, "Shall we do it?" That is not necessary—am I right?

Laura Trott: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. Action this day—that is what is required, and that is what we are pushing for.

Sean Woodcock: The right hon. Lady is being generous with her time. I ask her the same question that I posed earlier: if this is so important, why did the Conservatives not get round to doing it when they were in government for 14 years?

Laura Trott: The rise of social media really came about in a serious way in 2015 or 2016 with the rise of front-facing cameras. We took action through the Online Safety Act 2023, which was a huge Act in pushing forward the safety of children, but it has not been effective in policing content. It has not been enough, and we need to go further. We now need a social media ban for children.

Let me say once more: I will not give up this fight until the Government tell the House what they will do and by when. I hope that that comes tonight—the Minister indicates that it may come later in the other place—but I will not give up, and neither will the thousands of people who have joined the brilliant "Raise the Age" campaign, which has been speaking so powerfully for frustrated parents across the country.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The shadow Minister is absolutely right. The inboxes of all Members across the House have been filled by parents who feel passionately that they need help to be able to control their children's use of things online. They need the Government to step in and say, "You are actually not allowed those apps." I am a parent myself, with young children, and as parents we cannot be over their shoulder all the time watching what they are seeing online. We know that what they are being given by the algorithm is so unsafe, damaging and harmful, and they deserve to be protected from that by the Government.

Laura Trott: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. What she says speaks to the point that our two parties have been able to come together in the interests of children; it is just the Labour party that is standing in the way.

Frankly, I know that there are Labour Members who agree with us and who want the Government to stop promising action and actually start taking some. Given the events of this week, I suspect that many of them do not even trust a word their own Government say. *[Interruption.]* It is absurd that the Government continually promise urgent action, yet all they have laid before Parliament is an amendment that does not commit to any action at all and does not specify a timeframe. This is not good enough. In a terrible week for the Government, the Opposition have proved that politicians can make change by coming together in the interests of children to ban smartphones. We can do the same on social media. The Prime Minister has already made his Back Benchers defend the indefensible this week, and I urge Labour MPs not to let him do the same to them again

and to vote for change this evening. We owe it to the generation of children who are being exposed to extreme and violent content every single day to do so.

Childhood is short, and children are being influenced and impacted by what they are being exposed to right now. Damage is being done now, and months and even years of delay mean a childhood lost for some, because once that content is seen, it cannot be unseen. Once those pressures take hold, they cannot simply be reversed, and the consequences can last a lifetime. This is not about action at some point in the future; it is about whether we act while there is still time to protect children who are growing up today, not years from now. Childhood is short, and we cannot give it back to children later, so we must protect it now.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am surprised to not see Mr Adam Jogee on his feet, considering the level of chuntering he has been doing from a seated position. You do not wish to contribute formally?

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab) indicated dissent.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Unfortunate. I call Helen Hayes.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): First, I welcome the Government's decision to introduce a statutory ban on mobile phones in schools. I appreciate that the guidance previously proposed was clear and that schools must take account of Government guidance, but where an issue is unequivocal—and I think the need for mobile phones to be absent from schools unless there is a clear need for an exception is unequivocal—putting the matter into legislation is the most straightforward way to ensure compliance, and it provides clarity for the public.

However, what approach will the Minister take to the guidance accompanying this ban, particularly with regard to exceptions? There will be children who still need to have a phone in school for a variety of different reasons—for example, because they are young carers or because they rely on phone-enabled software for support with a disability or special educational need. At the Education Committee yesterday, one of our witnesses made an important point about how exceptions are to be treated when implementing a ban, which was that care needs to be taken regarding how the wider issues in the classroom are managed for children who have an exceptional need for a phone. Those issues include who gets to use the phone, what apps are allowed to be on that phone, and how children are kept safe from bullying in this context.

Jess Brown-Fuller: Chichester high school in my constituency has introduced Yondr pouches—I imagine there are many similar pouches. Children can take their phones to school, but then they have to put them in those lockable pouches. They do not have access to them throughout the day, and they can unlock the pouches when they leave school. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is a potential solution, especially for children who need their phones for health reasons or who, for other reasons, need their devices to make sure they can be in school?

Helen Hayes: I agree with the hon. Member—and, indeed, with the Opposition Front Bencher, the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott)—that the ban must be on the basis that phones are not in bags during the school day, but are removed from children while they are at school. The point I was making was really about children who need to have their phone with them. There will be some exceptions, and the question of how that is worked through in the guidance is important for protecting those children from the pressures that might come with being the only child in a classroom who has access to their phone. Drawing up a list of exceptions is more straightforward than deciding how those exceptions should be managed in a classroom environment, so I hope the Minister will be able to provide some assurance on that point.

I now turn to Lords amendment 38. Yesterday, in the first of two evidence sessions on screentime and social media that are designed to enable the Select Committee to contribute to the Government's consultation, we heard from three companies: TikTok, Meta and Roblox. Next week, we will hear from Snapchat, which withdrew from yesterday's session at very short notice, much to our disappointment. We also heard from academics undertaking research in this area.

It was absolutely clear from the evidence those three companies gave us that we cannot continue to rely on the companies whose platforms are causing the problem to regulate themselves out of it. I think that parents and carers across the country would have been incredulous had they listened to our evidence session yesterday. We heard Meta say that it did not believe that its apps were in any way addictive, when it has just lost a court case in the US on that precise point. We listened to TikTok say that it was horrified that children were coming to harm on its site, as if that was a rare exception, when a police investigation found that such harm is widespread. We heard Roblox express confidence that exploitation cannot happen on its site, when an independent expert recently said that the risks of children coming to harm on Roblox were so high that children should never be left unattended while using it.

3.45 pm

Sam Carling: My hon. Friend is citing some shocking evidence, and I will be sure to listen to the Committee session later. On her comments about Meta not believing that its platforms are addictive, does she agree that the problem goes more broadly than just children? Lots of adults have issues with social media addiction, and a social media ban for children would not necessarily solve that. We need to look at broader solutions.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before the hon. Member gets to her feet, I remind her that we have to conclude at 4.16 and I need to get five or six more Members in to contribute. I hope that she will be coming to a conclusion soonish.

Helen Hayes: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. One of the reasons for the incredulity among those listening to the evidence yesterday was precisely that we recognise the addictive nature of social media. Frankly, the discussion yesterday felt like how a discussion about tobacco might have felt in the 1940s. The harm is so evident as to be

undeniable, but the companies responsible for it continue to argue that the harm is minimal or non-existent and that anything in moderation is fine.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Will the hon. Member give way?

Helen Hayes: I will not take any further interventions because of the time left, if that is okay.

The need for urgent action to take children off social media in their crucial formative years is clear, so I welcome the Government's consultation, the measures in the Bill to enable a ban and other regulatory measures to be introduced via statutory instrument with no need for further primary legislation.

In our evidence session yesterday, we also heard from academics about some of the complexity that must be considered if we are to get a ban and any further regulatory measures right. For example, we questioned Roblox. It is not a social media company, because the primary activity on its platform is gaming, and it appeals to very young children. On Roblox, children can contact each other via a trusted friends feature and they can create content, and we have heard examples of some very disturbing content. They can be absorbed on their screens for hours at a time, and we know that there have been examples of children being groomed and contacted by people who want to do them harm. Roblox is not included in the Australian ban, because it is not a social media site, but there should be at least some consideration of the extent to which social media harms also extend to some gaming platforms, and of how children can be protected from that.

One of our witnesses questioned whether, in the UK context, 16 is the right age threshold for a ban. In Australia, young people do not have major exams at 16, and there should be consideration about whether the exact time that our young people are preparing for their GCSEs is the right time to be diving into social media for the first time, or whether a slightly younger or older threshold would be better. Next week, we will hear from parents and parent-led organisations, including the Molly Rose Foundation and Esther Ghey, the mother of Brianna Ghey. It is important to note that these stakeholders have different views, and we will explore their disagreement and common ground through our questioning.

When—not if—we regulate to remove the pernicious influence of social media from children's lives, it is vital that our regulation is effective, and I am frustrated by Opposition Members' lack of acknowledgement of that complexity and the importance of not only acting, but getting it right.

Finally, will the Minister set out a clear timescale for regulation under statutory instruments, so that parents can be assured that there is an end point to the debate on this issue and that action—the right and effective action that we need to keep our children safe—is coming?

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): To enable all Back Benchers to get in, there will be a speaking limit of three minutes. We now come to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, who has kindly said that she will speak for less than five minutes.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I will try my best, Madam Deputy Speaker. Every family has the ambition to send their child to the best school—preferably close by—so we welcome the Government's moves to strengthen the duty of the schools adjudicator to take account of quality of educational provision and parental preference in an area before changing a school's pupil admission numbers. We also welcome the duty to consult. We remain concerned about conflicts of interest and how things will work in practice. Ultimately, if a high-performing, popular school has space to expand and there is a demand for places, ideology should not get in the way of it doing so.

I welcome the Government's decision to finally ban access to mobile phones during the school day by putting existing guidance on a statutory footing. I join the shadow Secretary of State in paying tribute to all the campaign groups and to my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) for all her work on this issue. After more than a year of parents, teachers and pupils begging, this simple change will have a big impact. I am just sorry that it did not happen sooner and was described repeatedly as a gimmick.

Classrooms will be a step closer to becoming a place of focus and learning, free from the addictive and demanding world of social media, but they need the right equipment and procedures in place. With school budgets stretched to breaking point and some parents not necessarily able to afford pouches, I urge the Government to ensure that all schools have the necessary support to properly ensure that every classroom can be smartphone-free.

I welcome the reasonable adjustments alluded to in the guidance, but I would also welcome clear assurance from the Minister that for those pupils with medical needs or caring responsibilities, schools will be at liberty to make appropriate exemptions and accommodations that are not onerous or discriminatory towards individual children. Similarly, school leaders should have the freedom to ensure that children with SEND who may need assistive technology have appropriate access to a device. I strongly endorse the comments on exceptions by the Select Committee Chair, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). Providing clear advice to teachers and headteachers on a regular basis would be very helpful to alleviate those concerns.

While we can celebrate a big victory for smartphones in schools, the damaging impact of addictive social media and gaming and of chatbots extends far beyond the school day. Each day, more children are coming to serious harm because of social media, while the big tech companies come to this place, as we have heard, and brazenly deny responsibility for the damage that they are causing to the mental and physical health of our children and young people.

Social media is encouraging insidious, brain-numbing behaviour in all of us—not just children, as the hon. Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) said—through its infinite scrolling features, frequent dopamine hits and addictive algorithms. Its content endangers the people we are here to protect. Just last week I spoke to a constituent whose child cut themselves after seeing a video on YouTube shorts that said it could help relieve stress. The longer we delay, the more we hear such stories.

I urge the Government to formally recognise in the legislation that both addictive design and harmful content have created this toxic cocktail. If we cannot accurately identify the problem, how can we tackle it? I know that Ministers want to help our children, but we need them to do more. We have been debating this issue for more than a year now. The now Children's Minister, the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), put forward his own Bill on social media harms more than a year ago. The time is now to gut addictive algorithms, ban social media giants from collecting our children's data and make big tech responsible for the harmful content it is pushing on our children. I urge the Government in the strongest possible terms to come forward with a concrete commitment to action and a swift timeline for implementation.

I agree with the Minister that we need to go broader than social media, to gaming and chatbots. Some of that wider remit was acknowledged in a very positive amendment from Baroness Kidron in the other place, which the Government rejected. The Liberal Democrats have put forward broader, more nuanced amendments in the other place beyond just a blunt social media ban, but they have been repeatedly rejected. This is not about party politics, as some have suggested. We are all trying to come together towards the same aim, but we need a concrete commitment in any amendments that are brought forward to a date when the Government will take action. We cannot wait for a drawn-out consultation that asks if, not how, we should ban social media. Our children who are affected every single day cannot wait for action to be taken.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak briefly this afternoon. I wanted to speak because we had a tragedy in my constituency, where a young boy of just 13 years old was stabbed and brutally murdered in a local park after a terrible series of incidents of online bullying. This is a very serious matter and I appreciate the Government's work on it, and the consultation, which has enormous potential. I pay tribute to Olly's mum and dad, who have been campaigning extremely hard on this matter, to tackle both the scourge of knife crime and social media and online harms. They have argued very powerfully for a ban at 16, but I am aware that there are contrary arguments, as the Select Committee Chair, the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), mentioned earlier. The Molly Rose Foundation and other campaigners take a different view. I hope that these matters can be addressed fully in the consultation, and that we can look in great detail at some of the challenges, because these are extremely difficult issues for our society and for parents.

In my own life as a parent, I have found it difficult to fully comprehend the level of risk that is out there. We all face the challenge that social media, gaming and other technologies move very quickly, so it is important that we look at gaming and a range of other matters. I look forward to the consultation exploring this issue fully, looking in depth and, hopefully, answering the pleas from all the parents involved in the campaigns, because this is such a serious and important issue. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend the Minister, and with the Government as a whole, on this matter.

[Matt Rodda]

On the matter of phones, I wholeheartedly welcome the Government's action. It is important to see this issue from the point of view of parents, children and schools. Schools have to implement the ban, and the Minister has rightly set out how today's amendment will give clarity to schools so that teachers will understand precisely what is meant. It will give greater signposting to taking action on phones in schools and, as a result, protect children. That is hugely important, and I very much welcome the Government's work on this matter. I appreciate that other Members want to get in and that time is limited.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): I was very sorry to hear the story that the hon. Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) shared. I will speak about a different aspect of the Bill: schools and admissions.

Good schools, and the good teachers who run them, are exceptionally precious. At its best, a good school truly can transform the lives of its pupils by fostering their natural talents, by helping equip them to tackle challenges and by expanding their intellectual horizons. When good schools are working well, they should be able to grow, so that more parents can choose to send their children to a school where their talents can be cultivated and their interests encouraged. That is a simple principle—one that Members from across the House, and indeed everyone everywhere, should be able to agree to.

A good education should not be the preserve of only those children who have parents who can afford to pay for one. Enabling more pupils to attend the best schools in the state sector means that that kind of education can be offered to more children, yet, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) has set out, the powers that this Bill will create on pupil admissions will achieve precisely the opposite. They allow the Government and regulators to limit the growth of good schools, or even force them to shrink, in order to make sure that schools that are performing less well can stay open. The most generous interpretation of the Government's intentions is that this change is being made in the name of bureaucratic convenience.

As the number of pupils entering the school system falls, it is true that local authorities will need to make decisions about which schools remain open and where. The Government Minister responsible for defending this legislation in the other place said that the proposals are

“very much a function of the time, in terms of demography, that we find ourselves in.”—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 20 April 2026; Vol. 855, c. 541.]

Even if that was the case, it would be completely absurd to tackle this problem by limiting the growth of good schools in order to make life easier for bureaucrats in local government, and for headteachers at schools that are not performing well. Wherever possible, surely we should be enabling the growth of good schools so that they have the capacity to take on more pupils, if and when schools that are performing less well need to reduce their numbers. If parents make decisions that they believe are best for their children, who are bureaucrats to tell them otherwise?

In practice, limiting the growth of good schools will keep more children trapped in failed schools for longer, deny them the opportunity to flourish and deprive them of the firm foundations for life that a good education can provide. Even if this was being done in the name of bureaucratic convenience, it would be grotesque, but I fear that the reality may be even worse. Since this Government came to power, we have repeatedly seen the Department for Education take steps that undermine the progress made by the last Government in this area, including by making it harder to turn failing schools into academies.

Time and again, we have seen this Government put their ideological instincts ahead of what works in practice. Regardless of whether their proposals are motivated by ideology or convenience, the result will be the same: fewer children able to attend good schools, depriving them of the strongest start in life.

4 pm

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): The House of Lords has identified clear gaps and proposed practical solutions, and has sent improvements back to us. The Lords has acted to put in place clear safeguards, and the Government respond by stripping them out and pressing ahead regardless. Let us take Lords amendment 38. The Lords were clear that they required action to protect children from harm online, including stronger age assurance and a clear expectation of progress within 12 months. The Government have chosen to strip that out, and replace it with a broad power to make regulations at some future point. If the Government agree that there is a problem, and Ministers clearly do, why remove the mechanism that would ensure something is actually done about it?

Similarly, Lords amendment 102 was straightforward. It said that high-performing schools delivering good outcomes and in demand from parents should not have their admission numbers reduced unless that decision is necessary and proportionate. The Government have rejected that safeguard. Instead, they offer softer language, asking the adjudicator to “have regard” to certain factors, but “have regard” is not a protection. It does not guarantee that parental preference will carry any weight. I ask the Minister directly: why remove a clear safeguard for high-performing schools and replace it with something that offers far less certainty? Why take out measures that provide clarity, certainty and protection, and replace them with looser powers and softer language? Once again, we see the same approach—sensible safeguards that have been put forward are being swept aside by this Government. That is why I cannot support the Government's position at this stage, and why I urge Ministers to think again.

Sir Roger Gale: I have a very personal interest in this: I have five grandchildren, ranging in age from 15 to nine, and there are another five Ukrainian children in roughly the same age group living with my family. I want to see all of those young people protected. I understand peer pressure only too well. I understand that if one child has a smartphone, every child has to have a smartphone, or they feel left out. However, I know from all the surveys that have been carried out that the overwhelming majority of young people are crying out for guidelines, and for the ban that will make them all feel the same, and not feel excluded.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) said, we have the opportunity in the House of Commons, through this vehicle that is available to us, to take action this day, not in three months' time, six months' time or two years' time. If we do not take this opportunity, a generation of young people will suffer, and we will be responsible. There is no need for that to happen.

Geriatric though I may be, I understand the difference in definition between a smartphone and a brick phone. It is perfectly possible for any child who has to have a phone to have a brick phone, at very modest cost, so that they can communicate on medically essential matters, or if there are caring issues. That is not a problem. We are not talking about brick phones; we are talking about smartphones.

Helen Hayes: I hesitate to intervene, but I think the right hon. Member perhaps has not understood that children with a modern hearing aid, for example, use an application on a smartphone, which cannot be put on to a brick phone. That necessitates having a smartphone in the classroom.

Sir Roger Gale: I do understand what the hon. Lady is saying. Those cases are very few and far between, and there can always be exceptions, where they are medically necessary. I do not believe that is a problem. I am saying to the Minister that we have an opportunity today to legislate. Do not prevaricate; do it!

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Patience is a virtue, and as we have made up time, the final Back-Bench speaker will get five minutes. I call Damian Hinds.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to have heard the last few speeches, which made very important points, but even with five minutes, time is still short for me. I will speak briefly about a couple of aspects of social media and mobile phones.

On social media, let us get on with it. We have had this issue come back from the Lords multiple times, and we can do this. There is a glaring logical flaw at the heart of the Government's argument for not taking action—we have also heard it from a bunch of Labour MPs today—which is, “We can't do this one thing, because there are some other things we could do as well.” That just does not hold water. All those other things—around gaming, other types of applications, chatbots, addictive features and so on—could be additive to a ban on social media for children under the age of 16. They would still, by the way, be very relevant to child safety. I remind the House that our duty to children extends to those aged up to 18, as per the Children Act 1989 and our commitments to the United Nations.

There are issues to resolve about a ban—exactly where the lines should be drawn; exactly what is in and what is out—and yes, of course, the Government have to consult on those issues, but they do not need to consult further on the principle of whether the country and the House of Commons want a ban on young people under the age of 16 accessing social media, a conclusion that so many other countries are also coming to.

On mobile phones, throughout the progress of the Bill, I have found a remarkable contrast. The Government said for so long that they would not ban phones in schools because there should be some discretion for headteachers, but they are going to tell them precisely how many items of branded school uniform they are allowed to specify, and will tell them that in secondary schools that could include a tie, but in primary schools, for some bizarre reason, it cannot.

I am pleased that the Government have partly seen the light. The Minister, whom we all like and respect, said last week that the problem had already been solved—and presumably it has now been re-solved, as the Government have come back to the issue—but I have to say that that is not what children say. What children tell us, both informally and when they are answering surveys about the actual use of mobile phones in schools, is how often lessons get interrupted, teachers are filmed, and bullying and other stuff happens at break times and lunchtimes. We need to act. Of course, there can be individual exceptions for those using assistive and adaptive technology, for young carers, and for others, but the one exception that we must not have is on the type of ban.

The critical question is about having a policy of “not seen, not heard”. Every school in the country, pretty much, already has at least that, but I am afraid that it is not effective as a ban. If you have this thing in your pocket, or in your bag at your foot, it is still there, and you feel its presence. If it vibrates, you might actually feel it, physically; but even if you do not, you feel that compulsion towards it. The only way to make a school truly free of the scourge of mobile phones is to have them away from the child. The “not seen, not heard” approach does not work.

The main argument for saying that we have to allow “not seen, not heard” is about cost. I understand that. Pouches, which a couple of colleagues have mentioned, do have a cost, but we do not have to do pouches. There are other ways of doing this. I mentioned the Petersfield school in my constituency, which has a phones-away-from-children ban, and which uses a simple device—a plastic box that can be purchased in most large-format Swedish retailers. That is locked away in a cupboard, along with a number of other boxes, until the end of the day. The biggest cost has been the foam inserts, with numbered slots in which each child puts their phone, but the sum total cost is very reasonable.

I want to answer the hon. Member for Banbury (Sean Woodcock), who is no longer with us, so to speak. He asked why had we not taken this measure when we were in government. That is a perfectly reasonable question. There are two reasons: first, the issue has become more acute; and, secondly, the attitude of headteachers. It has changed. We have gone from headteachers and their representative bodies saying, “The best way for you to support me in this school is not to impose a national ban,” to them saying the exact opposite—that the best way to support schools and headteachers is to have a ban written into law.

Caroline Voaden: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Damian Hinds: I think that would try Madam Deputy Speaker's patience. Today is the day that we can take action on those two points.

Olivia Bailey: I thank all colleagues for their contributions to the debate, which I found very engaging. I will try, in the few minutes that I have, to respond to some of the key points made.

I start with my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who asked some really important questions, in particular on the matter of medical and other exemptions, which the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) also asked about. I seek to draw Members' attention to the guidance that is available, which is very clear that schools are able to use their judgment to make exemptions where appropriate, in medical situations or otherwise. I think that is the right and proportionate thing to do. I am, of course, happy to keep the application of this policy under review; it is obviously a great strength of the nature of statutory guidance that we can keep it under review.

I share my hon. Friend's frustration about the unwillingness of Opposition Members to engage with the nuance and variety in the debate on social media, unlike us. We are properly and rightly looking at a range of options. We must do so, in order to act decisively, as we are determined to, in order to keep our children safe online.

The hon. Member for Twickenham also asked me for a clear declaration that we will act. I feel that I gave such a declaration in my opening speech, but I will repeat that our consultation is broader than the amendments before us, and enables us to act on a wider range of harms. I am sure that we will continue to discuss this point, but I have been extremely clear that the Government will act, and will act swiftly.

Munira Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Olivia Bailey: I apologise, but I am going to make progress. I am happy to discuss this with the hon. Lady at any time.

My hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) rightly paid tribute to Olly's mum and dad. I have had the huge privilege of meeting Olly's mum. No parent should have to endure what his parents endured; their huge courage in campaigning in their son's memory is truly admirable.

We heard contributions on the proposals on pupil admission numbers from the hon. Members for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) and for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths). I want to be clear that we want to see good schools expand, and we want a great education for every child, but we have to be realistic: in an age of falling rolls, it is possible that this power may be needed to protect the principle of a great education for every child. We have been very clear, through the safeguards that we have put in place in our amendments, that parental choice and the quality of the school will be paramount in this decision making.

The right hon. Members for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale), and for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), discussed phones in schools. I like the right hon. Member for East Hampshire, too, but I would gently point out to him that our guidance was published a few months ago, and that Ofsted has started inspecting under it this month. I urge him to be patient, when it comes to the implementation of the action that we have taken. I ask him to consider that we have already taken decisive action on phones in schools.

I was grateful to the right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott) for her tone on many fronts, and in particular for the support for our measures on phones in schools. I will repeat what I said in my opening speech in response to her direct question: the guidance, which we will now make statutory, explicitly says that the Department for Education expects schools to implement a policy in which pupils do not have access to their mobile phone throughout the school day, including during lessons, in between lessons, in breaks and at lunchtime. I do not think we could be clearer about our intent for this legislation.

It is right, as the right hon. Member for East Hampshire has said, that different schools are implementing this ban in different ways, whether that is with a plastic tray in the classroom, a pouch or whatever it may be. We are very clear on this point.

Laura Trott: I really appreciate the Minister engaging with this issue. However, some people could interpret "not having access" as children not being allowed to touch their phone during the school day, but still being allowed to have it in their bag. Can she be very clear today that that is not allowed under this guidance?

Olivia Bailey: I can be extremely clear on that, as I have just been. We are categorically crystal clear that there is no access to phones at any point during the school day. The guidance says that. We have removed from the guidance that we have published any reference to any kind of "not seen, not heard" policy in the case studies. We are completely clear: no access to phones at any point during the school day. It is not for me to determine how a headteacher enforces their discipline and behaviour policies in their school, and this is ultimately a question of enforcement. I gently point out that we had to act to fix the weak guidance left by the Conservative party. I ask her to reflect on the fact that phones and social media were not invented in July 2024—her party had 14 long years to take the decisive action that we have now taken.

I hope that the time for party political games on this legislation is over. Fifteen months is too long to wait for the vital safeguarding measures for which we need the Bill to become law. There is agreement across the House that phones have no place in schools, and that we must act to keep children safe online. The Government are doing both, and I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to vote with us today.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 260, Noes 161.

Division No. 503]

[4.15 pm]

AYES

Abbott, Jack	Atkinson, Catherine
Abrahams, Debbie	Atkinson, Lewis
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Bailey, Olivia
Akehurst, Luke	Baines, David
Aldridge, Dan	Baker, Alex
Ali, Rushanara	Barker, Paula
Anderson, Callum	Barron, Lee
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Baxter, Johanna
Arthur, Dr Scott	Beales, Danny
Asato, Jess	Beavers, Lorraine
Asser, James	Begum, Apsana
Athwal, Jas	Bell, Torsten

Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Botterill, Jade
 Buckley, Julia
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Juliet
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cox, Pam
 Creagh, Mary
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Ellis, Maya
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Ferguson, Mark
 Fleet, Natalie
 Flynn, rh Stephen
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison

Gelder, Anna
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Chris
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McMahon, Jim
 Midgley, Anneliese

Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Murray, Katrina
 Naismith, Connor
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy

Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Spencer, Hannah
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turmaine, Matt
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitby, John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Stephen Morgan and
 Deirdre Costigan

NOES

Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Brewer, Alex
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Burghart, Alex

Burgen, Richard
 Cane, Charlotte
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Cleverly, rh Sir James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David

Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)

Dewhurst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Easton, Alex
Eastwood, Colum
Evans, Dr Luke
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Gibson, Sarah
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Hanna, Claire
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hobhouse, Wera
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Lake, Ben
Lamont, John
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lopez, Julia
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
McDonnell, rh John
Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohamed, Iqbal
Mohindra, Mr Gagan

Moore, Robbie
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrisey, Joy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pritchard, rh Mark
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Roome, Ian
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Trott, rh Laura
Vickers, Martin
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:
Katie Lam
Rebecca Paul

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House insists on its amendment 38J and disagrees with Lords amendments 38V to 38X to amendment 38J.

4.28 pm

More than one hour having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the Lords amendments, the proceedings were interrupted (Programme Order, 9 March).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Questions necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded at that time (Standing Order No. 83G).

Clause 56

FUNCTIONS OF ADJUDICATOR IN RELATION TO ADMISSION NUMBERS

Resolved,

That this House insists on its disagreement with Lords amendment 102, but does not insist on its amendments 102C to 102G and proposes amendments (a) to (d) in lieu of the Lords amendment.—(*Olivia Bailey*)

After Clause 62

PROHIBITION OF SMARTPHONES DURING THE SCHOOL DAY

Resolved,

That this House insists on its disagreement with Lords Amendment 106, but does not insist on its amendments 106C to 106E and proposes amendments (a) to (c) in lieu of the Lords amendment.—(*Olivia Bailey*.)

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 38V, 38W and 38X to Commons amendment 38J;

That Olivia Bailey, Jade Botterill, Jacob Collier, Emma Foody, Oliver Ryan, Laura Trott and Clive Jones be members of the Committee;

That Olivia Bailey be the Chair of the Committee;

That three be the quorum of the Committee.

That the Committee do withdraw immediately.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

Question agreed to.

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

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until any Messages from the Lords relating to the Crime and Policing Bill shall have been received and disposed of, and any Committee to draw up Reasons which has been appointed at this day's sitting has reported.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I now suspend the House in accordance with the motion that we have just agreed. I will arrange for the Division bells to ring shortly before the sitting resumes.

4.31 pm

Sitting suspended (Order, this day).

Crime and Policing Bill

Consideration of Lords message

Clause 4

FIXED PENALTY NOTICES

6.40 pm

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): I beg to move,

That this House disagrees with the Lords in their amendments 2H and 2J, but proposes in lieu of those amendments amendment (a) to their amendment 2F and amendment (b) to their amendment 2G.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following Government motion:

That this House insists on its amendments 439C and 439D and disagrees with the Lords in their amendments 439E and 439F in lieu.

Sarah Jones: It is with regret that we return to the Lords amendments to this Bill. The elected House has made its views crystal clear on the issues before us. We have already voted twice, by substantial margins, to reject the Lords amendments. It is time for the considered views of this House to prevail. Let me deal briefly with the two remaining issues before us.

In our earlier debates, I have been clear that the Government agree that the enforcement of public spaces protection orders and community protection notices must be proportionate. Fixed penalty notices must never simply be seen as a money spinner for enforcement agencies, but as an appropriate and proportionate means of tackling antisocial behaviour in our communities. We will make this distinction absolutely clear in our statutory guidance. To this end, we have already agreed amendments to provide that the statutory guidance issued under the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 must address the proportionate use of fixed penalty notices by authorised persons. I know the Liberal Democrats want early action on this, so we have brought forward a further amendment to provide that such guidance must be issued within six months of Royal Assent.

It is particularly regrettable that the Opposition have returned yet again to Lords amendment 359, albeit in modified form. The amendment is simply unworkable, and it is wholly contrary to the approach taken by successive Governments to the exercise of the powers in the Terrorism Act 2000 to proscribe terrorist organisations. There is no more important duty on the Government than to safeguard this country from terrorist attack, but requiring the Government to in effect give a running commentary on whether any organisation linked to the Iranian armed forces should be proscribed does not for one moment add to our security. Their lordships can keep insisting on this amendment, but our response will be the same. This is not an amendment that any responsible Government can or should entertain.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the papers today, there are pictures of six ladies who are going to be executed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which is in charge in Iran, because they protested in the streets for liberty and freedom. For those six ladies whose lives are on the line and for the millions of people

in Iran who want freedom, I think the Government should proscribe the IRGC, and they should not delay in doing so. I say respectfully to the Minister that it is time to face the realities we have in this world.

Sarah Jones: None of us would say for one second that we are anything other than appalled by what we see happening in Iran. None of us supports the Iranian Government and none of us supports the IRGC. We have sanctioned over 550 individuals and organisations, including the IRGC, to prevent them from coming here and to take their assets where we can do so. The point is that this Parliament is not the place for a Government to say one way or the other what they are going to proscribe or not proscribe. That is not the way government is done in this country, and it is not the way we are going to operate now. However, I get the hon. Gentleman's point for sure. None of us supports the IRGC or anything it does, and we are appalled by the very significant, awful number of deaths we have seen in recent times and, indeed, over many years.

In conclusion, we are reaching the stage where the issue before the House is no longer the detail of the various Lords amendments, but whether the unelected Lords should continue to disregard the clearly and unequivocally expressed views of the House of Commons and delay the enactment of the Bill. We have already rejected the Lords amendments on two occasions, with majorities of well over 100. Let us send these amendments back to the Lords, hopefully for one last time.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Those in the other place have asked us to reconsider Lords amendments 439E and 439F, which compel the Home Secretary to review the proscription of groups linked to the Iranian armed forces, including the IRGC.

There can be absolutely no doubt about the threat that Iran and its proxies pose to this country and our national security. In 2015, terrorists linked to Iran were caught stockpiling explosives on the outskirts of London. In 2020, amid protests in Iran, the IRGC sought to assassinate two journalists on British soil. Just last year, the IRGC was linked to an attempted attack on the Israeli embassy in Kensington, which was foiled by counter-terrorism police. The organisation has been linked to at least 20 credible threats in the UK.

Even beyond the direct risk posed by IRGC terrorism, the organisation is responsible for funding and supporting other extreme groups in this country, and has worked closely with criminal gangs to undermine our national security. We will be able to combat that threat only if we are willing to tackle it head-on, using every power available to us to do so. To that end, the very least we can do is make it harder for Islamist extremist groups to operate legally in this country. By proscribing the IRGC and other groups linked to the Iranian armed forces, Ministers would be able to protect not only those being attacked—actually, it is our Jewish community that we are really thinking about at this difficult time. These Lords amendments can only be a good thing. They would help to strengthen those protections.

When Labour Members were on the Opposition Benches, many of them agreed. In April 2024, the now Foreign Secretary called for exactly this policy. Yet now, they are refusing even to review the proscription of groups such as the IRGC, which fuel the Islamist cause and are

[Joy Morrissey]

directly linked to the Iranian armed forces. I urge the Minister and her colleagues on the Government Benches to change their minds and accept the Lords amendments. The threat is far too grave to be ignored. By burying their heads in the sand, they will not make the problem go away; they will only put our country and its people more at risk.

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

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I recognise that, since the last round of ping-pong, a concession was made on youth diversion orders in the other place and we welcome that. We are disappointed that the Government have not made suitable concessions on fixed penalty notices. However, we do not seek to force that to a vote this evening. We hope to work with the Government and we will pursue other avenues.

The shadow Minister set out the case very well for the motion on the proscription of Iran-linked groups. Recent activities in this country give us further cause for concern. The rise in antisemitic sentiment on our streets and the way in which Iran is clearly seeking to foment discontent on our streets by funding activities that further antisemitic hatred and terrorist outrages should give us pause for thought. I would hope that Members on both sides of the House recognise that—I know that they do. Even though the Government are clearly not going to vote for the motion this evening, we will.

Sarah Jones: I hope that we are here debating this Bill for the last time. I know that Government Members earnestly want to see the Bill enacted so that we can deliver safer streets for all our communities. I thank the Liberal Democrats for not pushing their amendments to a vote on this occasion.

On the issue of the IRGC, I have been clear that no responsible Government who put the safety and security of the country first can give a running commentary on whether or not this organisation will be proscribed, and it is time to close down this debate. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) was absolutely right to mention the Jewish community; we are all deeply concerned by what we have seen happen to our Jewish friends and colleagues across the country in recent days, particularly in London. We are doing all we can to ensure that our Jewish community is kept safe. As the hon. Lady will know, we are investing to ensure that we have protections for synagogues and other Jewish spaces where we need it, and we are working with them to do everything that we can. The hon. Lady is right on that matter—I agree with her on it.

However, as to the question of whether the Government can be told in this place that we must immediately proscribe an organisation—that is not the way that this Government work. It is not the way that any Government have worked. I respectfully suggest to the other place and to Members in this place that the time has come to call it a day and to let this Bill pass.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House disagrees with the Lords in their amendments 2H and 2J, but proposes in lieu of those amendments amendment (a) to their amendment 2F and amendment (b) to their amendment 2G.

After Clause 190

PROSCRIPTION STATUS OF IRAN-RELATED ENTITIES: REVIEW

Motion made, and Question put,

That this House insists on its amendments 439C and 439D and disagrees with the Lords in their amendments 439E and 439F in lieu.—(*Sarah Jones.*)

The House divided: Ayes 253, Noes 143.

Division No. 504]

[6.51 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack	Davies, Paul
Abrahams, Debbie	Dean, Josh
Akehurst, Luke	Dearden, Kate
Aldridge, Dan	Dickson, Jim
Ali, Rushanara	Dixon, Anna
Anderson, Callum	Dixon, Samantha
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Dodds, rh Anneliese
Arthur, Dr Scott	Downie, Graeme
Asser, James	Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Athwal, Jas	Eagle, rh Maria
Atkinson, Catherine	Eastwood, Colum
Atkinson, Lewis	Eccles, Cat
Bailey, Olivia	Edwards, Lauren
Baines, David	Edwards, Sarah
Baker, Alex	Efford, Clive
Barker, Paula	Ellis, Maya
Barron, Lee	Esterson, Bill
Baxter, Johanna	Evans, Chris
Beales, Danny	Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Beavers, Lorraine	Falconer, Mr Hamish
Bell, Torsten	Farnsworth, Linsey
Benn, rh Hilary	Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Betts, Mr Clive	Ferguson, Mark
Billington, Ms Polly	Fleet, Natalie
Blake, Olivia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)	Foody, Emma
Blake, Rachel	Fookes, Catherine
Bloore, Chris	Foster, Mr Paul
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Francis, Daniel
Botterill, Jade	Frith, Mr James
Buckley, Julia	Furniss, Gill
Burgon, Richard	Gardiner, Barry
Butler, Dawn	Gardner, Dr Allison
Byrne, Ian	Gelder, Anna
Byrne, rh Liam	Gill, Preet Kaur
Caliskan, Nesil	Gittins, Becky (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Glendon, Mary
Campbell, Juliet	Goldsborough, Ben
Carden, Dan	Gosling, Jodie
Carling, Sam	Gould, Georgia
Carns, Al	Greenwood, Lilian
Champion, Sarah	Hack, Amanda
Charalambous, Bambos	Haigh, rh Louise
Charters, Mr Luke	Hall, Sarah
Coleman, Ben	Hamilton, Paulette
Collier, Jacob	Hardy, Emma
Collinge, Lizzi	Harris, Carolyn
Collins, Tom	Hatton, Lloyd
Conlon, Liam	Hayes, Helen
Coombes, Sarah	Hazelgrove, Claire
Cooper, Andrew	Hillier, Dame Meg
Cox, Pam	Hinchliff, Chris
Creagh, Mary	Hinder, Jonathan
Curtis, Chris	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Daby, Janet	Hopkins, Rachel
Dakin, Sir Nicholas	Hughes, Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)
Dalton, Ashley	Hume, Alison
Darlington, Emily	

Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 MacNae, Andy
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McIntyre, Alex
 McMahan, Jim
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Morden, Jessica
 Morris, Grahame
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Onn, Melanie
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo

Powell, Joe
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Russell, Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thompson, Adam
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turmaine, Matt
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Whitby, John
 Whittome, Nadia
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
 Deirdre Costigan and
 Stephen Morgan

NOES

Amos, Gideon
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 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
 Cane, Charlotte
 Cartledge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Mims
 Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Denyer, Carla
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dineneage, Dame Caroline
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Dyke, Sarah
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Franklin, Zöe
 Freeman, George
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Gibson, Sarah
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Lamont, John
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Munt, Tessa
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Roome, Ian
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Snowden, Mr Andrew
 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
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Trott, rh Laura
 Vickers, Martin
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Wilkinson, Max
 Wilson, Munira

Wood, Mike
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
James Wild and
Rebecca Smith

Question accordingly agreed to.

Ordered, That a Committee be appointed to draw up a Reason to be assigned to the Lords for disagreeing with their amendments 439E and 439F;

That Sarah Jones, Stephen Morgan, Adam Thompson, Alex McIntyre, Sarah Coombes, Joy Morrissey 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.*)

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

Point of Order

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wonder if I could get your guidance on seeking a correction of the record from today's Prime Minister's questions. In response to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister said that Sir Olly Robbins

"was absolutely clear that nobody put pressure on him to make this appointment."

I am afraid it is very clear from Sir Olly's evidence to the Foreign Affairs Committee that he believed that pressure was put on him. I refer to Question 532, to which he said:

"Throughout January, honestly, my office and the Foreign Secretary's office were under constant pressure. There was an atmosphere of constant chasing".

I refer, too, to Question 580, in response to which he said:

"while I think the Department felt under pressure, we were proud of the fact that we had not bowed to that pressure."

I also refer to Question 615, in response to which he said that Philip Barton's

"handover to me has contributed to my strong sense that there was an atmosphere of pressure and a certain dismissiveness about this DV process".

I could go on. Strongly contrary to the impression that the Prime Minister wished to create, Sir Olly Robbins clearly said that his Department had been placed under pressure. I wonder if you can help explain to me how we might achieve a correction to the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. As he will know, ministerial responses, including those of the Prime Minister, are not the responsibility of the Chair. However, he has put his point clearly on the record and the Treasury Bench will have heard it; if a correction is needed, I am sure that one will be brought forward.

PETITIONS

Aylesbury United Football Club

7.8 pm

Laura Kyrke-Smith (Aylesbury) (Lab): I present a petition about Aylesbury United football club on behalf of residents in Aylesbury and the villages. Aylesbury United, affectionately known as the Ducks, have played a vital role in our community for well over a century, supporting both physical and mental wellbeing for tens of thousands of local people. The club's future is bright—the club is now training up more than 600 kids aged five to 15, including a number of girls' teams—but there is one major challenge. This year marks 20 years since the Ducks were evicted from their stadium on Buckingham Road and they remain without a home ground in Aylesbury. They are turning away kids because there are no facilities to accommodate them.

The petitioners ask

"that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the merits of Aylesbury United Football Club returning to a home ground within the Aylesbury constituency, and to encourage the relevant bodies to take the necessary steps to achieve this."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Aylesbury,

Declares that Aylesbury United Football Club, founded in 1897, has made an invaluable contribution to our area in fostering community spirit and promoting physical and mental wellbeing over more than 125 years; further declares that over 60,000 people have been positively impacted by the Club over the last 30 years; further notes that the Club's players and supporters, nicknamed the Ducks, have been without a home ground in the Aylesbury constituency since their eviction from Buckingham Road in 2006 — a displacement that has now lasted 20 years; and further notes that the Ducks have long sought to relocate to a local ground.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to consider the merits of Aylesbury United Football Club returning to a home ground within the Aylesbury constituency, and to encourage the relevant bodies to take the necessary steps to achieve this, thereby "bringing the Ducks home".

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003182]

Stockport Green Belt

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I present this petition on behalf of the residents of the constituency of Hazel Grove. It accompanies a similar petition for the residents of the constituency of Cheadle, presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mr Morrison), with over 3,000 signatures.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Hazel Grove,

Declares that the green belt across Stockport and Hazel Grove should be preserved; further declares that brownfield sites should be prioritised for new developments; and further declares that adequate school places, transport provision, and GP capacity should be guaranteed for any new developments.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to roll back its doubled mandatory housebuilding target for Stockport and thereby allow Stockport Council to deliver a Local Plan that protects the area's green belt whilst developing the homes our communities need.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003183]

River Brue and water regulation

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I present this petition on the River Brue and water regulation, following 203 sewage dumping events last year, which lasted 2,716 hours. I also mention the work done by groups such as BrueCREW, Somerset Wildlife Trust and Somerset Eel Recovery Project, which have campaigned to improve the river's health. The petition declares

"that the River Brue is a valued ecological area that supports local trout, eel and other fish populations."

The petitioners therefore request

"that the House of Commons urge the Government to take further action to save the River Brue catchment, starting with replacing Ofwat with a stronger unified regulator, and enforcing full transparency on sewage discharges."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Glastonbury and Somerton,

Declares that the River Brue is a valued ecological area that supports local trout, eel and other fish populations; further declares that the River Brue was polluted by sewage 203 times in 2025 lasting 2,716 hours; further notes with concern the high phosphate levels in the Brue; further notes the work done by groups such as the Brue Crew, Somerset Wildlife Trust and the Somerset Eel Recovery Project to campaign for the River Brue's health; further notes the use of the River Brue for recreational use and wild swimming; further declares that the Government should replace Ofwat with a stronger unified regulator; further declares that there should be full transparency on sewage discharges including mandatory reporting of volume as well as duration; further declares that there should be a shift to public benefit models for water companies that are mutually owned by customers and professionally managed to ensure profits are reinvested into infrastructure; and further declares that action should be taken to close loopholes that allow water company executives to avoid bonus restrictions.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to take further action to save the River Brue catchment, starting with replacing Ofwat with a stronger unified regulator, and enforcing full transparency on sewage discharges.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003189]

Hamworthy Fire Station

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): I rise to present a petition in support of my constituents in Poole who are opposed to the threatened closure of Hamworthy fire station. This petition sits alongside an online campaign led by the Fire Brigades Union, signed by over 16,700 people, and relates to wider proposed closures across Dorset and Wiltshire of eight stations, which risk longer response times for residents and more dangerous conditions for firefighters. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority to find a solution that will prevent the closure of Hamworthy fire station.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that Hamworthy Fire Station provides essential emergency cover not only for Hamworthy, but also for Upton, Lytchett Minster, Turlin Moor and the wider Poole area; and further declares that Hamworthy Fire station must remain open to support the local community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with Dorset & Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Authority to withdraw Hamworthy Fire Station from the closure consultation and to abandon any proposal to close it.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003190]

Sudden Unexpected Death in Epilepsy

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Lilian Greenwood.*)

7.13 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): In the United Kingdom, more than 600,000 people—one in a 100—live with epilepsy and every day around 80 people are diagnosed. Sudden unexpected death in epilepsy, abbreviated as SUDEP, is the term used when a person with epilepsy dies suddenly and unexpectedly. At least 21 people die every week in the UK from SUDEP, and even that is an underestimate, with epilepsy deaths believed to be under recorded. I will raise two key themes in this debate: first, the SUDEP and epilepsy risk communication and understanding gap, and secondly, the inherent systemic failure to prevent deaths following prevention of future deaths reports. I will conclude by outlining my key asks, which are needed for lasting and meaningful change.

The causes of epilepsy-related deaths range from prolonged seizures and accidents to drownings and suicide; however, SUDEP is a devastating worst outcome, accounting for half of all epilepsy fatalities. According to the charity SUDEP Action and the Epilepsy Research Institute UK, the highest rates of death are in areas of deprivation and among vulnerable groups, such as those with worsening mental health, people with learning disabilities or autism, pregnant women and children. SUDEP affects all ages, but we know that it disproportionately affects the young, with a peak in people's 20s and 30s.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate to the House tonight. I have been asked to come along on behalf of my constituent, James Nichols, who lost a dear friend in just that age group to SUDEP and has been a tireless campaigner on the issue ever since. He explained to me that the really tragic thing about SUDEP is that it can often come somewhat out of the blue through breakthrough seizures after an individual has not had seizures for many years, which can make it a particularly traumatic experience for loved ones and family members. Will the hon. Gentleman perhaps touch a bit more on what we can do to support family members?

Olly Glover: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and pay tribute to his constituent and their family. I am going to be talking quite a lot about what we can do to prevent such occurrences in the future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this debate forward. I spoke to him beforehand and, like the hon. Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow), I am here to represent my constituents and those who are affected by this issue in Northern Ireland. SUDEP affects one in 1,000 people with epilepsy annually, which includes many cases in Northern Ireland, yet many families say that they are unaware of the dangers of these night-time tonic-clonic seizures. Does the hon. Member not agree, as he to what the Government need to do, that more must be done to educate patients and family members to ensure that the information is known and that precautions can thereby be taken?

Olly Glover: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct to say that awareness raising and increasing understanding are key priorities in dealing with SUDEP and epilepsy in general.

Patients with epilepsy carry a risk of premature death that is, on average, two to three times higher than in the general population, as has been outlined by *Frontiers in Epidemiology*. What is most devastating is the knowledge that 60% of epilepsy-related deaths each year are believed to be preventable, according to the *European Journal of Neurology*, with SUDEP accounting for many of these deaths.

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this really essential debate to the House. My constituent Emma Taylor tragically lost her daughter at the age of 19 and she now campaigns tirelessly for SUDEP Action as a policy champion. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with her on the need for the Government to promote proper first aid seizure training?

Olly Glover: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman's constituent. I thank her for her tireless campaigning and offer my condolences for her loss.

My Oxfordshire constituency of Didcot and Wantage is the home to SUDEP Action, a charity that is local, national and international in its impact. In 1995, five bereaved women came together around a kitchen table to found the charity in tribute to Alan, aged 27; Matthew, 21; Natalie, 22; and William, 22—all of whom had died, with the condition unrecognised beforehand. Jane Hanna, Sheila Pring, Catherine Brookes, Sue Kelk and Jennifer Preston faced despair together and chose to build hope. Since 2020, SUDEP Action has worked alongside the Epilepsy Research Institute to identify tackling epilepsy deaths as a No. 1 research priority.

The key challenge that SUDEP Action faces is that research insight does not reliably or quickly reach neurology consultations, primary care or social care. National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines exist, but services are inadequately supported to implement them. Jane Hanna from SUDEP Action told me that my own constituents face nine-month waits for a first seizure clinic and waits of nine to 12 months for follow-ups. She told me that waits of this magnitude, such as we are experiencing in my constituency, are unsafe. Her partner Alan waited for four months and died suddenly five months later. Waits such as these are not confined to my constituency; they are reflective of a structural problem across the country.

Free safety tools exist to tackle the lack of knowledge and the complacency around seizures and SUDEP, but systemic issues are difficult to shift because of poor access, poor medicine management, failure to communicate risk and poor recording of deaths. An independent review was named after Clive Treacey. Clive died at 47 in 2017 in a hospital setting where he had lived for 10 years. The report on his life is shocking for this country in the 21st century. The Minister might be aware of the debate secured last year by the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), who I am pleased to see in his place tonight, and of the response from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), who supported the Clive Treacey checklist.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for bringing to light the Clive Treacey checklist, because it is a really fitting way to remember Clive. It is important to remember, however, that although it is named after Clive, he is not defined by his epilepsy; he was not defined by his learning disability and he does not need to be defined by his death. Clive loved to paint and was a really talented gardener, and his family are eager that he be remembered for those memories that they carry of him. I want to make sure that I take the opportunity to put that on the record.

It is also very clear from the Clive Treacey checklist that SUDEP risk for people with learning disabilities and epilepsy is three times higher—300%—but the actual risk of SUDEP can be cut by 84% if people have an annual check-up. That is part of what the Clive Treacey checklist advises NHS trusts to follow. I again thank the hon. Gentleman and invite him to do all he can alongside me—and, I am sure, many other Members—to make sure that every single NHS trust introduces and follows the Clive Treacey checklist to protect some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

Olly Glover: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and his tribute to his constituent, and I look forward to working with him and others on this issue.

The checklist, commissioned by NHS Midlands and developed by SUDEP Action, is designed for commissioners and providers of care. There is hope that it will be red-flagged in annual health checks for people with learning disabilities, as the hon. Gentleman has said. Despite the existence of this high-risk cohort, most families were, like Clive's, unaware of SUDEP and epilepsy risk despite learnings from earlier deaths. They were never given the information they needed, and the mistakes of the past continue to be repeated. Recent research by the *European Journal of Neurology* surveying neurologists found that only one fifth discussed SUDEP with all patients. That speaks to an unacceptable systemic failure. More than 20 years after national guidance was introduced, young people and their families are still being left in the dark.

So what needs to be done? SUDEP Action has developed practical safety tools to empower neighbourhoods: the SUDEP and seizure safety checklist; the EpSMon app, which helps people understand their personal epilepsy risks; and the Charlie card to support risk reduction and communication across care settings. We know that where the adult checklist is used, the rate of SUDEP conversations has risen from 20% to 80% and risks have fallen. But the challenges are vast. Progress is fragmented, it is far too slow, and at a time of rising inequalities all too often the risks are getting worse. The series of prevention of future deaths reports into epilepsy reflects broader patterns: missed opportunities; a SUDEP and epilepsy risk communication gap; a failure to act; and a culture that too often fails to listen to families.

Bambos Charalambous (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): Five years ago, my constituent Nadine tragically lost her brother Trevor to epilepsy. An inquest into Trevor's death ruled that his healthcare team and prison staff at the prison that he was in had not carried out their duties, which led directly to his death. Trevor's death, sadly, is one of many that highlight a clear unresolved

gap in epilepsy care in custodial settings. Does hon. Gentleman agree that the best way to prevent epilepsy deaths in prison is through education and training, to ensure that no life is lost to epilepsy due to lack of awareness or understanding?

Olly Glover: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and he is absolutely right to raise prison as another setting where people are often vulnerable and where more needs to be done in relation to SUDEP.

Sepsis, which has a similar history of systemic failure, will shortly benefit from a modern service framework co-produced with the UK Sepsis Trust. Meanwhile, neither epilepsy nor neurology is explicitly mentioned in the NHS 10-year plan. There is a mandatory national framework to protect unborn children from anti-seizure medication risks, but there is no mandatory national framework to protect people living with epilepsy from SUDEP and epilepsy deaths, despite 30 years of evidence and repeated calls for action.

SUDEP Action provides intensive assistance on 60 to 70 investigations of deaths each year and sees the toll of long, drawn-out processes and, far too often, a defensive culture by default. It also sees a painful accountability gap where inquests are not even held and families feel silenced. The complacency around SUDEP, seizures and epilepsy, which was first called out by Liam Donaldson as chief medical officer in his annual report in 2021, carries wider harms for communities and persists in too many places.

Moving towards my conclusion, I wish to outline some key asks for the Minister. There are hundreds more stories from families that I wish I could have shared today, but I always endeavour to be as brief and concise as possible in this setting. My thoughts are with all in the bereaved community, whom I stand by and will continue to campaign for. In order to effectively support the wonderful charities that are doing so much to prevent SUDEP and support families through this, I have four questions for the Minister.

First, will the Minister commit to developing a modern framework for SUDEP? This would require policymakers working on epilepsy to work with those with lived experience via SUDEP Action and to spread good practice. In addition to mandatory information on side effects from anti-seizure medicines, there must be a framework for person-centred information about SUDEP and seizure risk, as well as national training initiatives that support whole-system learning.

Epilepsy and SUDEP must be included in neighbourhood healthcare, integrated with acute hospitals, social care and community health settings, as well as in prisons as the hon. Member for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous) said, to maximise the opportunity for prevention. There must be safe levels of epilepsy specialist doctors and nurses in local areas. Improving the quality of the annual check for learning disabilities by including a SUDEP check for people with epilepsy would be a significant step forward in upskilling primary care.

Secondly, will the Minister commit today to arranging a meeting with SUDEP Action? Ministerial colleagues have offered engagement on prevention of future deaths reports with SUDEP Action, promising meetings in letters sent in January and February, but such meetings have yet to take place.

[Olly Glover]

Thirdly, will the Minister support a national oversight mechanism in the Hillsborough Bill? Families have been campaigning for an amendment to the Hillsborough law so that there can be a single, permanent oversight body to prevent the same mistakes that have happened across different tragedies, such as Grenfell, the Post Office, Horizon and infected blood. It would track progress across Departments and public authorities, publicly report on failures, delays or resistance to reform, and prevent the repeated cycles of injustice that are seen after major disasters and scandals.

Finally, will the Minister accept an invitation to visit my constituency to see the work of SUDEP Action, a charity built by families and clinical champions from grief, sustained by courage and determined to stop deaths? I am grateful for the Minister's time in this Adjournment debate and look forward to her response.

7.25 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mrs Sharon Hodgson): I thank the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) for securing this important debate. At the outset, I will say that I am happy to meet him to discuss all the action points he raised at the end of his speech—and as for where that meeting will take place, we can discuss that.

Sudden unexpected death in epilepsy, or SUDEP for short, is a vitally important issue for those directly and tragically affected, and for many Members. We must learn lessons when deaths occur and make the changes needed. We must also ensure timely access to the right specialist support for people with epilepsy. We must tackle long waits for neurology appointments, and continue to build the evidence base, so that innovative treatments, such as medicinal cannabis, where clinically appropriate, are available in a safe and consistent way. I will set out the actions that we are taking with the NHS and partners to reduce risks as well as improve outcomes for people living with epilepsy.

First, there is a statutory duty for organisations to respond to a prevention of future deaths report issued by a coroner when their investigation identifies circumstances that create a risk of future deaths. That provides a clear mechanism for organisations to set out the actions that they will take to address those risks. Alongside the PFD process, it is essential that the NHS continues to strengthen how it identifies and acts to mitigate risk in day-to-day epilepsy care. That is why, when it comes to epilepsy, we are working with the NHS and partners to embed structured risk assessments and consistent risk communication in routine practice, so that known risk factors are identified early, addressed where possible, and discussed openly with patients and families, in line with best practice.

Cutting waiting lists, including for neurology services, is a key priority for this Government. We have committed to achieving the NHS constitutional standard, which is that 92% of patients should wait no longer than 18 weeks from referral to treatment, by March 2029. We have already delivered 5.2 million additional elective appointments in our first year in government. Waiting lists overall are coming down, but we recognise that they remain too high, with neurology remaining a particularly challenged specialty.

For patients with epilepsy, timely access to specialist advice, supported by clear referral routes and co-ordinated care across primary care, community services and hospitals, is critical to good outcomes. Nationally, NHS England's neurology transformation programme developed a model of integrated care to support integrated care boards in delivering the right service at the right time to patients, as close to home as possible.

For those with refractory epilepsy who need highly specialised input, NHS England's updated service specification for specialised adult neurology services is clear that specialised neurology centres must include services for the assessment and management of refractory epilepsy.

Progress is being made on the treatment backlog. Between February 2025 and February 2026, the number of incomplete neurology pathways reduced by over 10,000, the average waiting time reduced from 16.5 weeks to 15 weeks, and the proportion of patients seen within 18 weeks increased to 57.9%. We will continue to work with the NHS to improve access and reduce delays for patients, including those with epilepsy, and families.

Research is central to improving outcomes for people with epilepsy. The Department funds research into epilepsy through the National Institute for Health and Care Research—the NIHR—and, in the five years from April 2020 to March 2025, we committed almost £19 million to 15 epilepsy research projects. The NIHR welcomes applications on all topics, including epilepsy.

I fully understand why patients and families continue to press for safe and equitable access to medical cannabis, particularly for children with drug-resistant epilepsy. There is one licensed cannabis-based medicine, Epidyolex, that is available for prescribing on the NHS, where clinically appropriate, following clear evidence of its safety and clinical and cost-effectiveness. Most cannabis-based medicines that patients are seeking are unlicensed and have not been assessed for their safety, quality or effectiveness. Until the evidence base improves, the NHS will not routinely fund them, and clinicians will rightly be cautious about prescribing. That is why, through NIHR and NHS England, the Government are investing over £9 million in clinical trials of cannabis-based medicines for drug-resistant epilepsy, to strengthen the evidence and support consistent, safe decision making.

We know that around 30% of people with epilepsy have a learning disability, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) set out, and that the risk of SUDEP is higher for those with a learning disability. The most recent “learning from lives and deaths” report found that epilepsy was one of the most common underlying causes of death for people with a learning disability between 2021 and 2023. That highlights how crucial it is that information and support for patients with epilepsy who have a learning disability is tailored to their individual needs.

Dave Robertson: I thank the Minister for delineating everything that the Government are doing to support people with epilepsy. I was fortunate enough to secure an Adjournment debate a couple of months ago to talk about the Clive Treacey safety checklist. The Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), said at the Dispatch Box that he expects every NHS

trust to follow that checklist. Does she agree with him, and will she send the message that all trusts must follow that checklist?

Mrs Hodgson: I welcome the development of the Clive Treacey safety checklist. It is an important part of Clive's legacy, notwithstanding the comments that my hon. Friend made about his legacy being much wider than that. We would encourage commissioners and service providers to use the checklist and its accompanying guidance as a key tool when designing services for their local populations, and to ensure that steps outlined in the checklist are followed whenever a patient experiences a significant change in their care. We hope that is being rolled out, followed and used.

At the national level, there are a number of programmes and tools supporting safer, more consistent epilepsy care. NICE guidance recommends that people with a learning disability have monitoring reviews at least annually, and information should be tailored and adapted. They should have access to specialist care and co-ordinated, multidisciplinary support. NICE is clear that where young people are transitioning into adult services, planning should begin early. While NICE guidance is not mandatory, the Government expect commissioners and service providers to take it fully into account when making decisions on how best to meet the needs of their local communities.

NHS England's RightCare programme has developed an epilepsy toolkit to support commissioners and clinicians in improving epilepsy care and reducing preventable deaths. The toolkit makes structured risk assessment and risk reduction, and proactive conversations about SUDEP, a core part of guidance, and it signposts practical resources, such as the SUDEP and seizure safety checklist, to support consistent risk communication in line with NICE guidance.

Health Education England, which is now part of NHS England, has developed an epilepsy programme in collaboration with SUDEP Action. That includes evidence-based training modules, delivered through the NHS England e-learning for healthcare platform, covering practical diagnosis and management, medication adherence and SUDEP risk factors. Alongside that, Government-supported frameworks, including the national bundle of care for children and young people with epilepsy, are helping to drive more equitable access to timely intervention and rehabilitation.

In closing, I thank the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage for securing this very important debate; it is great to see it so well attended. I thank all hon. Members who took part in it and made interventions, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and my hon. Friends the Members for Stroud (Dr Opher), for Lichfield, and for Southgate and Wood Green (Bambos Charalambous). They made a number of very important points, and if I need to follow up on any of them with colleagues in other Departments or in my Department, I definitely will.

I also thank those with lived experience of epilepsy, and the families who have lost loved ones to SUDEP. Their courage in speaking out continues to drive change through the work that we do in this place. We will continue to work with partners across the health system to support people with epilepsy and, ultimately, reduce deaths from epilepsy.

Question put and agreed to.

7.36 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Division

ENERGY

That the draft Energy Prices Act 2022(Extension of Time Limit) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 23 February, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 380, Noes 7.

Division No. 501]

AYES

Abbott, Jack
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Aquarone, Steff
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Babarinde, Josh
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Bennett, Alison
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brasher, Mr Jonathan
 Brewer, Alex
 Brickell, Phil
 Brown-Fuller, Jess
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Juliet
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carden, Dan
 Carling, Sam
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Chownes, Dr Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Creagh, Mary
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Darlington, Emily
 Davey, rh Ed
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies-Jones, Alex
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
 Dean, Josh
 Dearden, Kate
 Denyer, Carla
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Doughty, Stephen
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Dyke, Sarah
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eastwood, Sorchia
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Evans, Chris
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Farron, Tim
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh

Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Forster, Mr Will
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Franklin, Zöe
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 Gibson, Sarah
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Gittins, Becky (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Goldman, Marie
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Gould, Georgia
 Green, Sarah
 Greenwood, Lillian
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hanna, Claire
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kane, Mike
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Ayoub
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lightwood, Simon
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mahmood, rh Shabana
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
 Midgley, Anneliese
 van Mierlo, Freddie
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Mullane, Margaret
 Munt, Tessa
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 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
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell

Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Robertson, Dave
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roca, Tim
 Rodda, Matt
 Roome, Ian
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sabine, Anna
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shannon, Jim
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Hannah
 Stone, Jamie
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan

Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Luke
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet

Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Voaden, Caroline
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 West, Catherine
 Western, Andrew
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williams, David
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Wrigley, Martin
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Young, Claire
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Allister, Jim
 Anderson, Lee
 Easton, Alex
 Pochin, Sarah

Rosindell, Andrew
 Swann, Robin
 Tice, Richard

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 22 April 2026

[PAULA BARKER *in the Chair*]

Junior Doctors' Foundation Programme

9.30 am

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Foundation Programme and its role in supporting and retaining resident doctors.

Thank you, Mrs Barker, for chairing today's debate. First, I must thank everyone for coming and say something about my interests. As many know, I am an ear, nose and throat surgeon and I have a son who is a registrar in accident and emergency medicine. I am a fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons, I have an MD from the University of East Anglia, and my medical school was at Sheffield.

This debate is to consider the foundation programme and its role in retaining resident doctors. It is a privilege to introduce the debate, and I am grateful to all the colleagues who have come along this morning. As we all know, our resident doctors just spent six days on the picket lines; the wards were covered by others, operations were postponed and patients' appointments were rescheduled. When the strikes ended, as they did just over a week ago, the problems did not go away. That is why I asked for the debate. If we are serious about resetting the relationship between this Government and the medical profession, as I believe we all are, we must begin somewhere, and in my view we should begin where every doctor begins: at the foundations.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): From this morning's papers—perhaps the hon. Member will wish to refer to this—it seems that the Health Secretary had engaged with the British Medical Association and had an agreement with its leader. Does the hon. Member share my disappointment that even with that agreement, it went ahead with the strikes? When it had agreed a wage packet for doctors that could be anything from £50,000 as a starting wage to £100,000, it seemed that we had the recipe for an agreement, yet it was all thrown away by, it seems, the BMA.

Peter Prinsley: I heard the same thing; indeed, I met Dr Fletcher from the BMA yesterday myself and heard exactly this story, so the situation is intensely frustrating, but I believe that we can get ourselves back to a position in which an agreement can be reached.

My argument this morning is simple. The foundation programme, the first two years of a doctor's working life, is, in its present form, not supporting and retaining doctors as it should. The problem is that the doctors are treated like numbers on a spreadsheet rather than the people they are, and some of our brightest young doctors, at precisely the moment when they need the most support, are considering leaving the NHS altogether.

Let me set out what the system does, why it is failing, what we have learned from recent attempts to reform it and what I believe we ought to do instead; but let me first refer to a Royal College of Physicians survey of

resident doctors that was done in 2025, which has some interesting findings. Only 44% of the resident doctors stated that they were satisfied with their clinical training. Just 26% of the respondents felt ready to move on to the next step. About 20% of the doctors thought that the recruitment process was fair, which meant that 80% of them thought that it was unfair. About half of them want to work less than full time and, most alarmingly, only 65% of them said that they thought they would be working in the NHS in five years' time.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate. Given that the foundation programme is typically the first full-time frontline post for doctors and often coincides with the period when they are most vulnerable to stress and burnout, does he agree that the Government should be doing more to address their workload?

Peter Prinsley: Certainly we must address the workload but, as I will reveal later in my speech, there are many things that we can do to help the situation.

Let me say a bit about my own experience, which admittedly was a long time ago—

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): No!

Peter Prinsley: I know—it is hard to believe. I was a medical student in Sheffield, and my first jobs were at the Royal Hallamshire hospital and the Northern General hospital. I have fond memories of the time that we started there. There was, for instance, a doctors' mess with hot food. There was somewhere for us to live; we had residences. It is ironic that the name "junior doctors" was changed—just last year, I think—to "resident doctors", because that is the very last thing they are. The residences have all disappeared—they have been sold off—and the doctors work shift systems, sometimes with absolutely nowhere to rest.

We had six-month rather than four-month rotations, which meant that we got to know the teams we worked with. We worked with named consultants. We had a distinct pyramidal team, with senior registrars, registrars and senior house officers, and we knew the people we were working with. They were people we had known as medical students; they were often the people who had taught us. That meant that there was a sort of support network for young doctors as they started in their careers. On the whole, the newly qualified doctors of today do not experience anything quite like that.

Jamie Stone: It is great to hear a qualified doctor talking about this matter. Health is devolved in Scotland—I must put that on the record—but in my constituency one finds that an awful lot of social care workers are calling it a day and walking away, with all sorts of unfortunate ramifications such as delayed discharge. Crucially, the support for doctors that the hon. Gentleman is talking about is not there or has been reduced. Does he agree that, if we boosted social care workers' pay and conditions and retained them, that would help doctors?

Peter Prinsley: I absolutely agree that doctors are only part of a much bigger healthcare system. We certainly need to look after all the people involved in

[Peter Prinsley]

health and social care. Of course, that is more of a problem in geographically remote districts such as the hon. Gentleman's constituency, where I believe it is difficult to recruit professions of all sorts.

I do not want only to sound nostalgic this morning, although of course I am. I am not arguing that absolutely everything was better in my time, because it certainly was not, but in one important respect it was better: it was designed around human beings. It understood that newly qualified doctors are individuals, not one of a herd to be simply moved across a map by a computer. It also recognised that pastoral support and clinical teams matter, and that the transition from medical student to doctor is a particularly vulnerable moment in a medical career. Let us come back to that point soon.

Today, we have a thing called the foundation programme. In 2024, the foundation programme office replaced the application process with something called preference informed allocation. What happens is that medical students list the foundation schools in order of preference, and are each assigned a computer-generated rank. The rank is not informed by academic achievement, personal circumstance, where the student trained or what they did; it simply works through the ranks and places the student accordingly.

The UK foundation programme's 2026 figures show that of the 10,810 graduates allocated this year, 82% received their first preference. Superficially, that sounds quite reassuring, but I do not really think it is. Every year, a minority of graduates—this year it is roughly 1,900 young doctors—end up somewhere other than their first choice. The minority who do not get their first preference find themselves, aged 22 or 23, packing up their lives for a city where they know nobody. As I put it in the Chamber last month, it is a

“crazy foundation lottery that sends a doctor from Norwich to Belfast and a doctor from Belfast to Norwich.”—[*Official Report*, 26 March 2026; Vol. 783, c. 452.]

That is what we mean when we talk about a lottery. It is not a figure of speech, but a literal description of how the system works.

There is another reason why this headline figure flatters to deceive: the system incentivises what we call strategic preferencing. The students know the ranking system is random and that a high rank does not protect them tomorrow, so they game it. They preference the foundation schools they think they can realistically get, rather than the ones they actually want. A high first preference rate is, in part, a measure of the student lowering their ambition to protect themselves against a coin toss. That is not a system working; that is a system being worked around.

Let me say a bit about couples. Medical students often form a couple with other medical students or other people who work in hospitals, because that is the nature of a hospital. The foundation programme offers something called linked applications, but the unfairness is particularly acute. Two medical students in a relationship can choose to link their applications so that they are allocated together, but the pair is placed using the lower of the two ranks, so that if one of them is lucky in the ballot and the other is not, both are placed in the worst ranked situation. Should the algorithm be unable to accommodate both in a single school, the link is broken.

A student cannot unlink once they have applied, and there is no appeal. The system quite simply cannot see that these are two people trying to begin their careers side by side. It just sees two records on a database.

That has knock-on consequences throughout the rest of the service. When foundation doctors are disorientated, unsupported and demoralised, their work does not disappear; it flows upwards to the more senior doctors, who take more and more of it on themselves. Young doctors should not be deployed by ballot into strange cities, with only limited account taken of their circumstances—their partners, their dependants, their health or their need to be near home. The claim that the current system is somehow fairer than the one it replaced is, I am afraid, one we cannot accept.

Let me talk about how we got here and the recent reform. The old system was not perfect. For many years, medical students competed on a combination of academic decile and a national examination known as the situation judgment test. The SJT was quite unpopular: it was stressful, it had unpredictable validity and there was a documented score gap that consistently disadvantaged candidates from ethnic minority backgrounds. That was a real and serious unfairness, and those who reformed the system were right to try to address it. When the students lobbied against the SJT, they had a good reason to do so, but they did not ask for a random number generator—yet that is essentially what they got.

In 2024 the SJT was abolished and academic achievement stripped out. In their place came PIA, underpinned by a computer ranking. It is hard to think of a clearer case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Students asked for fairness, and they were given randomness. Those are not the same thing. Fairness takes account of circumstance; randomness ignores it. Fairness rewards merit and responds to need; randomness does neither. What we have is not a reformed system, but an experiment that has gone wrong.

That is not just my view. The medical training review led by Professor Stephen Powis and Professor Chris Whitty, published last October, drew on more than 8,000 responses, 6,000 of them from resident doctors. Its very first recommendation was that

“a reform of postgraduate medical education and training is undertaken as a matter of urgency.”

It also recommended that recruitment to medical training be reviewed so that it is

“fair and equitable to all candidates”.

It is not sufficient, on any reading of the report, for allocation merely to be random. Random is not fair.

The BMA has taken a big interest in this question, which is not surprising, and I will read out some of its recommendations:

“The BMA is calling for: meaningful improvements to working lives with greater access to support services, supervision, rest and mess facilities; increased flexibility in rotations, including the option to swap placements; a guarantee that all UK graduates will be offered a foundation post, with full details provided at least 12 weeks before the start date; and any review of the allocation system to include proposals for a new recruitment process developed with meaningful consultation with students.”

There is another group of doctors that we should consider: those who will progress to become academic doctors. There is a crisis in this country of clinical academics, the doctors who teach the next generation of

doctors. It has become very difficult to recruit into clinical academia. The career pathway for clinical academics has become very uncertain, and we have an emerging crisis—a real and present crisis—that must be addressed. One way to do that is to think about how we recruit foundation doctors into academic programmes.

Here is a straightforward proposal, which I hope colleagues will improve rather than simply accept. Let us return to a firm-based model for the first year of training. The F1 placement should be arranged by the medical schools, not by a centralised national algorithm, with each new doctor placed alongside peers they already know with consultants who have taught them. That is the system we had so many years ago. Medical schools know their students; they know who has the caring responsibilities, who has a linked partner, who has health needs, who has a strong reason to stay close to home. They are in the best possible position to start designing a year that makes sense for each individual.

That does not preclude movement later. F2 can broaden horizons, and specialty training will often mean relocation, but in the critical first year, when doctors are doing their first on-calls up at night by themselves, writing their first prescriptions and being present at their first deaths, they should not be alone in a city where they do not know anybody. They should be doing that with the support of their friends, teachers and colleagues they already trust. I do not think that would be particularly expensive; it might even cost less than the centralised allocation machinery we run today. Whatever we do, I offer one principle: medicine is the most distinctly human of professions and it is futile, and somewhat ironic, to try to reform it with an algorithm. The reform must be human.

Let me close where I began. Resident doctors have just come off picket lines. I do not think that in this debate we can rehearse the pay dispute, which is a matter for another day, but the strikes are not just about pay. At root, they are about a sense that the profession has been treated as though it does not matter. The individual doctor has become invisible behind the workforce spreadsheet. The Government have taken one very important step, with the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Act 2026 giving UK graduates the rightful priority for specialist training places—and that matters. Today's debate is an opportunity to take the next step to fix the starting point itself.

We have in medicine one of the most extraordinary workforces in the world. Young doctors are among the best trained, most dedicated and most compassionate professionals. We owe them and, more importantly, the patients who depend on them, better than a lottery. We owe them the fair, well-supported, human start they deserve. I believe that would go a long way to resetting the Government's relationship with the profession, and towards ending these damaging rolling strikes.

9.47 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for setting the scene incredibly well. We all appreciate his in-depth portrayal of the issues. I thank him for his 40 years, as I understand, of service to the NHS. It probably does not seem that long but, on paper and statistically, it clearly is.

The hon. Member has forgotten more than I will ever know about the procedures, as I speak from a layman's point of view. I can, however, outline what young doctors have told me, which certainly bears repeating. They work through their F1 and F2 years in fight-or-flight response. They work unsociable hours without a support network. They make life and death decisions, then return home from that night or day on duty and wonder whether they made the right decision. They wonder whether they missed something and they worry about their patients.

Doctors are empathic with their patients, they are compassionate and they understand the issues incredibly well. They follow shift patterns that on paper look like a different week but, in reality, they are working 80 hours over seven days. Off days on call keep them on tenterhooks waiting to know if they will be called in to do more work, which they will respond to out of duty and compassion. They are scheduled to finish work at 8 o'clock and on a regular basis they only leave at 9.30 pm. They start work before 8 am and take their first break at 2.45 pm, and that is not a one-off on a busy day—every day is a busy day. It is almost like "Groundhog Day"—that film where the alarm goes off at 6 am, he gets up, he does all the things, he goes back to bed and the next day starts the same—but for doctors, it is life and death.

When I asked how they function on that lack of sleep and sustenance, one 23-year-old doctor told me:

"I keep sweets in my pocket and pray for guidance."

It needs to be more than that. I carry sweets in my pocket because, as a diabetic, if I feel myself going down, I have a chew on one and it brings me back up again, but for them, it is to ensure their concentration. Christians always pray for guidance in everything they do. They need wisdom in all the work that they do.

When I asked that 23-year-old doctor what was next for her in life, what she wanted to specialise in and what her hopes were for the future, she said:

"I am so exhausted that I don't think anything is next."

The exhaustion takes over. The workload is overwhelming. Put simply, she is burnt out and feels unsupported and uncertain—not because she is not a confident person, but because the workload and all that she has done have overtaken her. That is replicated numerous times, in too many doctors for us to attribute it to personality. It is not her personality, because she is a lovely young lady; it is the current procedure.

I am very pleased to see the Minister in his place. He has empathy and understanding of what we need for our doctors. I am confident that his reply will encourage and hearten us. Hopefully, it will also help with the expectations on young doctors from families and with the paperwork—that has never been more onerous, yet there is no time for them to set aside to do it because they are overwhelmed by the workload in wards and A&E and surgical work supporting doctors. If their placement is in a smaller hospital, they do not have the support of house doctors or consultants during evening shifts, and the pressure is immense. I said earlier that it is overwhelming, and it is, to the extent that they sometimes just say to themselves, "My goodness me, how am I going to keep going?"

We all understand that medicine, by its very nature, is highly pressured and that skills are learned not only in books, but in practice. For the junior doctors I met back

[Jim Shannon]

home, it is a physical practice—they learn by what happens in the ward. Home-grown students are not being retained, however, so changes to the system must take place, and take place soon. In his introduction, the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket referred to one doctor who went from Norwich to Belfast and another who went from Belfast to Norwich. It is unreal, and it seems idiotic—I use that word in a very gentle way—that that should take place.

Training a doctor in the UK costs the taxpayer roughly £230,000 to £327,000 per student from medical school through foundation training. That is a big sum of money, but we are training someone on whom we depend to be the best in a critical situation in hospital. Who of us, when we have a chat with our doctor and ask for their opinion, will not accept what the doctor tells us as gospel? We trust that we can depend on that doctor's diagnosis of the disease, so that money must result in qualified, capable doctors and not just young people who could have made a difference if they had been given the support and reasonable working hours with reasonable pay to make all the on-calls and missed sleeping patterns worth it.

Alex Easton: Another problem we have in Northern Ireland is that many doctors are moving over to private care, which is leading to shortfalls of NHS doctors. Is that something we need to tackle to retain doctors in the NHS?

Jim Shannon: It certainly is. To be fair, I do not know of any doctors who have made the journey, but I know that they are certainly aware of the bigger wage packets available in, for instance, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, where they can go for two or three years. The problem is that if they go away for two or three years, they may never come back. It is not just a matter of going to earn big money to pay off student fees and move forward—it is more than that. It is a critical issue, so the hon. Member is right to mention it.

I wonder whether the Minister would consider in his response the option of having student doctors sign a retainer that would keep them in the NHS, and consider providing a bursary for their fees. I understand that Wales does that; I know it is a regional matter for us in Northern Ireland, but if Wales can do it, there are certainly points for us to consider.

I have constituents who have gone to Wales from Northern Ireland for the purpose of going away for two or three years—I think of one young lady in particular whose family I know well. She went to Wales and completed her full studies there at university and in the hospitals. Then, of course, what happens? She meets a young Welsh guy and he sweeps her off her feet and the next thing we know, she is engaged, she is married—she is never coming home.

We will not have the advantage of that young lady's expertise, but Wales will. I am very pleased that Wales will have that expertise, because she is an excellent student and person. I am sure there are many other people for whom the same thing has happened, because love is a funny thing, is it not? When it gets you, you cannot get off it. You are caught forever. From my point of view, my wife has stuck with me for 39 years—my goodness, she needs a medal.

I have spoken at length about intelligent, capable young people who feel overworked and underappreciated but who, most importantly, feel overwhelmed. That can change with support—support that must echo from here not with words, but with appropriate pay and staffing. If we do that, we will retain the best of the best within the NHS. I do not doubt that that is the desire of the Minister and this Government, and of every hon. Member here.

9.58 am

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) not just for securing this important debate, but for his service in this sector.

I am shocked by what the hon. Member set out about the algorithm and how students or resident doctors are placed in the embryonic stages of their profession. In fact, I am astounded—I suspect many parliamentarians will not know this, and certainly the public will not be familiar with the process—that there is no appeals process. I suspect that something could quite easily be incorporated, within certain parameters, so that not everybody gets to appeal, but it is possible in exceptional circumstances. That must be right.

When we talk about the future of healthcare in the United Kingdom, we are really talking about the people who hold it together every single day, and resident doctors are at the core of that. These individuals have committed years of their life to rigorous study, they have worked long hours and they have an unwavering dedication to patient care, yet at one of the most critical stages of their career, many feel unsupported, overstretched and uncertain about their future within the NHS.

This is where and how the foundation programme plays a vital role. It is not just about a training pathway; it is the bridge between medical school and a lifelong career in medicine. At its best, the foundation programme provides structured learning, broad clinical exposure, and the opportunity to develop confidence and competence in real-world settings. It shapes not only skills, but professional identity.

If we are serious about supporting and retaining resident doctors, however, the foundation programme must do more than simply place doctors into rotations—it must actively nurture them. That means ensuring fair workloads, access to high-quality supervision and protected time for education. It means creating environments where doctors feel valued, heard and supported not just as clinicians, but as people. Retention is not just about pay or contracts; it is about culture. When doctors, especially foundation doctors, feel respected, when their wellbeing is prioritised and when they can see a sustainable future within the system, they are far more likely to stay and build their careers in the United Kingdom. One of the biggest problems I see around Birmingham is new and young doctors talking about moving abroad.

We cannot ignore the reality that many resident doctors have felt pushed to the point of taking industrial action. Strikes are never a first choice; they are a last resort when people feel that they have no other way to be heard. Concerns about pay erosion, rising living costs and consistently long and demanding hours have created a situation where many doctors feel undervalued and exhausted.

I went to a picket line outside Queen Elizabeth hospital Birmingham. So many young doctors there talked about how they were unable to live in close proximity to the hospital; they were living many miles away, simply because of accommodation costs. That is quite surprising, because we often hear people talk about junior doctors earning so much money. But if in reality, after tax and all the other expenses, junior doctors—people who save lives—cannot afford to pay for accommodation near the hospital, that shows how our system is broken.

If we want to be honest about supporting doctors, we must acknowledge that their concerns are not unreasonable. A system that relies on goodwill alone is not sustainable. Extra investment in the NHS means very little if it does not translate into better pay, safer working conditions and genuine support for the workforce delivering care every day. The Government must do more: not just words, but meaningful action. That means engaging constructively, addressing the pay concerns fairly and ensuring working conditions that allow doctors to provide safe, high-quality care without burning out.

If we invest properly in the foundation programme and support doctors throughout their early careers, allowing them an appeals process for exceptional circumstances and giving them the basic support in addressing their current challenges, we are investing in the long-term strength of our healthcare system. Supporting resident doctors is not optional—it is essential. When we support them, we do not just retain doctors; we safeguard the future of patient care.

10.3 am

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for another insightful speech; this time I will avoid comparing the anatomy of human and dog ear canals—we have covered that already.

We always rightly start these speeches by paying tribute to NHS staff, doctors, nurses and everyone involved in patient care, especially given the pressures on them as a result of sheer patient numbers and working in systems that can make the job even more stressful and pressurised than it already is. They are caring for severely injured or very ill people at the toughest moments of their lives. The emotional burden of caring for people who could be dying is difficult in itself, but resident doctors work in a system that adds extra pressures and conditions that can add stress alongside that. We cannot pay enough tribute to them for even surviving in those areas.

One of the best books highlighting the plight of resident doctors that I have read is Adam Kay's "This is Going to Hurt". It did a lot to help the public to understand just how difficult it is for a doctor to not know where their training place is going to be. It is where they are going to be forced to live and work for several years—a place where they may not have any friends or family; they might be taken away from family and spouses. They might have dependants and children. It is really difficult to plan a career, especially such a difficult and challenging career, when working with that level of uncertainty. I lived with medical students when I was a student at Liverpool University and have followed their careers since. The challenges that the hon. Member set out have been reflected in their lives and careers.

I support the Government's ambition to increase medical school placements. That is important. We have a recognised workforce shortage in the NHS, so that is an obvious thing to do, but we must ensure that we do not carry on falling into the same trap. The previous Government, under Boris Johnson, said that they would increase medical school placements—and they did, but without providing the infrastructure for training resident doctors who want to go on to specialised training. That obvious bottleneck was going to filter through. No mechanism was put in place to ensure that the NHS would have the capacity to train those extra medical students when they finished their F1 and F2.

In Winchester I speak to many resident doctors, and even to their parents. Those resident doctors have gone through university, sometimes getting themselves in a fair amount of student loan debt, and are working hard on their F1 and F2. The stress of not knowing whether they will get a training placement is overwhelming, frustrating and for us, as a society, ridiculous because we are short of doctors. How have we ended up in a situation where we are training students and resident doctors, but cannot give them the further training places to continue? I urge the Government to ensure that any training places will filter all the way through for the rest of that person's career.

We know that the last Government not only thought it sounded good for winning votes to say that they would increase medical school placements, but said that they would build 40 new hospitals, though there was absolutely no funding—putting votes before a genuine long-term plan for the NHS. We then come up against a brick wall of reality. People working in the NHS end up suffering and the people who rely on the NHS—everyone—end up not getting the service that they voted for.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the Minister's statement about increasing training numbers, especially for people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. It is important that we look at the diversity of the professions. Certainly within the veterinary profession, socioeconomic diversity is not what it should be; it does not reflect society. A profession—whether the medical profession or another—offers a better service to society if it better reflects it. I once heard someone say that talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not. It is the job of all professions to ensure that we get the people with the talent enrolled on courses so that they can have fulfilling careers and offer much back to society.

The statement is a really good first step, but it is a bit vague. The Minister writes about underserved parts of the UK seeing new medical spaces; how many will there be, and how will that be delivered? Will current medical schools increase their capacity? Will new teaching hospitals open to support it? The target is to place

"up to 25% of students at participating medical schools...to local foundation training places".

How many medical schools have indicated that they want to participate? That will be fundamental to how this policy gets delivered.

To reiterate what the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket said, we need to treat medical students and resident doctors like people; they are not just numbers. Working conditions are as important as pay, and to improve working conditions we need to double

[Dr Danny Chambers]

down on improving social care to avoid delayed discharge and corridor care. The doctors delivering treatment will feel that they are doing a better job, and will not feel under pressure as a result of being unable to deliver the care that they want and that patients deserve.

We also need to ensure that we have a happy, resilient, passionate and excited workforce going forward. The Minister has been asked constructive questions. I ask him not to repeat the previous Government's mistakes of talking about increasing hospital numbers and medical students, while creating a whole generation of doctors who cannot go on to serve their communities and have a fulfilling career.

10.11 am

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) on securing this debate and giving a great speech. I need to declare an interest as a consultant paediatrician in the national health service, a member of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and a member of the British Medical Association.

Going back a little while to when I was young—in fact, we are going back 25 years—I graduated as a doctor in 2001. I had done a five-year degree and I had provisional registration with the General Medical Council. In order to get full registration, I had to complete a year as a pre-registration house officer, most commonly referred to as a house officer. That was six months of medicine and six months of surgery in adult care in either order. It was, to some extent, an extension of medical school. Indeed, it was supervised by the medical school in terms of placements, and almost everyone—I say “almost”; I will come back to that in a moment—stayed local.

In the process that I followed in Newcastle, where I was a student—I am recollecting this from 25 years ago—we had to apply for two medical and two surgical jobs. I applied for the Royal Victoria Infirmary and the Freeman hospital, but there were other options across the north-east where people were involved in training and medical school placements, such as Carlisle, Sunderland, North Tyneside—which was particularly popular at that time—South Cleveland and others. As with any other job, one was shortlisted, interviewed and potentially offered a job. The system worked so that, if a person was offered both jobs, they had to pick one. When the first round went out, people said which job they wanted and that was theirs. All the other jobs that were not allocated were put back into round two, people applied again, and by the time it got to round three essentially everyone had a job.

The benefit of the system was that everyone knew that they had a job in the region where they trained to complete their full registration with the GMC, and the Government knew that all the people they had invested in for that training would become fully qualified doctors, provided they put in the requisite effort and attainment.

However, changing over deaneries was extremely difficult. I applied for the RVI and the Freeman, and I got offered both. That was straightforward, but then I fell in love. I was proposed to, I accepted and I planned a

wedding for no more than a week before I graduated. I did not fall in love with another member of hospital staff; I fell in love with a farmer, and farms are quite difficult to shift.

I then decided that I wanted to move to Nottingham deanery. It is fair to say that Newcastle deanery was not keen on that idea, although it was supportive, and Nottinghamshire deanery was really not keen on the idea because it had to fit an extra person into the system. It made that clear, saying, “Well, you’re not having a job in a big teaching hospital.” That was fine: I just wanted a job near to where my husband’s farm was. I was allowed to move deaneries under those special circumstances.

I first spent time at Lincoln under Dr Patterson, a wonderful consultant, as a young doctor. He was a respiratory physician, and I very much felt part of his team. I then went to Mansfield, where I worked for Mr Moulton, an orthopaedic surgeon. He was a lovely man; we used to do French verbs together during knee operations. After that, I worked for Miss Patterson, a vascular surgeon.

As the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket put it, I very much felt part of a firm or part of a team. There was continuity of care, as I was looking after my consultant’s patients. I was not part of a massive group of people performing a list of tasks for a whole range of consultants on a group of patients who I did not know, which is how it can be for many junior doctors now.

The other thing provided at that time was accommodation. Part of the system with a PRHO job was that accommodation was provided for free, on the hospital site or very close to it, for the first year. That meant that when junior doctors were doing those two six-month jobs straight out of medical school, they had accommodation.

In their wisdom, the people negotiating the pay and conditions decided to give that accommodation up for a little bit of extra money. At the time I thought that was mad, but since I had passed that stage, at the time I considered that it was really none of my business. However, I think that it caused a problem, particularly because the European working time directive has meant that instead of working really long shifts, people work much shorter shifts but have much longer travelling times. I was working long shifts but not having to do a lot of travelling. Junior doctors now have to do shorter shifts—more of them, on a much less flexible rota, to get all the required shifts in—and they are also travelling for miles at the beginning and end of each shift. I think that change has been counterproductive; I wonder whether the Minister has any thoughts about it.

The other thing is that the system was based on merit—whether or not I got the job at the RVI or the Freeman was based on merit. I had to apply. I had to say that I had done things such as presenting at an international conference as a final-year student. That sort of thing was considered important, as was getting good grades in my exams or in my project work at medical school; now it is not.

I just wanted to examine what happened between that time and now. In 2005, the then Labour Government introduced a modernising medical careers programme, which changed the one-year foundation programme to

a two-year foundation programme—I am not clear why that was thought necessary—and the placements were changed from six months to three or four months in duration. I agree with the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket that that is too short for someone to really get into a job, and to understand the team they are in and what they are doing, before they have to move on again. People have virtually just arrived and then they are going.

There was then the medical training application scheme, or MTA scheme, in 2007, which was a national scheme. There were lots of errors and data breaches. The Secretary of State apologised, and we went back to the deanery approach. There was then a lot of concern that that system was not fair, and that it was stressful; it required people to perform well in exams, and people did not like that very much.

So we have gone to the Oriel system—this preference-informed allocation system that matches people with places. In the engagement process before it was brought in, there were 14,500 responses, mostly from students, and 66% of respondents said they wanted the system, while about 30% said they did not, so it was brought in. The education performance measure and the situational judgment tests, which have been referred to, were removed, and a lottery system was brought in. Essentially, it means that junior doctors are given a completely randomly allocated number, based on nothing but chance. Junior doctors are then allowed to express a preference for particular foundation programmes.

However, when I refer to foundation programmes, I mean areas of the country. As I said, in the case of Newcastle that can mean an area that goes all the way from one coast to another—for example, right down to Middlesbrough and up to Hexham and Berwick. Those are not small areas; they are quite chunky bits of the country to travel around, requiring many hours of travel, from north to south to east to west, in some of them.

Nevertheless, applicants get to express a preference. The computer system will allocate places on the basis that if someone's first preference is available, they get it, but if it is not they effectively get put back in the box for later. The computer will go down the list until it has allocated all the first preferences and, as the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket said, quite a lot of people do get their first preference although, as he also said, whether or not it was their first preference in truth is another matter.

Then an applicant gets to look in the foundation area that they have been allocated to, and to express a preference regarding the jobs within that region. The computer, using the same number—if the student was lucky the first time, they are lucky the second time—goes down the list and allocates them. If they are not allocated, it has to go round again and allocate them a later preference. That means that people either get their first preference or go very much further down the list: a Newcastle medical student, as I was, could get sent to Penzance, which is a lovely place but a long way from Newcastle. There is nothing the student can do about that. They have no control over their life. Even if they are the best-performing medical student in every capacity in the whole country, they still get sent where they get sent—and that is tough.

Peter Prinsley: Some time ago, when I came here, I had working with me an intern, Dr Harry Dunn, who was a medical student at Cambridge University. He graduated last year. He came top, not only of the University of Cambridge medical student cohort, but of the whole of the University of Cambridge, so he was the top student of his year. He was offered a foundation post in Northern Ireland. He chose not to take it, and has now gone into consulting, having given up medicine. That is an extremely sad example of an unintended consequence of this crazy lottery.

Dr Johnson: I congratulate that person on his prowess in university. He is clearly an incredible person, and it is a shame that he has been lost to medicine. I am sure Northern Ireland is a great place to work, and it is disappointing that he did not want to go there, but he should have been able to apply for the jobs that he wanted in places where he wanted to work, and to compete fairly for them. That is a bit stressful and competitive—but getting into medical school is competitive.

You may not know this, Mrs Barker, but the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket and I grew up on the same street, in the same town, and went into similar-ish careers. We competed for medical school places and for our jobs. We are all here today having competed against others for election—that is the reality of life. To remove the competition, which is based on meritocracy, and replace it with a random allocation is more unfair and stressful than the alternative.

One of the issues raised about the old scheme was that it was difficult to recruit in some areas. The competition for the best jobs, or at least those perceived to be the best or most wanted jobs, means that some areas of the country and some specialties could find themselves with the people who did not succeed in getting the jobs they wanted. How do we manage that? It used to be managed with rotations. When people went to the interview for specialist jobs, they would be called in one at a time and told, "These are the rotations available. Which one do you want?" The best jobs—the most popular ones—would be mixed with the least popular, so that would mitigate the problem.

There is one issue that I want to raise briefly. Some medical schools in the UK, including Newcastle, have overseas campuses in Malta, Cyprus and Malaysia. Some British people have gone to those branches of UK medical schools and have found themselves completely excluded from places in the United Kingdom under the medical training changes that the Government have made in the past couple of months, which seems wrong. We talked about that when the Bill went through, and the Minister was keen to reassure us that all would be well, but we have found that British students have not been able to get jobs in the British training programme. Will the Minister look at prioritising at least those who went to medical school before the changes for British jobs?

The current system gives junior doctors—resident doctors, as they are called now—no agency, no control, no appeal and no alternative. It is clearly unfair. Could the Minister update the House on how he intends to fix the system?

10.24 am

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I congratulate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for securing this vital debate, and all the hon. Members who have contributed. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's significant and distinguished career and experience in our NHS. I take the opportunity to thank resident doctors up and down the country for the vital contribution they make to our NHS and to treating the patients it serves.

As my hon. Friend said in his opening speech, the UK foundation programme is a central part of the pathway to becoming a doctor, bridging the gap between medical school and specialty or general practice training in the NHS. It supports newly qualified doctors to develop the clinical and professional skills needed to deliver safe and effective care, preparing them for progression into core, specialty or general practice training. Resident doctors who currently work in the NHS have made it clear that they have concerns and frustrations with their training experience. We are committed to listening to and addressing that and to improving the training pathway for the medical workforce, for the benefit of NHS services and patients.

Through phase 1 of the medical training review we conducted extensive engagement to ensure that doctors, patients and NHS leaders had the opportunity to describe what works well in medical education and training and what needs to improve to meet the needs of both resident doctors and patients. The phase 1 diagnostic report was published last year and made 11 recommendations centred on four key priorities: more flexible training; removing the divide between service and training; ending the damaging recruitment bottlenecks and rewarding teams where doctors feel valued.

The implementation team, led by Dame Jane Dacre, who has been appointed as the independent chair for this work, will now work with doctors, the General Medical Council, the Medical Schools Council, royal colleges and other bodies to drive this much-needed change.

Dr Johnson: Could the Minister highlight the timing of that in relation to the workforce plan, and when that will be published?

Stephen Kinnock: The workforce plan will be published this spring, so there is not too long to wait. It has taken a little longer than we initially hoped, but we think it is really important to ensure that it is anchored in very solid engagement with our partners and stakeholders.

Earlier this year, the Government delivered fast-track legislation to put UK medical graduates at the front of the queue for foundation and specialty training places, reducing uncertainty and ensuring that they can progress to full registration as doctors. We have confirmed that all eligible UK medical graduates will be offered a place on the foundation programme this year. Of course, our fast-track legislation seeks to rectify the unforgivably reckless and damaging decision made by the previous Government to remove the resident labour market test after Brexit, which in many ways is the root cause of the mess created by the neglect and incompetence of the previous Government over 14 years.

I turn now to the process for allocating places to applicants for the UK foundation programme and the steps the Government are taking to improve it. We recognise that the location a foundation doctor is assigned for training has both professional and personal impacts. The four UK Health Departments determine the number of places available each year based on workforce planning across the continuum of postgraduate medical education and training. Applicants are allocated across the UK using a nationally applied preference informed allocation system, which has been extensively commented on in the debate.

The PIA system was introduced in 2024, following extensive engagement with the four UK statutory education bodies, medical students and key stakeholders. The move to the new system aimed to address concerns that the previous system was unfair and stressful for applicants and that there was a lack of standardisation within and across schools. It is worth mentioning that the consultation on the PIA system received over 14,500 responses, 66% of which favoured a move to the PIA option against the status quo. There were 106 organisations among those 14,500 responses. It was an extensive consultation with fairly conclusive feedback on the change that was required.

Ayoub Khan: In relation to the consultation on the PIA system, does the Minister agree that, if there is no appeal process in the system, it cannot be fair, because there will be extenuating circumstances that ought to be considered? That is something I suspect the Government could implement relatively easily.

Stephen Kinnock: It is worth highlighting that around 82% of applicants get their first preference. That is a significant improvement—it was 71% in 2023. We are taking steps in the right direction, but we would love to get to 100%. It is difficult to get to 100% of anything in a large and complex system, but that is our aspiration. Of course, those who do not get their first place are welcome to re-engage with the system, and efforts are made to ensure they get their preference, although we do not always succeed in that process. I will take the hon. Member's question away and discuss it with my colleague the Minister of State for Health—she leads on this portfolio, although she was not available for this debate—and we will write to him with further clarifications on the important point he makes.

The introduction of the PIA was broadly supported by stakeholders, and I am pleased that we have seen an improvement under this system in the number of students allocated their first preference programme. As I said, 82% of applicants to this year's foundation programme were allocated their first preference, up from 71% in 2023. However, we are committed to ensuring that the system remains fit for purpose. NHS England will conduct a review to ensure that it is still working for applicants. The timelines of that review will be confirmed in due course.

Furthermore, although some individuals may want to move away from their university area for foundation training, some need greater certainty, for a range of reasons, about their foundation placements. In the last two years, we have supported a portion of students in three UK medical schools by allocating them to foundation programmes in their local area. Last Friday we went further, announcing that we will work with medical

schools and foundation schools to extend that support to trainees across the country from disadvantaged backgrounds. Providing a post close to where they live will mean more stability for trainees and will support employers in developing a local workforce.

I would like to say a final word on the PIA. I think we all accept that it is not perfect—it is very difficult to have a perfect system—but I take issue with the characterisation by some Members in the debate that it is a random system. We do not agree with that characterisation. We are clear that the system in place is enabling people to clearly articulate their first preference, and in the overwhelming majority of cases they are getting their first preference. That does not feel like a random system to us, but we absolutely accept that it is not perfect, and there is always room for improvement.

Let me turn to rotations. We recognise the importance of stability for doctors in training and the impact that frequent relocations can have on wellbeing, retention and workforce planning. Following the 2024 resident doctors agreement, the Department of Health and Social Care conducted a review of rotational training and found that rotations can provide valuable breadth of experience. However, we know that in some cases they can disrupt learning, wellbeing, team integration and patient care. To tackle that, NHS England is developing pilots under the medical education and training review to test longer placements and more flexible arrangements for less-than-full-time trainees. The evaluation of those pilots will inform future policy decisions on placement length and continuity benefits.

I turn now to the wider working conditions for resident doctors. It is essential that we create a supportive environment for doctors throughout their training that looks after their health and wellbeing. NHS England's resident doctors' working lives programme continues to implement several measures aimed at supporting resident doctors, encouraging them to stay in training and the NHS and reducing overall attrition. That includes measures such as the less-than-full-time training options to allow trainees to continue to work in the service and progress with their training on a reduced working pattern where that is beneficial for their personal circumstances.

We have made significant progress over the past year to improve the working lives of resident doctors, including agreeing an improved exception reporting system, which will ensure that doctors are compensated fairly for additional work, and rationalising statutory and mandatory training to reduce unnecessary burden and repetition.

Dr Johnson: The Minister talked about less-than-full-time training, which has obviously had an impact on the number of doctors we need. The Secretary of State said before the general election that if Labour was elected, it would double the number of medical school places. Is that still the Government's intention?

Stephen Kinnock: Yes, that is the Government's intention. Obviously, we have had some challenges in April around our hope that we could create 1,000 additional places. We have not been able to do that, unfortunately, because of the reckless decision of the BMA to go back out on strike. The absorption of huge capacity, as well as operational issues, has meant that we have not been able to do that.¹

Dr Johnson: I thank the Minister for that answer, but I believe that it relates to postgraduate training places. I was asking whether it is still the intention to double the number of medical school places?

Stephen Kinnock: Sorry; I misunderstood the question. Yes, it is still our intention to double the number of medical school places.¹

The Government remain committed to publishing a 10-year workforce plan this spring to set out how we will create a workforce ready to deliver the transformed service that we set out in the 10-year health plan. The 10-year workforce plan will ensure that the NHS has the right people, in the right places, with the right skills to care for patients when they need it.

NHS staff told us through the 10-year health plan engagement that they are crying out for change. The workforce plan will set out how we deliver that change by making sure staff are better treated and have better training, more fulfilling roles and hope for the future.

I thank all hon. Members for taking part in this important debate.

Ayoub Khan: I hesitate to interrupt the Minister's final remarks, but will he shed some light on the strike by young junior doctors? Queen Elizabeth hospital in my constituency serves many local residents. The young doctors I have spoken to talk about the cost of living and the inability to support themselves, at the point when they are entering an exciting career. What more support will the Government provide them with?

Stephen Kinnock: That gives me an opportunity to highlight the fact that this Government have delivered a 29% pay increase for resident doctors. Although I absolutely accept that, prior to July 2024, over 14 years of dealing with an incompetent Government, they suffered from being underpaid and neglected, and we had to seek to fix that—we have done that in good faith and with good will—there have to be limits to what we can offer. The sky is not the limit; the limit is the deeply damaged and parlous state of the public finances that were left to us when we took over in July 2024, and the significant pressures across every aspect of Government.

We implore the resident doctors and the BMA to come back to the table. The Secretary of State believed that he had a deal with the officers of the BMA, and those officers then took that deal to the broader committee. There is no doubt that that committee has ideological motivations, and it refused to accept the deal. We are now in a very challenging position. The Secretary of State has asked several times for a face-to-face meeting with the entire committee, and that request has been refused. We have to make progress, but I simply remind its members that most of our constituents would see a 29% pay increase as a pretty positive deal.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for that comprehensive response to the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan). So near and yet so far—that is the way I see it. I have always supported the Secretary of State in his endeavours to secure a deal, and it is incredibly frustrating to get so close to one and for it then to fall down. I am probably reiterating what the Minister said, but although the deal fell and we did not secure what we all hoped for, does the Department

1.[Official Report, 27 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 3WC.] (Correction)

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[Jim Shannon]

intend to continue engaging with the BMA and the junior doctors to secure a deal? We have got so close that we must be able to get this over the line.

Stephen Kinnock: The short answer is yes, absolutely—our door is always open. We have to find a constructive way through this. I accept that it is not always just about pay; it is also about broader terms and conditions—exactly the things we have been debating today. That is why I was so excited by the fast-track legislation we brought forward specifically to address the bottlenecks and the impact of the disgraceful decision under the previous Government to remove the resident labour market test. We are seeking to fix all those problems, and we need a constructive partner on the other side of the table to do that. We are starting to see in opinion polls that public support for the action taken by the BMA and resident doctors is eroding quite seriously, and I hope they take that into account before they make their next decisions.

Dr Caroline Johnson: As a doctor, I feel uncomfortable with the morality of going on strike and leaving patients to suffer in order to get more money for oneself. I think the morality of the strikes is outrageous. However, does the Minister regret the repealing of the minimum service levels legislation, which could have enabled the Government to put in firmer boundaries around the strikes to prevent harm to patients? Will the Government consider banning doctors from striking altogether, as a Conservative Government would, in the same way that people in the Army and the police are banned from striking?

Stephen Kinnock: The hon. Lady's point about morality is important and interesting, but people also have to be able to put bread on the table, pay the mortgage or rent, and feed and clothe their kids. Morality is fine, but it does not put bread on the table. The two things are very important.

On the retrograde steps the Conservative party is proposing around industrial relations, that is just not what the Labour party is about. The Labour party is about constructive, positive industrial relations and respect. It is about treating the workforce and unions with the respect they deserve and finding a constructive solution. We do not want to move to some kind of police state, where we restrict the rights of trade unions. We see the right to organise and go on strike as a fundamental right of citizens in our country, and it would be a retrograde step to remove it. It is pretty extraordinary to hear that suggested by the Conservative party when we live in a liberal democracy. So the answer to the hon. Lady's question is no. I believe we will find a way through this dispute. It will be hard going—it will be two steps forward and one step back, I am sure—but in the end I believe we will get there.

Dr Johnson: I thank the Minister for being extremely generous with his time. He says the Government will not consider removing the right of doctors to strike, but he seems to be going further and suggesting that doing so would be wrong in principle. Do the Government

therefore intend to allow the right to strike for those who are currently not allowed to, such as the police and armed forces?

Stephen Kinnock: We have those restrictions on the right to strike in the police and the armed forces for obvious reasons of national security. I think that is a very different issue; our critical national infrastructure must be protected, and there cannot be any dispute about that.

We are dealing with a workforce whose pay and conditions had clearly been neglected. The previous Government used the moral argument the hon. Lady was trying to make as leverage to keep pay and conditions down, which I would say is a deeply immoral position to take. The right to be a member of a trade union and to go on strike is relevant to certain sectors of our labour market, and that right, where it exists, should be protected; where it does not exist, that is a completely different debate.

I thank all Members for taking part in this important debate. The Government are taking important steps, and we remain committed to improving the working lives and prospects of resident doctors, and to ensuring an effective foundation programme.

10.46 am

Peter Prinsley: I thank all hon. Members who came to speak in the debate. I particularly thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan), who gave very interesting Back-Bench contributions. I also thank the Minister and the Opposition spokespeople—the hon. Members for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson) and for Winchester (Dr Chambers)—for their contributions. It is quite true that the shadow Minister and I grew up on the same street—probably about 10 houses apart, but many more than 10 years apart.

This has been an interesting debate, whose purpose was to highlight the plight of foundation doctors. As we have said, if we can fix the foundations, we will be able to fix the problems we have with our young doctors. I definitely think that this industrial dispute, which has been rolling and rumbling on for several years, is solvable. It sounds as though we were close to solving it and particularly to attending to the conditions of young doctors.

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Order. I remind the hon. Member that this is not a chance for a second speech; it is just a winding-up speech.

Peter Prinsley: I will wind up, then. I thank everyone very much, and I look forward to seeing success in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Foundation Programme and its role in supporting and retaining resident doctors.

10.48 am

Sitting suspended.

Army Reserve

11 am

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Army Reserve.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Barker. It is also a pleasure to have the Minister in her place; she brings with her a distinguished service record and is recognised across the House as having a genuine commitment to our armed forces. I am sure that she, like me, recognises that the role of the Army Reserve has changed in recent years. When we debate this issue, we are not simply talking about training days with the reserves; they play a much more active role in supporting defence capabilities on a daily basis.

In bringing forward this debate, my purpose is not to strike a partisan tone. There is much on which both sides of the House can agree. First, the Government are right to say that the threat to our national security has increased, and increased materially. The strategic defence review is right to focus on expanding our reserves as one of the measures that we need to take. The Armed Forces Bill, despite some of the noise in the media, has a number of sensible measures on updating legislation. There are areas, as a foundation, that all sides of the House can agree on.

My principal concern is the gap between the Government's words and their delivery. In particular, I am concerned about their delivery in the context of negotiations with the Treasury, and in the context of a No. 10 that is perhaps distracted by other issues and not as focused on responding to the national security threat with provisions such as the reserves.

I will address that point through three areas: first, the reserve numbers; secondly, a specific issue this year around the Government's commitment to reserve service days, a material issue on which it would be helpful to hear directly from the Minister; and thirdly, funding prioritisation and to what extent—given some of the media stories regarding the Ministry of Defence and the wider context that it faces—funding, whether for equipment or estate for the reserves, will be ringfenced or secured this year.

On numbers, Members on both sides of the House recognise that boosting the number of our reserves is probably one of the best-value options for the MOD in terms of building defence capability. It is what I would regard as low-hanging fruit—something that should be done. The SDR set a modest ambition of a 20% increase, but I think we should be doubling the numbers this Parliament; other countries such as France are doing that—and from a higher base, so up to over 100,000.

Even on the Government's more modest ambition of 20%, if we actually look at what has happened since the general election, there was an initial fall in numbers until the SDR. In that non-partisan spirit, however, let us just look at the numbers since the SDR: in that period, there has been virtually no increase. Since coming into office, the number of reservists fell by 119 personnel—not particularly consequential—but since the SDR, it has risen by just 249.

To put that in context, on the Government's current trajectory, it is going to take 13 years to meet their own more modest target—a target that is a fifth of the

French target and that starts from a lower base. In other words, it is going to take 13 years just to add 20% to our reserves, when the French are going to double theirs. The record so far does not match the Government's words about the increased threat and the importance of the reserves.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member on securing this debate. I declare an interest as a former reservist for 11 and a half years. I used to have hair then—that is how long ago it was. He will be aware that as of 1 January 2026, the trained strength of the UK Army Reserve was some 23,740, a decrease compared with 1 January 2025, and its total trained strength has continued to decline over the years.

I always try to be constructive and helpful to the Minister and the right hon. Member who secured this debate. Does the right hon. Member agree that we need to invest in the cadet forces, particularly those attached to schools across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and encourage our young people to train as reservists while still pursuing their career choices?

Steve Barclay: I know that the hon. Member has a long-standing commitment to the cadets and the military in general. The cadets is a recognised pipeline into the armed forces, and I am sure the Minister recognises its importance in giving people their first taste of military experience. Again, I think that is an area of agreement.

The first point I want to land is that in the first two years of this Government, the number of reservists has fallen overall, if we take the quarterly statistics published in April that give the numbers to January. The current record does not match the Government's words. My second point is on reserve service days and this year's commitment—

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Steve Barclay: That commitment is the most important point, but it can wait until after the hon. Member's welcome intervention.

Edward Morello: Before the right hon. Member leaves his first point, which I absolutely agree with, I want to pay tribute to the 6th Battalion the Rifles in Dorchester, the only infantry reserve in the south-west. Their proud track record includes service in Mali, Cyprus and elsewhere with British forces. The issue of growing numbers is particularly pertinent to rural areas where there are sparse populations over large areas. Does he agree that the Government's aim to grow reservist numbers also needs to focus on the particular issues associated with rural areas?

Steve Barclay: The hon. Member is right. I represent the rural constituency of North East Cambridgeshire, and I recognise the point that he raises; that plays into the issue of overall numbers and into the second point that I am coming on to, which is about the commitments for the existing numbers.

Let me set out the crux of the issue. Media reports suggest that the MOD has been asked to make efficiency savings of £3.5 billion this year. My concern is that

[*Steve Barclay*]

quite often, areas of the budget are locked down—they are fixed and cannot be shifted—so it is tempting for the MOD to look to the reserves as an area most able to meet those efficiency targets. The reserve service days could be cut as part of that. That is hugely disruptive because it often means that posts, as they come up for renewal, are delayed and left vacant; it means those who might have planned financially to do a certain number of days find those plans change; and it means those trying to fit in annual leave or commitments with their existing employer find those plans disrupted at short notice.

Given that I have heard anecdotal reports of units already being told that their reserve service days may be reduced this year, could the Minister send a clear message to reservists up and down the country that the Government do value their work and the reserve service days, and that there will be no reduction in reserve service days this year? In the overall scheme of things, for a budget of £60 billion, the cost of the reserves is tiny if one is trying to meet those wider budget challenges.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): There are two points that could reinforce the right hon. Member's argument. First, I served in the Territorial Army, and it taught me to read a map; the reserves can teach people skills that will be useful in their lives. Secondly, many people's lives are disorganised, but being in the reserves, the Territorial Army or part of the forces could give a structure to their lives. That will help out with the Government's social policies, a point that should be emphasised to the Treasury. It is not just about people in uniforms; it is about the wider good of the nation.

Steve Barclay: I completely agree. The Government say they are committed to tackling things such as the cost of living; everyone in the House is very worried about the growth in youth unemployment and other pressures, and we want society to come together in more integrated ways. The armed forces are a unifier within society, so the hon. Gentleman's points are extremely pertinent.

Let us look at this key point of reserve service days in the context of what has happened in the first two years of the Labour Government. In 2023, there were 1.339 million training days recorded; that dropped to 1.17 million last year. I am not trying to overstate the position—those are modest changes—but the direction of travel is wrong. Given the national security threats, the reserves are more important, and other countries are moving much faster on this. That is why I want to hear from the Minister a clear commitment to units up and down the country and to reserve service days. That is the most material issue that I want to flag in this debate.

My third point, which I concede has been an issue for many years, is that there has always been a temptation to give a lower priority to the reserve estate and equipment within the MOD more generally. The Government are right to say that the reserves are really important, but following on from that we need ringfenced funding for equipment and the estate. I know that there are specific issues, and we have the reserve estate optimisation

programme, but the funding for that this year is not clear. Perhaps the Minister can clarify that. Given the £3.5 billion efficiency target, the Department could be tempted to stray into such areas, but if someone is a reservist in the logistics unit and there are no vehicles, or is in an artillery unit and there are very few guns, that has a corrosive impact on morale and on wider defence capability.

Let us look at how things have changed. The conflict in Ukraine is, in essence, a conflict between two reservist armies: reservists have been called up on the Ukraine side, and there are now reservists on the Russian side. We can see from the direction of travel just how important the capability of our reserves is. The Government are right to flag that, so it would be very odd if they were to cut reserve service days this year or if they did not protect the budget.

Jamie Stone: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way a second time; he is being more than generous. I should declare an interest: my son-in-law is a serving officer in the Royal Air Force and my daughter was, until recently, the same. One of the things that hits morale in all three services is being below strength—when they do not have the numbers and the platoon is short by two or three people. There is a long tradition—this was true in my time too—of reservists having an attachment to what we might call a frontline battalion or a frontline unit. That was actually great fun, and it really added something to the reservists' lives. It was looked forward to. I hope that might happen now and again.

Steve Barclay: Again, there is a lot of agreement in the House about these points. With that in mind, I will suggest a couple of potential solutions—I always think it is better to come with solutions than with problems—and ask the Minister for an update.

First, it would be great to have a clear signal to units about reserve service days. Secondly, the Minister will be familiar with the case of Major Milroy, which goes to the issue of fairness. The Government have lost twice in tribunal. There was a debate on that case a couple of months ago, so it would be helpful to have an update. Thirdly, Labour Members often talk about the perils of zero-hours contracts, but of course reservists are often in essence on zero-hours contracts. It would be interesting to know whether the Government are considering a statutory underpinning for employers' commitments.

Jim Shannon: On the comments by the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone), I recall my time in the Royal Artillery during the Falklands war. This relates to the issue of whether a person can retain their job should they be sent to the front. We were not going to go to the Falklands, we were going to go to Germany, and the frontline troops were going to go to the Falklands—but that did not happen, because the numbers were there on the ground to make sure that it did not. I remember going to my boss—I worked at Henry Denny at the time—and saying, "Mr McCluskey, it looks like we might be called up, and I've been told to let you know. The reason I am telling you is because I understand that you have to retain my job, so that when I come back, I will get my job back." In the society we live in, it is important for employers to understand that they have an obligation to their employees.

Steve Barclay: It is worth putting on the record that there are many good employers who recognise that. At the same time, we want to make it as easy as possible for those willing to be reservists to do so. I want to flag that and some of the consistency across Government.

I will come on to some solutions. I talked about the context of the £3.5 billion efficiency savings this year—the money is next year, 2027—and the pressure of that. I remind Treasury colleagues that reserve pay and bounties is less than one quarter of 1% of the MOD budget, which is why this area of MOD spend brings a lot of bang for its buck. I also remind the Minister of the 2009 *Guardian* front page, when Gordon Brown had to intervene because that past Labour Treasury was straining to make savings in this territory. That caused such angst on the Government Benches at the time that the decision was U-turned.

I know this Government do not particularly want to U-turn—that would be a heresy in the current climate—but it may be helpful for the Minister to get ahead of the argument with Treasury colleagues. We are talking about a very small sum of money in an area that offers real defence capability. It is not the most fertile political terrain for the Treasury to strike. The Minister will know better than most in this House about the NATO commitments in article 3 and how we meet those—the reserves are key to that. And I am sure she has seen the excellent paper from Professor Vincent Connelly and Hamish Mundell, part of a series by the Royal United Services Institute, highlighting the importance of this area and why we in this House should focus on it.

11.17 am

The Minister for Veterans and People (Louise Sandher-Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) for securing today's debate on this hugely important topic, as he rightly noted. I am a member of the Strategic Reserve myself, and I am grateful to other colleagues who have joined us to talk about the important role that the reserves play in our armed forces. During my time in the British Army, when I was a regular, I served with some fantastic reservists. They were and are a seamless and indistinguishable part of teams across the armed forces.

I will turn to a couple of points raised during the debate. First, I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his wonderful advocacy for the cadets. They are a fantastic part of our armed forces community, and the support they give to our young people is truly transformational and life-changing for so many. This Government have a commitment to growing the cadets; I was at a cadet event yesterday, and they did a fantastic job. As he rightly points out, they provide wonderful structure for young people growing up across our country.

The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) rightly highlighted the fantastic benefits of joining the reserves, both in terms of the skills and experience that people gain—many of these skills are difficult to gain anywhere else—and the values that can be learned from being in the reserves. I thank him for his advocacy.

The right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire is right to talk about the importance of RSDs. I am cognisant of that for a host of reasons, not only because

they maintain capability, but because for many of our reservists they are a vital part of their income; losing RSDs has an oversized impact on their ability to manage their everyday expenses. I am very cognisant of that, as well as of the overall impact on skills retention and retention in general.

I am sure the right hon. Member will understand that I cannot make a commitment here and now, and he noted that RSDs are budgeted by the services rather than centrally. However, I note that the Army has had no RSD cuts over the past two years, and I hope he understands how seriously we take that. I would hate for anybody to think that we would see RSDs as a lever to pull without recognising the impact of doing so. I join him in highlighting how important they are.

The right hon. Member rightly raises some of the other challenges that the reserves are facing, whether on their estate or the kit and equipment to which they have access. Again, this Government are committed to investing in our armed forces. He will be well aware of our commitment to raise defence spending to 2.6% of GDP next year, with further ambitions. As he says, this is in direct recognition of how important it is to invest in RSDs. He will appreciate that I cannot comment further on Milroy today, but I am sure he will note my previous remarks.

Steve Barclay: Could the Minister perhaps write to me?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I will write to the right hon. Gentleman when we have a further update.

I am not familiar with the *Guardian* front page that he mentioned, but I will dig it out of an archive. I am sure he will appreciate that it is from a bit before I started paying attention to these things.

We agree that our reserves are a vital source of expertise, and they are a critical link, as the right hon. Gentleman and others have noted, to industry and wider society. Reserves are central to the credibility of our deterrence, the defence of our homeland, our warfighting readiness and our ability to fight a protracted conflict.

There is a consensus in many areas that there has been too much complacency for too long, as well as a failure to appreciate the importance of our reserves, a failure to make the most of them and a failure to invest in them. That is borne out in the data, which the right hon. Member will be familiar with. When I left the Army in 2020, our volunteer reserve force was around 30,000, and it was 26,000 by the time of the last election, so when we came into Government we were determined to turn the situation around.

Our strategic defence review has highlighted the need for the reserve force to have increased scale, greater access to specialist skills and greater workforce agility, which is really important. We have accepted the recommendations and committed to the 20% increase in the medium term, as the right hon. Member notes, as well as a number of sweeping reforms to grow our strategic reserve.

I will quickly provide an update on those two lines of work.

Steve Barclay: I say this very gently, because there is huge agreement on this, but I draw the Minister's attention to the fact that the Public Accounts Committee, which has a majority of Labour members, says no movement is expected on that until the next decade—so not this Parliament. Does she agree on that, or does she think her colleagues are wrong?

Louise Sandher-Jones: Like many in the MOD, I like a challenge. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman recognises that I very much mean what I say when I talk about the importance of the reserves and how that is linked to numbers.

I want to address some of the criticisms that have come our way. At one point last year, almost 700 of our reservists were mobilised. Currently, there are 25,770 men and women in the Army Reserve. They have contributed to seven major operations across Europe, helping to resettle eligible Afghans and training Ukrainian forces—that is all incredibly vital work. A small fall in the active reserve last year does not necessarily represent a continuation of the hollowing out of the reserve force we have seen over many years.

Before Putin ordered his tanks into Ukraine in 2022, we had just under 30,000 reservists. Despite the fact we have seen how important reservists have been to the defence of Ukraine, and how much that conflict has underscored to many of us the necessity of mass in the modern battlefield—as opposed to conflicts we have engaged in elsewhere—we still saw reservist numbers dwindle. Indeed, by the second anniversary of that invasion, we had already lost another 3,000 reservists.

Since the last election, as the right hon. Gentleman can see, this Government have taken the actions needed to stem that bleeding. We are achieving progress, although I appreciate that he is urging us to go further and faster. We are introducing multiple reforms to fix the foundations. For example, we are unblocking the pipeline from regular to reserve service by removing the requirement that someone has to leave the armed forces before they can join the reserves. And our recruitment reform operation, Invector, is helping to drive up applications and enhance training throughout.

We have also increased the retirement age and brought in greater flexibility around mandatory retirement. We have introduced a pan-defence skills framework to bring renewed vigour to skills mapping, which will enable the MOD to better target the civilian expertise we need and recruit accordingly. We are also improving and building the digital infrastructure we need to manage, track and keep in touch with our reservists. Since last July, we have turned around the shrinking volunteer force and are starting to see green shoots of fresh growth, with renewed purpose and what I hope all will agree is a bright future.

That brings me to the second strand, which is our Strategic Reserve. The suite of reforms that we initiated through our Armed Forces Bill will update the Reserve Forces Act 1996 and strengthen the Government's ability to generate and maintain a larger and more capable Strategic Reserve.

We had faced a number of legislative constraints that impeded our work to enlarge the Strategic Reserve, so we are dismantling them, block by block. Most notably, we are putting in place a new recall power to lower the threshold of warlike operations, to introduce a number of adjustments to expand the scope of recall powers, and indeed to raise the recall age from 55 to 65 for other ranks, for those who wish to be recalled. We are also harmonising recall liability across our three services. There are historical quirks that we are determined to get after, grasp the nettle and fix.

To heighten the readiness of our Strategic Reserve, we have advanced plans to kick-start annual training for the ex-regular element of the Strategic Reserve, which will include a programme of employer outreach and a range of employer incentives to help facilitate it. We also have plans to modernise the administrative digital infrastructure that underpins our Strategic Reserve by January 2027, which again is in line with the SDR commitment.

We are also addressing structural governance weaknesses. We are establishing a single Reserve Forces and Cadets Association to take over the functions of the 13 regional associations that currently exist. Again, that addresses recommendations made in multiple independent reviews, and it will strengthen governance.

Last year, the Reserves Continuous Attitude Survey identified people's top motivations for joining and serving in the reserves: a desire to serve our country, to overcome challenges and to develop as an individual. I know from my own experience, and from the experience of many others here in Parliament, that our armed forces are unparalleled in their ability to tick those three boxes, and I encourage anybody who loves their country, is ambitious and wants to have an adventure to get involved.

For our part, the Government are getting on with the job of building a bigger and more capable reserve force, and a bigger and more capable Strategic Reserve. We were clear in the SDR that reaching these goals will take time, as the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire mentioned, but we have the plans in place. We are reforming the legislation and taking action, all backed by our commitment to deliver the biggest uplift in defence spending since the cold war.

I conclude by putting on record the Government's appreciation, which I am sure is shared by Members from parties across this House, of the commitment and service of all those who step forward to serve in our reserves. I can only reiterate, based on my own experience, how integral they are to many military operations, both here at home and abroad. They are committed, and they bring a fantastic enthusiasm and perspective. They also bring a huge depth of knowledge and skills that we might not have within the regulars, and a patriotic desire to serve. I thank them very much for their service.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Mountain Rescue

[EMMA LEWELL *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for mountain rescue.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Lewell. I know that many colleagues across the House and people in our communities share a deep appreciation for the extraordinary work that mountain rescue teams do. While Hazel Grove, the finest constituency in the land, has no mountains, we do have hills, and we have a good number of mountain rescue volunteers. Alongside their day jobs, these volunteers have chosen to train to an extremely high standard and to place themselves in some of the most dangerous conditions imaginable in their spare time, so that when someone in the hills—near me, that means the Peaks—gets into trouble, they can respond and save them from dire situations. That deserves far more recognition than it currently receives.

This winter alone, we have seen time and again the lifesaving and critical service that mountain rescue teams provide, from Snowdonia to the Lake district to the Peak district. Responding to call-outs in severe weather and scarily dangerous conditions, volunteers risk their own safety every time they respond. These services are significant: Mountain Rescue England and Wales co-ordinates 47 volunteer mountain rescue teams operating across eight regional bodies, which together cover some of the most challenging and remote terrain in the country.

Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab): On that point about working in remote environments, does the hon. Member agree that we should be looking to integrate more drone technology to support mountain rescue, and will she join me in praising the work that Flyby Technology has been doing in this space?

Lisa Smart: I am grateful for the intervention. We need to use whatever technology exists to make the work of mountain rescue volunteers even more effective. I will come on to talk about the work they do to find people who are missing, but drone technology can certainly help with that, and we should welcome it.

The sheer scale of the teams' operations is remarkable. According to the latest annual review, in 2024 mountain rescue teams responded to almost 4,000 call-outs, resulting in over 3,000 deployments—a 24% increase on 2019. It was also the first year in which teams went zero days without a single call-out. That meant that every single day of the year, somewhere in England or Wales a mountain rescue team was called upon.

Behind those rescues are over 3,000 volunteers, who have given over 167,000 hours of their time in a single year. Their work goes well beyond what many people imagine: volunteers rescue climbers and lost walkers, yes, but they also provide first aid, support ambulance trusts in major incidents, assist in flood responses and help police with searches for missing people on and off the hills.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): My hon. Friend will know that down in leafy Oxfordshire, we have far fewer mountains in our proximity than she does, but we do have rolling countryside and hazardous waterways. Lowland rescue plays a really important role as the counterpart to mountain rescue. It is also a charitable, volunteer-led organisation. Will she join me in praising its work to find vulnerable people and make sure they come home safely?

Lisa Smart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving a shout-out to those involved in lowland rescue. I know there is a whole search and rescue community, including those who look at caves and other environments, and I am glad that he gave me the opportunity to thank all those involved in the great work of lowland rescue.

As climate change leads to more extreme weather events, rescue teams are increasingly a de facto fourth emergency service. The 24% rise in call-outs over five years reflects the growing popularity of outdoor activities. That is to be welcomed, but it puts real pressure on rescue teams, and social media is a significant driver. The chief executive officer of Mountain Rescue England and Wales, Mike Park, has spoken of a shift in the types of visitors to upland areas, as people are drawn to locations by striking footage online without always understanding the conditions or the hazards involved. Chief superintendent of North Wales Police Owain Llewellyn described an “almost unprecedented” rise in visitors to the Eryri national park as a direct result of social media posts and a corresponding increase in call-outs.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Lisa Smart: If only for a correction of my pronunciation, I would welcome an intervention.

Liz Saville Roberts: I thank the hon. Lady very much for mentioning Owain Llewellyn of North Wales Police. Of course we see immense increases in the population present in the North Wales Police region; given the present police funding arrangements, it is very challenging to deal with those tourism pressures, which are only increasing. Does she agree that, alongside volunteer rescue teams, the funding for all emergency services needs to reflect the reality of population pressures?

Lisa Smart: I strongly agree with the right hon. Lady on making sure that all our emergency services are properly resourced to do the job that we rightly expect them to do. I also agree that the organisation of our police forces across our whole country should reflect the differing needs in urban and rural areas—although there are some overlaps—and that police should be resourced to address them.

The British Mountaineering Council has been direct about what the increase in outdoor activity means for teams. It has warned that the current situation is “not sustainable” and has raised serious concerns about volunteer wellbeing and the risk that teams could reach a point where they are unable to respond safely to every call. That is not a scenario that any of us should be willing to accept.

[Lisa Smart]

Mountain rescue teams in England and Wales receive no direct Government funding. They rely entirely on donations, fundraising and legacies, and each team costs between £50,000 and £100,000 a year to run. In the year ending December 2024, Mountain Rescue England and Wales had total income of just over £1.2 million, against expenditure of nearly £1.3 million, so it is already running at a deficit while managing nearly 3,800 emergencies in a single year. Compare that with Scotland, where the Scottish Government provides £300,000 a year to be shared between 27 teams. Notably, that grant was introduced in 2003 under the Scottish Liberal Democrat-Labour coalition. That demonstrates that when political will exists, direct public investment in these services is entirely achievable.

The previous UK Government did provide occasional grants to mountain rescue teams in England and Wales, including in 2020, when 11 teams received one-off grants totalling just under £150,000, and this Government have taken some positive steps. The 2025 autumn Budget included the exemption of search and rescue vehicles from vehicle excise duty but, although that was warmly received, it does not address the structural funding gap that these organisations face.

In June last year, the all-party parliamentary group for volunteer search and rescue was established, and it has since set out a clear case for what further Government action should look like. The most significant proposal is that search and rescue volunteers should receive the same status as Army reservists and special constables. That would result in paid leave from employers for search and rescue training and recompense for loss of earnings when attending a call-out during working hours, because at present, a volunteer responding to a call-out on a random weekday afternoon may be losing wages to do so. That is a real barrier to recruitment and retention that the Government have the power to address. The APPG has also called for Crown indemnity insurance cover for search and rescue teams, a dedicated Minister to engage with volunteer search and rescue groups and a VAT exemption on vehicles, building on last year's vehicle excise duty announcement. The Liberal Democrats fully support those proposals.

There is one issue in particular that I want to raise, which requires urgent action. It was brought directly to my attention by a member of the Kinder Mountain Rescue Team; along with the Glossop team, that team covers my Hazel Grove constituency and the surrounding areas, which include some of the best walking routes in existence. At a Delegated Legislation Committee last week, my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) raised some changes being made to Care Quality Commission registration during a discussion on amendments to the Health and Social Care Act 2008. The Government have moved to regulate independent medical care at temporary sporting and cultural events. Previous exemptions that allowed some medical providers to operate without CQC registration have been removed.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I did indeed make that point in a Delegated Legislation Committee. Our key concern is that rescue cover is not exempt, and mountain rescue teams have therefore said that they will not be able to provide cover at many events, including fell races and mountain biking events, that outdoor

enthusiasts like me enjoy. We should be encouraging individuals to participate in these events, and at the moment, they are not going to take place.

Lisa Smart: strongly agree with my hon. Friend's point. We understand the reasons behind the regulations—they follow on from the Manchester Arena inquiry, which raised important concerns about the provision of healthcare at sporting and cultural events—but we do not want the unintended consequences to mean that it is difficult for mountain rescue teams to offer support and cover for events.

Steps to regulate and improve the way in which healthcare at sporting and cultural events is provided should be welcomed. Public safety should always be a priority. However, the regulations will have severe unintended consequences for mountain rescue. Many teams provide medical cover at fell races, mountain bike events and other outdoor sporting activities; they do not charge, but they typically receive donations in return—income that helps to sustain the broader work of the team. Nationally, covering such events raises more than £200,000 annually, and that vital funding allows voluntary teams to provide their free rescue services.

Under the new rules, providing that cover now requires CQC registration, and the regulations go further than many might assume. Even when rescue cover is provided by non-healthcare professionals or team members holding the remote rescue medical technician qualification, or when advice from a healthcare professional is merely available over the phone, it would constitute a requirement for registration and inspection, according to the CQC. That is surely disproportionate overreach.

The medical director for Mountain Rescue England and Wales, Dr Alistair Morris, stated that the cost and administrative burden of registration would outweigh the financial benefit that teams receive from the donations. His assessment is that most mountain rescue teams will just stop providing cover at these events as a result. Dr Oliver Pratt contacted me recently to raise those concerns, as well as concerns about how the requirements would affect the Kinder Mountain Rescue Team, who are represented in the Public Gallery today.

The consequences of teams withdrawing from event cover go beyond lost income, because without a mountain rescue presence at these events, teams would be forced to scramble from their homes should an injury occur. That lengthens response times, with potentially serious implications for patient outcomes. No commercial event medical company provides full rescue cover in remote terrain, so the local mountain rescue team would be called out anyway, but would likely arrive later and be less well prepared. There is also a broader loss: attendance at local events raises the profile of teams in the outdoor community, provides opportunities for education and the promotion of safe practice on the hills, and helps with volunteer recruitment. The regulations risk severing that connection entirely.

When this issue was raised in Committee, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), stated that he did

“not want small events...to be overregulated”

or

“volunteers to be over-burdened with financial registration fees”—
[Official Report, Fifth Delegated Legislation Committee, 15 April 2026; c. 9.]

He promised to look into that point with the CQC. We welcome that intention, but an intention is not yet a solution. Mountain Rescue England and Wales has formally requested an exemption for rescue cover, and that request remains unanswered. The Minister responding to today's debate is not responsible for this piece of delegated health and social care legislation, but I would welcome her meeting mountain rescue representatives and working to bring forward that exemption. I am grateful that the CQC has written to me ahead of this debate, and I welcome its commitment to dedicated engagement with mountain rescue teams; but teams planning their events season now need greater clarity, faster. Guidance is not the same as the exemption that Mountain Rescue England and Wales has requested.

Mountain rescue teams are a vital part of our emergency infrastructure, and we should all want them to thrive, not have their ability to do so held back by legislative overreach. I look forward to the debate.

2.43 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart); as a fellow Greater Manchester MP, I share her determination that our constituents should be able to enjoy the nearby countryside safely and responsibly. I hope she agrees that, whether it is the Peak district, on her side of Greater Manchester, or Winter hill, on mine, we have some of the best natural landscapes our country has to offer.

As an officer of the APPGs on outdoor learning and on outdoor recreation and access to nature, as well as a passionate outdoor pursuits enthusiast, I know from my own experience that, sadly, mountain rescue teams do not always get the attention they deserve in this place. However, when things go wrong, it is local mountain rescue volunteers who are relied on to get people out of trouble—volunteers giving up their time, often in the worst weather, at all hours, day and night.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): The hon. Member is making an excellent speech. I have participated many a time in the Allendale challenge up in Northumberland to raise money for the North of Tyne Mountain Rescue Team. I thank all the volunteers who get involved, wherever in the country they are helping out. Since it is volunteers who are giving up their time, one of the key recommendations of the report from the APPG for volunteer rescue services was for the Government to recognise the mental health and wellbeing challenges they face. Does the hon. Member agree that it would be worthy of the Government to look at how they can support volunteers through the challenges they face when they are assisting in rescue efforts, wherever they are in the country?

Phil Brickell: The hon. Member makes an excellent point about mental health support for volunteers, and I will come to that shortly.

Volunteers are giving up their time to keep others safe. Our mountain rescue teams respond to thousands of incidents every year, from missing persons to injured walkers, and support the response to floods and major incidents. As has been recognised, they are largely—almost exclusively—funded by donations. The same people

who are rescuing others are out raising the very money they need to fund their vehicles and equipment and to support their training. That places a heavy burden on those volunteers and their communities.

That is why I was delighted back in the autumn when the Chancellor confirmed she had heeded my calls and those of others here today to exempt mountain rescue vehicles from vehicle excise duty. That practical step will save each team thousands of pounds, show some recognition of the roles that teams play and allow them to rightly focus their fundraising efforts—in Bolton's case, on the £60,000 a year it costs to maintain their vehicles and kit.

I know from speaking to the brilliant Bolton Mountain Rescue Team, which is based out of an old stable block at Ladybridge Hall in Heaton, that that exemption will make a significant difference. Since its formation in 1968, Bolton mountain rescue has covered a wide and varied terrain: almost 310 square miles stretching from Darwen to Manchester airport and from Wigan to Manchester. Its work is not limited to remote moorland: the team is regularly called out to search for missing people, support police operations, respond to incidents in urban fringe areas and assist during severe weather events. Indeed, over the Easter weekend, it was on site at the annual Rivington Pike race, one of the most historic fell races in the country, which saw more than 350 runners from across the north-west and beyond participate in a sprint to the pike and then back down to the finish line on Lever Park Avenue in Horwich.

Mountain rescue teams are on call 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Members hold down full-time jobs and have families and other commitments, and they drop everything when that call comes in. I hope colleagues will join me in recognising the brilliant and selfless work they undertake. Mountain rescue teams such as mine in Bolton have our back, so it is only right that we should have theirs.

I would therefore like to gently press the Minister on four areas where she might work with colleagues across Government on additional support for mountain rescue teams. First, although I welcome the event healthcare standard, which was launched this month following the Manchester Arena inquiry and was mentioned by the hon. Member for Hazel Grove, I have flagged concerns to the Minister's counterpart in the Department of Health and Social Care, the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), that the requirements may have unintended adverse impacts on mountain rescue teams.

Under that standard, regulated organisations that comprise healthcare professionals would need to register with the Care Quality Commission. Prior to that requirement, temporary sporting events such as fell races and local mountain bike events, which are covered by mountain rescue, were excluded. Mountain rescue teams will be brought within the regulated perimeter, with all the administrative requirements that come with that. Will the Minister therefore work with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that the new requirements on healthcare professionals, as they apply to mountain rescue teams, are proportionate and do not impose a disproportionate cost? I will happily share more information with her after the debate.

[Phil Brickell]

Secondly, mountain rescue teams across England and Wales are collectively spending around £450,000 a year on insurance covering public liability, employer's liability, vehicles, medical malpractice and trustees' responsibilities. On top of that, individual teams often have to pay individual costs locally for buildings, equipment and extra personnel. That is a huge amount to raise through charitable means, and it is hard to justify when these teams are in reality part of our emergency response framework. Extending Crown indemnity, as has been mentioned, or a similar statutory insurance arrangement to mountain rescue teams would make an immediate difference. It would free up resources that could be directly reinvested in life-saving capability, helping my constituents and people across the country who find themselves in peril, often with no other emergency service able to reach them.

Thirdly, let me flag rehabilitation. Mountain rescue volunteers operate in difficult and often dangerous environments, with steep terrain and frequent poor weather. They take part in physically demanding rescues, and the risks are real. If a police officer or member of the armed forces is injured in the line of duty, they have access to established services. Bizarrely, mountain rescue volunteers do not have the same support. Allowing our mountain rescue teams to access existing rehab services is a simple, practical step the Government could take to support them. It would not require new structures or significant funding; it would just recognise that these volunteers face comparable risks and deserve comparable support when something goes wrong. I urge the Minister to look into that proposal as a priority.

Freddie van Mierlo: I thank the hon. Gentleman for outlining those additional benefits, which would definitely be useful for mountain rescue teams. Does he agree they should also be extended to lowland rescue?

Phil Brickell: The hon. Member makes a very good point; we do not have lowland rescue in Bolton, but I do not see why not. Those volunteers are also hard-working and deserve similar support when they go through a traumatic episode.

Finally, on medical supplies, teams such as Bolton mountain rescue are required to carry a full complement of drugs to treat casualties in the field. However, because incidents are unpredictable, a lot of that stock expires before it can be used. Every year, that means more fundraising to replace perfectly good medication that has simply reached the end of its shelf life. There is already an arrangement for swapping out medical gases; extending that to drugs, by allowing unused supplies to be exchanged through the NHS, would save thousands of pounds, reduce waste and ensure that teams always have safe, in-date medication available. Again, I know this falls outside the remit of the Department for Transport, but can the Minister look into that issue with her DHSC counterparts?

Taken together, those proposals would make a real, tangible difference to teams on the ground. At the moment, frankly, too much of the burden still falls on volunteers and their communities. Teams such as Bolton mountain rescue are doing extraordinary work, often with limited resources, because they are committed to helping others. We should be helping them.

2.52 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I give a special thanks to the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) for not only introducing the debate but doing so exceptionally well. I also thank the hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) for his thoughtful proposals, to which the Minister will hopefully give some response.

In her introduction, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove spoke about the bravery and dedication of our mountain rescue teams, and I am sure the Minister—it is always a pleasure to see her in her place—will encourage us to support all mountain rescue teams across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

We stand today at a crossroads in public safety. In the hills and valleys of Northern Ireland, from the granite peaks of the Mourne to the wild expanses of the Sperrin mountains, a silent, professional and entirely voluntary army is keeping us safe. However, while their dedication is limitless, their resources are not.

I want to highlight what we do in Northern Ireland and some of the things we are involved with, and also to make a plea to the Minister. We have not only mountain rescue teams but a K9 search and rescue team; they do exceptional work in finding missing people, and their dedication is incredibly impressive.

For decades, teams such as Mourne mountain rescue and North West mountain rescue have operated on the generosity of the general public. They are tasked by the Police Service of Northern Ireland, and integrated into our emergency response, yet they remain charities, forced to shake buckets to pay for the fuel in their Land Rovers and the technology in their radios. We have been told about the Barnett consequential; it is not the Minister's responsibility, but I want to mention it. It is the mechanism that ensures that Northern Ireland receives its fair share of UK-wide spending. When Westminster increases funding for emergency services or health in England, for which I am always grateful and thank the Minister and Government, Barnett consequentials go on to our block grant. The problem with the money that comes is that there is no direct link; although the money arrives at Stormont, it is not necessarily earmarked for the rescuers on the mountainside. That needs to be done centrally in Westminster.

Currently, the Department of Justice back home provides roughly £100,000 to be shared among nine different search and rescue groups. To put that into perspective, a single new rescue base for the Mourne mountains has spiralled in cost to over £1 million, so that money does not even scrape the scab—if I can use that word—of what is needed. As in the case of the rest of the United Kingdom, we are not simply asking for a handout—it is not about that. We are asking for strategic investment, and we need to have it, especially when we look at the cost of the Mourne mountain rescue base that is being put together.

We need a dedicated, ringfenced portion of Barnett-derived funding that is specifically allocated to Northern Ireland search and rescue. My request to the Minister is, when it comes to the allocation of money through the Barnett consequential, can she ensure through discussion with the relevant Minister that money is specifically earmarked for mountain rescue back home?

Volunteers should be training to save lives, not spending their weekends writing grant applications or worrying about whether they can afford to replace an aging ambulance. We have seen the Scottish Government provide significant, reliable annual grants for their teams, which the hon. Member for Hazel Grove referred to in her introduction. It is time that rescue teams throughout the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland were put on that solid footing, and not the slippery slope of making do with what they are currently clinging on to.

When someone is lost in the dark, or injured on a cliff edge, they do not ask about the funding model of the person coming to save them; they just want help. Our volunteers provide that help without hesitation, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. It is time that our Minister and Government showed the same level of commitment. I am not saying that commitment has not been given, but we need to step up strategically in relation to where we are. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove set that out incredibly well in her introduction. Let us use the resources we have to ensure that those who save others do not have to save themselves from financial ruin.

2.58 pm

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. In Stirling and Strathallan we are served by three outstanding teams: Lomond Mountain Rescue Team, based in Drymen; Killin mountain rescue, operating from Killin and Callender; and Ochils mountain rescue, operating from a neighbouring constituency, but also on the hills that dominate the backdrop of the city of Stirling. Those teams are made up of highly trained volunteers—people with jobs, families and everyday lives—who are ready to respond at a moment's notice, often in the most difficult conditions and terrain in the country.

Such teams are not an add-on to the emergency services; they are the emergency services in certain areas. They have the medical training to treat people on the mountain, but crucially they are the only ones who can get them off the mountain, to safety and further treatment.

I want to talk about some specific issues that have been raised through the volunteer rescue services all-party parliamentary group. The steps the Government are taking to regulate independent medical care at temporary sporting and cultural events are welcome and necessary. But mountain rescue teams are not properly part of the conversation, and are perhaps being unintentionally captured by an approach that was never designed with them in mind. The consequences, as we have heard, can be significant. These teams are facing new layers of bureaucracy, increased administrative requirements and potential financial liabilities that simply do not sit easily with a volunteer model.

As we have heard, the reality is that many teams are now considering stepping back from providing event cover altogether. That matters for two reasons. First, those events are a key source of fundraising for teams that rely heavily on public support to fund their operations. Secondly, it has an impact on public safety. If mountain rescue is not present at events, it is no longer able to provide immediate care. Instead, it is called out later, often when situations have become more serious. Some

10% to 15% of the UK's geography is such that mountain rescue is the primary emergency service, because the police, ambulance and fire services cannot operate effectively in that terrain. So there is a clear and reasonable ask here: that we give serious reconsideration to how this new approach applies to mountain rescue.

There is also a wider lesson. If we want to avoid situations like this in the future, we need to involve mountain rescue and the wider search and rescue community much earlier in the policymaking process. They must be part of the conversation from the outset. Search and rescue services interface across multiple—*[Interruption.]*

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for a Division in the House.

3 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

3.13 pm

On resuming—

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): The sitting is resumed. The debate may now continue until 4.15 pm. I call Chris Kane.

Chris Kane: Thank you, Ms Lewell, for calling me back. Please give me one second to find out where I was—is it still Tuesday?

As I was saying, if we want to avoid such situations in the future, we need to involve mountain rescue and the wider search and rescue community much earlier in the policymaking process. They must be part of the conversation from the outset. Search and rescue services interface across multiple parts of Government—Transport, Health, the Home Office, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Cabinet Office all have a role. From the perspective of those delivering the service, that can feel fragmented.

There is a strong case for a single point of contact within Government—a clear champion who understands the role of volunteer search and rescue, and who can bring the different strands together. The Cabinet Office, given its co-ordinating role, might be a sensible place to consider having that, because ultimately, this comes back to people: highly skilled volunteers giving up their time, raising their own funds and stepping in when people need them most. They do not do it for recognition, but they deserve support.

When something goes wrong on the mountain, what matters is simple: that someone comes—and whether it is in Stirling and Strathallan or any difficult terrain anywhere in the country, they always do. For that they have our thanks and support, and I hope a commitment from the Minister to engage in the specific asks that our volunteer rescue teams have around Care Quality Commission registration and other issues. The Minister is always welcome at a future meeting of the APPG for volunteer rescue services to hear more.

3.15 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Lewell; I am sure you will give us guidance if and when the Divisions

[Tim Farron]

come again, but it is a pleasure either way. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) for leading this debate so eloquently and bringing this important issue to the attention of everybody in the Chamber. It is an honour to follow the excellent speeches given by the hon. Members for Bolton West (Phil Brickell), for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and to precede the excellent speeches I am sure we will hear in the moments ahead.

For those of us in the Lake district, the mountain rescue service is undoubtedly the fourth emergency service. That is demonstrated in a very pictorial way, really, in the centre of Kendal: just north of the town centre, Busher Walk is a small street where the police station, ambulance station, fire station and Kendal mountain rescue headquarters all sit within a few yards of each other. They work very closely together, and the mountain rescue team are deeply valued, respected and seen as a partner by the other three emergency services. Of course, the difference is that the mountain rescue team are entirely made up of volunteers.

Across the county of Cumbria, we have 12 mountain rescue teams. Five of those are directly in my constituency: Coniston, Ambleside and Langdale, Kendal, Kirkby Stephen and Patterdale. An honourable mention goes to my constituency neighbour, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, the hon. Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), who is a member of the Patterdale team. As a Minister, he is unable to participate in this debate.

I also pay tribute to those working as part of the Keswick Mountain Rescue Team. Keswick is not in my patch, but it certainly serves a good chunk of it and we are very grateful. I will also mention the Bay Search and Rescue team, who look after the lowlands—as my hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo), who is no longer in his place, referred to earlier—of the very dangerous and treacherous Morecambe bay sands. On top of that, we are served admirably by the North West air ambulance service and the Great North air ambulance service, which I was delighted to run my first London marathon for five years ago. It provides a wonderful service, and does so with the support of volunteers.

Mountain rescue teams have provided roughly 80 years of service to our country. Much has changed in that time, not least that, back in the 1940s, to raise the alarm that something had happened, one member of the team who had somehow found out that something was wrong on the fell would literally run around the town or village knocking on doors to get members of the team out to respond. Today, highly trained specialists have technical communication facilities available to them. Nevertheless, they still have in common—with each other, and with back then—the fact that they are volunteers who are dedicated and who are of their communities. They save lives and serve us admirably, and we are incredibly grateful to them.

In Cumbria, we have 20 million visitors a year. By our reckoning, that makes us the second most visited destination in the country after London. The lakes is a world heritage site. We have dozens and dozens of beautiful mountains and valleys—places that are utterly

spectacular yet often dangerous. Volunteers working on call for mountain rescue teams put themselves at risk daily, and they balance the service they provide with their other lives, often in full-time occupations.

I almost hesitate to highlight, because it is such a grim and recent memory, that people who volunteer for mountain rescue teams not only often deal with the most tragic of circumstances but can sometimes fall victim to them. Our friend Chris Lewis, of the Patterdale Mountain Rescue Team, died in 2023. He had sustained serious injuries 18 months earlier when he was called out, as part of a team, to an incident on Red Screes near the Kirkstone pass. That is a reminder that those people who freely give up their time risk their lives for us on a regular basis. I pay tribute to Chris and everybody else who puts themselves out there to keep us safe.

I observe that since covid—other hon. Members have mentioned this—we have seen a change in the relationship between the people of our country and the lakes in particular, as well as the dales and other places. In many ways, that is very positive—people have chosen the outdoors and got a taste for the countryside, often without a lifetime of background in how to operate in a safe and sensible way.

I am proud to be an officer of the all-party group for volunteer rescue services and I am chair of the all-party group on outdoor learning, of which the hon. Member for Bolton West is an important and valued member, and vice-chair. I very much value working with him and others in that capacity.

I cannot overstate the value of being in the outdoors for people's physical and mental resilience throughout life. We ought to be really pleased about that uptick in people, particularly younger people, wanting to take exercise and explore the fells, and yet a “but” is attached to that: mountain rescue teams report a significant increase in the number of call-outs over the past five years by people who are not familiar with the fells. Often they are younger people, sometimes not adequately prepared or without the right kit, and sometimes just not realising that the weather on the flat in Glenridding might not be the same as the weather on the top of Helvellyn. The consequences can be utterly fatal.

Those are the challenges that our wonderful mountain rescue teams have to deal with, on top of the fact—this is a subject for another Westminster Hall debate perhaps—that excessive second home ownership in the Lake district means that the resident population is not as big as it used to be, and the reservoir of people who could volunteer to be in mountain rescue is smaller than it once was. Those teams have more to do and a harder job to find and recruit the people to do it.

Mountain rescue teams, however, now face a new challenge. It has been referred to already, but I want to add my words. A proposed amendment to the Health and Social Care Act 2008 that stems, understandably, from the Manchester Arena bombing inquiry, would require any organisation providing first aid with a medical professional to register with the CQC. Mountain rescue teams not only respond to emergency call-outs, but provide valuable support to fell races, mountain bike races, country shows and so on. I know that myself—I am a regular participant in fell races and I must have done the Grasmere fell race 20 times now, as well as the Ambleside and Coniston races. Because of my knee injury, I had to miss last year's Grasmere fell race, and I

was missed—I got a text from one of the other participants, who was very sad that I was not taking part, because that meant this year his chances of coming last had become a little greater.

I utterly value the intervention and support of the mountain rescue teams in keeping us safe. We reckon, however, that CQC registration could cost an estimated £10,000 to £20,000 in total, admin charges included, for each of those mountain rescue teams. That is five in my patch, 12 across Cumbria and, I think, 47 across the whole country. That would mean that those volunteer-led teams simply could not sustain their level of operation. They would have to withdraw from those events entirely, and the events would have to take on professional and much more expensive cover by people who would not be able to get up the fell anyway. As has been mentioned by others, mountain rescue would still be called out if someone ended up involved in an accident halfway up or at the top.

All we ask of the Minister—I have also written to the Minister for Health Innovation and Safety on this point—is for the Government to introduce a proportionate, risk-based exemption for volunteer mountain rescue teams, so that vital community services are protected without disproportionate regulatory burdens.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I fully endorse and support what my hon. Friend is saying. My brilliant Cornish search and rescue team have asked me to attend this debate to make exactly the same point, that if they are not exempted from that CQC registration requirement, they will face thousands of pounds in costs and lots of time in bureaucracy. Frankly, many of them would not continue in the search and rescue service, and we would see a huge gap. They provide a valuable service, as we have heard, so I join my hon. Friend in urging the Minister to look again at that. If she cannot provide an assurance to us, to our constituents and to our brilliant search and rescue and mountain rescue teams, I hope that she and her colleagues can come back to us later.

Tim Farron: I very much agree with my hon. Friend, who makes excellent points on behalf of his own communities in Cornwall.

I will finish by saying that we have written to the Minister for Health Innovation and Safety, because the issue is to do with the Health and Social Care Act. We are pleased to see this Minister in her place—she does a great job—but it gives a bit of a picture of one of the problems that we face on this issue: mountain rescue does not really have a home, and it needs one. We need a Minister who is specifically responsible for mountain rescue and indeed for other search and rescue provision. I urge, via the Minister present, that to happen.

Many of the things we have all asked today have been about sending messages to the Minister, or through the Minister to the Health Department, and we hope that they will be heard. I simply say to the Minister: “Let’s not needlessly place a burden on our outstanding search and rescue teams.” Our mountain rescue volunteers put themselves at risk to keep us safe. They deserve our gratitude and practical support. Let us help them, not hinder them.

3.25 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I congratulate the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) on securing this debate, because it has been very interesting. There have been speakers from every nation and region of the United Kingdom. This issue is significant to us all.

I beg your patience, Ms Lewell, but I will, of course refer to Eryri, which is the mountain region that I represent much of. It is one of the busiest and most hazardous mountain regions within the United Kingdom. In 2025, we had around 600,000 visitors. Sadly, however, there are fatal incidents every year, due to falls, exposure and incidents in water. Of course, it is the mountain rescue volunteers who play such a key role in interacting with the emergency services, in rescuing people and in dealing with dangerous incidents, many of which are tragic.

I will refer to just two of them today. In February, there were two very young men—they were aged 19 and 20—from Norfolk who tragically died on Yr Wyddfa, the Snowdon range, after a really huge winter search and rescue operation that involved multiple rescue teams, in conditions that involved snow and ice, and severe exposure. We have to recognise the diligence and the commitment of the people who go out in such difficult circumstances.

There are also falls from ridges and from scrambles, particularly in the areas that are risky in Snowdonia, or Eryri. I will put those areas on the record, because it is important that people are alert to the risks there. I am talking about places such as Crib Goch and Tryfan, where there is no marked path. I am also talking about the Watkin Path pools, where—sadly—two young women died last June. I am also talking about Glyder Fach and Glyder Fawr.

Such deaths are so difficult for the people involved with the search and rescue teams, but my heart goes out to the families of people who have lost loved ones. This area is very important; it is full of leisure activity and is part of our economy in north Wales. The emergency services and the volunteer rescue services both play their part in making the places that I have mentioned as safe as possible. There are 11 mountain rescue teams in Wales. Six of them are in my constituency: Llanberis, Aberglaslyn, South Snowdonia, Aberdyfi, North East Wales, the North Wales Cave Rescue Organisation, and Ogwen, which is in the Bangor Aberconwy constituency, but serves the same mountain massif.

In addition, and to give people an idea of how significant the rescue services are in my constituency, there are the RNLI stations at Porthdinllaen, Abersoch, Pwllheli, Criccieth, Barmouth and Aberdyfi. Again, they all serve the leisure industry of tourism, which is so critical to the constituency. We have the search and rescue helicopters at Dinas Dinlle, which are run by Bristow on behalf of the coastguard.

Of course, this situation is demanding for the police as well. Earlier in the debate, it was mentioned that the population in parts of a constituency can go up by five times in the high season. That is not reflected in police funding, but none the less it is something that the police have to respond to.

We should also notice, of course, the timing of this debate, given that we will soon have the May bank holidays. For many of us here in Westminster Hall, if the weather is

[*Liz Saville Roberts*]

good, those bank holidays will be some of the busiest times that we have in the season, and they will probably also be times in which the search and rescue teams will be called out.

I will talk particularly about two of the rescue teams operating in my constituency. First, there is Llanberis, who are the busiest rescue team in the United Kingdom. Last year, they responded to 360 call-outs, which was 10% of all the incidents in England and Wales in 2025. Of course, they work with other rescue teams as well, but their busiest day last year was 12 July, when 716 incidents were recorded in north Wales. Sadly, the number of fatalities is rising too—from 18 in 2024 to 23 in 2025. Evidently, the work that these teams do is absolutely critical, but the sheer pressure on them as they perform their role needs to be recognised, both in the UK Government and in the Welsh Government, as well as the fact that they are so critical for our local economy.

There is another rescue team that I want to mention. It told me that although all the mountain rescue teams face funding challenges, when it comes to North Wales Cave Rescue Organisation—the problem is in the name—it is far less visible than the other rescue teams. I have seen the areas that it has to deal with in my constituency: we have old mines, slate caverns, quarries and natural caves over towards the east of north Wales.

Again, I am going to put those on the record because these places seem to attract people. Blaenau Ffestiniog's old slate caverns attract people on social media and are extremely dangerous; I want to use this debate to put that warning out. In Cwmorthin, Rhosydd and Wrysgan, people can go on what sounds like a wonderful adventure underground—from one side of the mountain to the other through the caverns—but it is extremely dangerous. People are putting themselves and others at risk. It is not a glamorous activity for Instagram and not something that people should do without professionals and experts.

I am a member of the APPG and I support its manifesto. I welcome the Minister to her place, but I am very much aware that she can speak only on behalf of the Department for Transport. What we are talking about today cuts across many Government Departments and the message needs to go back to them.

My final point, as raised by Owain Llewellyn of North Wales police, is about whether we can find a way of addressing the temptation that people feel through social media. I referred to Instagram, where people see wonderful pictures and want to emulate them and be part of that lifestyle. Can we somehow have a conversation with the social media platform providers about how to get across to people that although it looks so good on a phone or on a device, “You need to be safe, because for your families, it could be a disaster”—and of course for the teams that come out?

I want to express my greatest appreciation and gratitude to all those involved in the voluntary rescue. Without them, I do not know how we would keep people safe in such wonderful and precious places.

3.32 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) for her passionate, articulate exposition of the great

work that mountain rescue does in her constituency. We also heard the passion for mountain rescue and the great outdoors from the hon. Members for Bolton West (Phil Brickell), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane), and from the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), and a few others who intervened.

I too have a passion for the great outdoors and mountain walking. I spent a bit of the recess that we just had doing some of that in south Wales. It is often quite hard to articulate exactly why walking up a hill or a mountain is so tempting. Of course there is the reason that it is there, but beyond that it is the combination of the satisfaction of having done so, the exhilaration of overcoming a challenge and pushing one's own boundaries. But the risk that we have heard about today underlines the importance of our all respecting the hills and mountains and the great outdoors more widely. With greater numbers seeking enjoyment of it, but with skills such as paper map reading and compass navigation not necessarily what they were, mountain rescue will continue to play an essential role, particularly as even those with reasonable experience in mountain environments can get things wrong, experience bad luck or get into bad habits.

Alas, I know that only too well myself. A combination of bad habits and a bit of bad luck meant that I needed to be rescued by mountain rescue in Italy, when 36 hours on the side of a mountain with no food and water turned into the not entirely welcome exhilaration of being winched on to a helicopter and then spending 27 hours in an Italian hospital. Thanks to mountain rescue, I lived to tell the tale and learned from my experience. I have significantly added to my previous experience and made sure that when I do these things, I have better risk mitigations. I pay tribute to that particular branch of the Italian mountain rescue, as well as the mountain rescue teams who have saved so many people in this country.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) in his comments on Lowland Rescue Oxfordshire, which was honoured to receive the Queen's Award for Voluntary Service. Between its creation in 2008 and 2022 its volunteers attended more than 600 incidents, equating to more than 18,000 hours deployed on searches, both in and out of Oxfordshire. They were initially focused on foot search, but they expanded their skills to incorporate water rescue, dog search and drone search.

As we have heard, mountain rescue teams are a de facto fourth emergency service, especially during major incidents such as flooding and heavy snowfall, yet they do not have the equivalent funding streams or protections of other services. As climate change leads to more serious weather events in the UK we will, alas, come to rely on mountain rescue services more and more—and that reliance will not be reserved just for avid hikers, climbers, mountain bikers or other forms of adventure, but for whole communities, as flooding events become more common. In some teams, annual call-outs now exceed 150 to 300 incidents. As we have heard, drivers of the growth in those incident numbers include an increase in outdoor recreation and tourism, social media-driven locations attracting increased numbers of inexperienced visitors, and the impact of climate change on weather-related incidents.

The accounts of Mountain Rescue England and Wales show a total income of approximately £1.25 million in 2024, with the majority coming from donations and charitable activities rather than Government support. Since 2011, the UK Government have provided grant funding, historically around £200,000 to £250,000 per year across the whole UK. That funding is project-based rather than being core funding, and is primarily for equipment and training, rather than operational sustainability. That is a challenge faced by many other third-sector organisations—charities, museums and so on—where the grant funding system is focused on capital rather than operational sustainability.

As we heard from the hon. Member for Stirling and Strathallan, Scotland operates a distinct model. The Scottish Government provide direct annual grant funding to Scottish Mountain Rescue in recognition of its team's role in delivering land-based search and rescue on behalf of Police Scotland. That includes an annual grant totalling more than £300,000 per year, which is distributed to teams via an agreed formula; allocation reflects call-out volume, team size and assets, including funding in the Scottish Government's fairer funding pilot, providing assurance of continued funding until at least March 2027 and giving those organisations the ability to plan ahead.

Chris Kane: As a former council leader, I always say that the Scottish Government have to keep on top of what that figure is and invest in it, because volumes can change, and the amount of money is never enough to do all the work required. They need a robust approach to ensuring that the funding model is adapting and changing, particularly with all the additional costs and fees. They have to make sure that they are investing enough, and that requires constant vigilance to make sure that they have done so. Does the hon. Member agree?

Olly Glover: The hon. Gentleman's ask is entirely legitimate and justified. We hope that the current Scottish Government will, in the first instance, build on the wonderful achievement of the Scottish Liberal Democrat-Labour coalition in 2003 of introducing a Scottish Mountain Rescue grant.

In terms of our asks of the Minister, it is clear that the Government need to better support mountain rescue teams. At the very least, the Government need to ensure that they are not adding pressure through cumbersome bureaucracy and administrative costs that stretch their finances further. That is the risk of the current interpretation of the Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) (Amendment) Regulations 2025 and the impact they will have on mountain rescue teams. Those regulations are very serious, and we understand that they came from the findings of the inquiry into the Manchester Arena bombings, but their implementation should be proportionate to the risk and the nature of the organisations concerned.

Mountain rescue teams have been in touch with Liberal Democrat Members of Parliament to raise concerns over the impact those regulations will have on their ability to provide services at temporary sporting events in remote locations, such as fell races or mountain bike events. They have emphatically said that, as things stand, the regulations will mean that they cease providing rescue cover at those events, due to excessive administrative burden and costs. Without cover at events, mountain

rescue teams will be forced to scramble from their homes should an injury occur, increasing the wait time for patients, with potentially catastrophic implications for patients' health. We hope that the Government will heed the calls from mountain rescue teams and the Liberal Democrats for a carve-out for rescue cover. Steps should be taken to ensure that that change is as smooth as possible, and that the negative impact of the cost is mitigated as far as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) raised these concerns in Committee with the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), who stated that he did

"not want small events...to be overregulated"

or

"volunteers to be over-burdened with financial registration fees"—
[*Official Report, Fifth Delegated Legislation Committee*, 15 April 2026; c. 9.]

He promised to look into the issue with the Care Quality Commission. The Minister present today is not responsible for this piece of delegated legislation, but I hope she will be able to assist with those discussions in the Department of Health and Social Care, and that she, with the Department, will consider some of the ideas put forward for supporting mountain rescue services if the changes are enacted.

If the changes take effect, they will be catastrophic for many mountain rescue services. It is essential that Government support via other routes is ramped up to mitigate the impact, so that mountain rescue can continue to provide the critical functions we have heard about in the debate.

3.40 pm

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Thank you for agreeing to chair this important debate, Ms Lewell. Like others, I congratulate the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) on securing it.

We have heard a huge amount of unanimity across the political divide about our support for mountain rescue and the analysis of some of the challenges that it faces. Frankly, mountain rescue is easy to ignore because it operates by definition in remote areas, but there is something else: it is operated by people who are typically self-sufficient, independent and tough volunteers, and as a result it is a self-sufficient, independent and tough organisation. Those are not typically the kind of people who put their hands up and say they want the Government to do something for them, but—and this is an important "but"—when someone needs mountain rescue, it is the most important organisation in the world.

There seems to be a qualification for being on the Front Bench at the moment. The hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) was stuck out on a mountain in Italy for 48 hours, and look where that has got him. I was an idiot myself when I was in my teens: I got stuck up above the snowline on a mountain overnight, with no equipment at all, wearing trainers. Unfortunately, that was before the days of mobile phones, and I just had to survive; I managed to climb down the following day. By the sounds of it, there is a link between risk taking and political careers, but I hope that both of us have learned our lessons; I look forward to further anecdotes from the Minister.

[Jerome Mayhew]

We need mountain rescue, and we know that demand is increasing. We have heard about the 26 teams in Scottish Mountain Rescue, which in 2025 had 1,270 call-outs and assisted more than 900 people. It is worth remembering that that took more than 39,000 hours of volunteer time. We heard from the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) about the many English mountain rescue teams—five, I think, in his constituency—and we heard from the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) about Welsh mountain rescue. Like her, I want to raise the profile of Llanberis Mountain Rescue Team. In my former career, I was the managing director of Go Ape, working in outdoor recreation—often out in the mountains—and the Llanberis team was responsible for training for the mountain leader qualifications. It is at the heart of this country's very good training and outdoor education, and was responsible for responding to 10% of all call-outs last year. There is plenty to support and give plaudits for.

We have heard a number of arguments that more should be done regarding funding, and some of those arguments no doubt have merit, but we should be careful what we wish for with volunteer organisations. When I think, off the top of my head, about the most loved, most trusted and most supported organisations in our country, I think of the RNLI, the Air Ambulance Service, the hospice movement and mountain rescue. They have something important in common: they are not adjuncts of the state. They grow up from their local community, and they are therefore supported by, loved by and close to their community. It would be a terrible disservice to mountain rescue if, through some misplaced wish to support it, we brought it into the confines of the state.

Liz Saville Roberts: The hon. Gentleman makes an argument that I have heard before—that, to maintain certain rescue services, they must not be vulnerable to policy decisions making cuts to public services. There is a “but” though, as those services must have sufficient funding to survive. The RNLI is a very well loved and established charity, but it is much more difficult for some of the smaller charities. It is important that we move forward knowing that we need to maintain these services, even though we may have different funding models.

Jerome Mayhew: That is a reasonable point, but the key argument made by all hon. Members today is about the state getting in the way through regulatory oversight. That may be by mistake, as I think it probably is genuine oversight in this case—that is, the draft Health and Social Care Act 2008 (Regulated Activities) (Amendment) Regulations 2026, which were debated in Committee on 15 April. Real concerns have been expressed by Members across the political divide about the potential impact of the draft regulations on mountain rescue.

Those concerns were articulated in Committee by my hon. Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), who is medically qualified and was previously a medical member of mountain rescue. She set out concerns about the impact on mountain rescue, the application of treatment by volunteers and the requirement to be registered with the Care Quality Commission. The hon.

Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale estimated that it would cost each organisation between £10,000 and £20,000 for regulation. There will be a clear impact upon onsite healthcare on the mountainside, but also on sports events, fell running, mountain bike events—which I used to attend—and music festivals. We want high quality care, but as Members from across the political divide have argued, the regulations need to be proportionate. I hope that the Minister is about to announce that there will be an exemption for mountain rescue. We wait on her speech with bated breath.

That is just one example of regulatory burden; there are others. We should aim to have proportionate regulation. We should aim to reduce the regulatory burden in terms of bureaucracy while increasing the effectiveness of light-touch regulation to provide care and support when it is needed. The draft regulations appear to be the exact opposite, so I will be interested in the Minister's response.

I have a final point, though it is really an observation. On the increased demand for mountain rescue, we have to ask, “Why?”. It may be in part because of changed attitudes to how we live our lives as a response to covid and the lockdown, and a reassessment of the rat race. People want to get out, experience adventure, get closer to the outdoors and to nature more generally. If so, without hesitation I applaud and encourage, as we all should, that increased demand and appetite for the outdoors.

There is an attitude on social media, however, where we seem to laud “extreme” activities, making very dangerous and difficult activities seem accessible and desirable to people like me when I was a teenager in my trainers. There is a concern that that attitude underplays the risk associated with those activities, when professional training is needed to build the layers of experience that make one capable of undertaking and surviving them. There is a balance to be struck between encouraging interest, involvement and engagement, and reinforcing the need for personal responsibility for one's own safety—a responsibility that one addresses through training, experience and risk mitigation and management structures.

We are lucky to have mountain rescue. Finance will always be a challenge. I accept that improvements can be made, but I repeat my caution about the need to stay close to one's community. At the very least, the Government should not make matters worse with heavy-handed or stupid regulation. We seem to have an example of that going through Parliament right now. The Government have the opportunity, through the Minister, to address the sector's very real concerns, and I look forward to her comments.

3.49 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Lewell. I am pleased to be able to respond on behalf of my hon. Friend the Minister for Aviation, Maritime and Decarbonisation. I thank hon. Members from across the House for their thoughtful contributions and for shining a light on the vital work of volunteer mountain rescue teams. I am particularly grateful to the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) who secured this debate and in doing so has provided not only an opportunity to consider the challenges facing mountain rescue, but to recognise and celebrate the extraordinary contribution that those volunteers make to our national

resilience. Of course, I acknowledge not only mountain rescue, but also lowland rescue, cave rescue, independent lifeboats and lifeguards for the vital work that they do.

Like the hon. Member for Hazel Grove, I very much enjoy the Peak district's magnificent hills. I thank the Kinder Mountain Rescue Team who keep people safe on those hills, which are such a wonderful attraction for walkers, fell runners, mountain bikers and climbers, but can also change very quickly, particularly at the top of Kinder Scout. When the clouds come down, it can become quite a frightening and disorienting place.

Many hon. Members have raised concerns about potential regulatory changes that may affect the work of mountain rescue, principally, the removal of regulatory exemptions around Care Quality Commission registration. The Care Quality Commission will commence a consultation from 8 May to 12 June, which will provide further opportunities for groups and individuals affected to discuss their concerns. I hope that I can offer some reassurance to hon. Members that that will include a separate stream specifically for mountain rescue, made up of focus groups and wider engagement. That feedback will then inform how the changes will be implemented to avoid such groups being disproportionately impacted, including through new guidance being developed by the CQC.

Jerome Mayhew: That sounds like progress in the right direction, but can the Minister address the absolute cost of registration, which we have assessed as being between £10,000 and £20,000 per organisation? How will that be reduced by the Government's actions?

Lilian Greenwood: I understand the concern that the hon. Member and other hon. Members have raised but, as he will appreciate, that falls outside my Department's remit. However, I will ask my colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to respond on that point and on other questions that have been raised. I note the request for a meeting from the hon. Member for Hazel Grove, and I will ensure that that is drawn to their attention.

Search and rescue in the United Kingdom is, at its heart, a collective national endeavour. It is not delivered by any single organisation or Department acting alone, but by a partnership that brings together Government, emergency services, charities, local responders and, critically, thousands of committed volunteers who stand ready day and night to help people in distress.

I am glad to say that, while I have not had to be rescued from a mountain, I have witnessed a rescue and had the opportunity to enjoy the hills thanks to support, help and guidance from the national mountain rescue centre, which I believe is probably in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts). That is a really wonderful place that has some fantastic staff who can guide people through some of the trickier aspects of conquering Tryfan or, indeed, any of the other hills in Eryri.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the many hundreds and thousands of volunteers up and down this country, some of whom I will be meeting again this weekend on Sunday as I join them on a training exercise in Warwickshire. I pay tribute not only to the work they do in the search and rescue, but to the other organisations

that they get out for and help. They drove the vehicle for our local Father Christmas, who went round raising money for local charities in Bedworth this year; that is where I joined them for the first time. I thank the Minister for her kind words about the volunteers and the fantastic work that search and rescue does up and down this country.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for making that important point. Indeed, I met Warwickshire search and rescue when Lowland Rescue visited the House of Commons earlier this year or late last year.

The partnership embodied in UK Search and Rescue, or UKSAR, brings together Government Departments, statutory responders and voluntary organisations from across the United Kingdom. Through its strategic board and operators group, it provides a forum that supports alignment between policy, operational delivery and those who respond on the ground. It is an important mechanism for ensuring that different parts of the SAR system—maritime, inland and specialist—can work together effectively while respecting the different responsibilities and remits that apply.

Through UKSAR, a wide range of workstreams are taken forward to support volunteer search and rescue organisations. As has already been acknowledged, they include mountain rescue, lowland rescue, cave rescue, independent lifeboats and others that collectively form the backbone of our national response capability. That work spans interoperability, national operating guidance, medical response, volunteer support and the recognition of SAR organisation. While much of that work is necessarily technical and often unseen, its purpose is simple: to support volunteers to operate safely, professionally and effectively when the public needs them most. UKSAR has provided guidance on insurance for voluntary organisations, which is available on gov.uk. Indemnity requires a much wider discussion across Government, but I will ensure that the question about insurance is addressed by my colleagues.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane) recognised that responsibility for different aspects of search and rescue sits across Government. Inland search and rescue is not within my Department's direct policy remit. However, that does not lessen the depth of respect that we have for those who deliver these vital services, nor does it diminish the importance of recognising the practical support that Government can provide where it is appropriate to do so. It is very welcome that the APPG for volunteer rescue services is bringing the issues facing services to our attention. I am sure that the Minister with responsibility for search and rescue will respond to my hon. Friend's kind invitation to join a future meeting.

In that context, it is right to highlight some of the tangible progress that has been made in recent years to support volunteer SAR organisations across the UK through the work of UKSAR. A significant milestone was announced in the recent Budget, as has been acknowledged in the debate: a vehicle excise duty exemption for volunteer search and rescue services. That exemption will apply to mountain rescue, lowland rescue, cave rescue, independent lifeboats and the RNLI. It is the outcome of sustained and collaborative work led by UKSAR and the all-party parliamentary group for SAR volunteers, and it reflects a clear recognition of

[Lilian Greenwood]

both the public value of search and rescue volunteers and the practical costs they bear in carrying out their vital work.

Volunteer SAR organisations have also benefited from the VAT rebates introduced in 2015, which remain an important element of financial support. In addition, practical enablers are in place to assist operations on the ground, including access to radio spectrum at reduced or nil cost. That access allows teams to operate compatible communications during incidents, improving safety, co-ordination and effectiveness through the UKSAR band plan. Those measures might not always attract attention—they sound a bit techy—but they matter enormously to those who rely on them in the field.

Jim Shannon: First of all, I thank the Minister for those suggestions and for the direct help from Government. I know that this is not in the Minister's remit, but I ask her to ringfence the moneys being sent to Northern Ireland in Barnett consequentials, because if they are ringfenced, they go to where they should be.

Lilian Greenwood: I note the hon. Member's question, and I understand that support is provided to mountain rescue services within Northern Ireland, but that is a matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly.¹

As a number of hon. Members have rightly said, it is important to recognise that resilience is not only about equipment or interoperability; it is about people. Search and rescue can be physically demanding, and the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) mentioned a search and rescue volunteer who sadly lost his life. I certainly offer my condolences to him and his community, who will have been affected by that terrible incident. We know that it can be incredibly physically demanding work, but it can also be emotionally challenging, particularly for volunteers who balance the responsibility alongside family life and employment. That is why mental health and wellbeing principles for SAR volunteers have now been published on gov.uk, setting out expectations and guidance to support those who so often run towards risk on behalf of others.

All that sits alongside the central truth that has been reflected throughout the debate: volunteers lie at the very heart of search and rescue in the UK, and nowhere is that more evident than in mountain rescue. Mountain rescue volunteers operate in some of the most challenging conditions that our country offers: remote terrain, hostile weather, long and often complex incidents, frequently far from the spotlight and always without expectation of reward. They respond at night, in severe weather and in circumstances that demand both technical excellence and personal resilience, and many do so at considerable personal cost, stepping away from families and working lives at a moment's notice, carrying responsibilities that most of us thankfully never have to shoulder. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Whitehaven and Workington (Josh MacAlister), who, as has been mentioned already, volunteers with the Patterdale Mountain Rescue Team.

It is right that we acknowledge the pressures that volunteers face. As we have already heard, demand is rising, incidents are increasingly complex and volunteers

are balancing that extraordinary service with the realities of modern life, including cost of living pressures and the cumulative emotional impact of repeated exposure to traumatic incidents. Those challenges are real, and they deserve to be recognised honestly and respectfully. Despite those pressures, mountain rescue volunteers and volunteer search and rescue teams more broadly continue to respond with professionalism, humility and compassion. They are not a peripheral part of our emergency response system; they are one of its greatest strengths, and they exemplify public service in its truest sense. I am proud to be here on behalf of the Minister responsible for maritime search and rescue, and I am proud of the volunteers and supporting organisations that form such an important part of the UK search and rescue community. I pay tribute to those who respond on the frontline and to those working behind the scenes to ensure these life-saving services continue to be there whenever they are needed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) asked a number of questions in support of Bolton Mountain Rescue Team, which I know does vital work in his area. I concur that Winter hill and Rivington pike offer many beautiful walking routes. He raised a number of questions about the high cost of insurance, access to rehabilitation services, and medical supplies. Although those issues are not within my Department's remit, I will ensure that they are drawn to the attention of relevant ministerial colleagues who can write to him on those matters. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) called for greater support for mountain rescue, and I hope I have set out how the Government are responding to the needs of the mountain rescue community.

The hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale and the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) represent some of the UK's highest and most popular mountain regions. They rightly drew attention to the dangers of exploring not only the fells and ridges, but caves and quarries, particularly if doing so without proper equipment and without knowledge and guidance.

Social media does bring our wild places to wider attention, but we know that it is also leading to more people, particularly younger people, putting themselves in danger. That means that we need to look carefully at the channels that we use to ensure that safety guidance and warnings reach the people who need to see them. There is of course experience in Government of doing that—I speak as the Minister with responsibility for road safety, where we are trying to reach young men aged 17 to 24, who are particularly at risk. We are using completely different channels than perhaps we would have used in the past, because we know that we can reach them better through social media or YouTube or other methods. Perhaps the same can be applied to the sorts of warnings we are offering about the hills, mountains and caves.

I conclude by once again thanking hon. Members for raising these important issues. I thank the hon. Member for Hazel Grove for securing today's debate and giving the House the opportunity not only to debate Government support, but to recognise and celebrate the remarkable contribution of our mountain rescue volunteers.

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

4.6 pm

Lisa Smart: We have had a particularly strong debate this afternoon. We have reminded one another that mountain rescue teams are a vital part of our emergency infrastructure, and we believe that their importance will only grow. We want our communities to be out enjoying our great outdoors, because it belongs to all of us. My hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) reminded us of the value of being outdoors for all of us, but also the need to respect nature.

We had a number of really excellent contributions from across the Chamber today. The hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell), my fellow Greater Manchester MP, reminded us that mountain rescue teams are out 24/7 and available 365 days a year. He also raised an important point about the expiry dates on medicines. That was a very well-made point.

We had some interventions from the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) and my hon. Friends the Members for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo), for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) and for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), who reminded us of the existence of lowland rescue, the importance of the mental health of the volunteers who are involved and the burdens of the CQC regulations.

As he often does, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) brought the very important perspective from Northern Ireland. He talked about the importance of that long-term, sustainable strategic funding for rescue services. I am grateful to him.

The hon. Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane) made such an important point about how, in some parts of the country, mountain rescue teams are the only emergency service working. That was an extremely well-made point.

My hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale reminded us that the cost can be extremely high for those who volunteer their time and their energy,

and he was absolutely right to pay tribute to Chris Lewis. I join others in sending my condolences to the whole community, because that loss will be felt keenly.

Several hon. and right hon. Members made the point about the need to have a single point of contact. The Minister here is not able to speak on behalf of all of her colleagues, which made the point very well. The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) helped me to understand the correct pronunciation of Eryri, and reminded us just how dangerous it can be to spend time in the outdoors in places that might look absolutely banging on social media but are deeply inappropriate to spend time in for someone who is not a professional and does not have the back-up.

I just want to spend a moment on the risk-taking behaviour of the Front-Bench colleagues who are here today and were able to speak from first-hand experience. My hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) got stuck up an Italian mountain, but had a very good outcome. We are delighted that he is here to join us today. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), told us that he learned his lessons in youth, and reminded us that overconfidence in youth is not a new phenomenon—it is not something that has only been brought about by social media.

The shadow Minister described those who volunteer for mountain rescue services as self-sufficient and tough. He is absolutely right to do so, but we should not rely on that sort of person and that sort of organisation to do it all for themselves. It is a real sign of strength to ask for help, so I save particular thanks for those people from Mountain Rescue England and Wales, and my local mountain rescue teams—some of whom are in the Public Gallery today—who took the time to contact me and to brief a number of Members. They have made a massive difference to our country, and I am so grateful.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for mountain rescue.

Osteoporosis and Bone Health

4.11 pm

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered osteoporosis and bone health.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell. As a practising physiotherapist, I have seen at first hand the profound and often devastating impact that osteoporosis can have on not only the health, but the independence and livelihood of an individual and the lives of those who care for them. For too long, osteoporosis has been dismissed as an unavoidable consequence of ageing, and we have normalised the gradual stoop, the loss of height, and the curvature of the spine. We all recognise the familiar road sign depicting an elderly couple bent double, yet we rarely stop to question what it truly represents.

In reality, it is not a benign or natural process. It is often the visible consequence of repeated, preventable spinal fractures, where the bone of the spine collapses under pressure. This is not an unavoidable decline; it is, in many cases, a preventable harm.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Constituents such as Susan have suffered pain and changes to their life because of osteoporosis. Does the hon. Member share the concern of both Susan and I: that we will not see proper fracture liaison services in overlooked rural areas without a fully funded implementation plan to end the postcode lottery for these services?

Sonia Kumar: I believe that we should be rolling those services out across the entire country, and I will come on to that in the rest of my speech. I am sure that the Minister will also comment on that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady and thank her for the work that she did on this before she came to this place. We are very much indebted to her. Does she agree that the fact that this condition affects one in two women and one in four men over the age of 50 means that there should be greater awareness? The fact that there are some 72,000 people living with osteoporosis in Northern Ireland alone highlights the need to ensure that people know that they can do some things themselves, and that calcium and vitamin D could make such a difference to their quality of life as they age—I speak as one who is ageing quickly.

Sonia Kumar: The hon. Member comes to this with a lot of experience. I agree that people do not know what osteoporosis is, which is why we are having this debate. It is important to discuss what it actually is. For those less familiar with it, osteoporosis is a disease characterised by low bone mass and a structural deterioration of bone tissue, resulting in an increase in bone fragility and a susceptibility to fractures. Osteoporosis is asymptomatic and often remains undiagnosed until a fragility fracture occurs. It develops silently, without symptoms, until the moment that it declares itself—a fall from a standing height causes a fracture, or a twist or even a cough causes a low-grade insufficiency fracture. Normal stress has an abnormal effect on the bone. The bone is able to withstand the stress, but because it is of such poor quality, it then crumbles.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. I was diagnosed with pre-osteoporosis when I suffered a minor injury from playing tennis, so for the last eight years I have been taking Adcal tablets regularly. I was proud recently to welcome a new state-of-the-art physical activity hub in Bedworth in my constituency, which will help residents to stay active and stop the symptoms of conditions such as osteoporosis. I would therefore like the Minister to address how the Government will make better use of our growing physiotherapy workforce—

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): Order.

4.15 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.25 pm

On resuming—

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): Order. The debate may now continue until 4.55 pm.

Rachel Taylor: As someone who is taking medication to ward off the progression of osteoporosis, I was delighted to welcome Bedford's new state-of-the-art physical activity hub, which will help residents to stay active and stop their osteoporosis developing. I would like the Minister to explain how the Government will make better use of the growing physiotherapy workforce to deliver early intervention, fracture prevention and rehabilitation in the community in places such as the Bedford physical activity hub.

Sonia Kumar: If someone says physio, I am always going to say, "Yes, yes, yes," behind them. I agree with my hon. Friend that we should roll out physiotherapists and the multidisciplinary teams required to help those with osteoporosis. I also thank her for highlighting the importance of taking bone-sparing medication. Many people in the UK do not take it because they do not understand its importance.

More than 3.2 million people in England now live with osteoporosis, including just over 2.5 million women. One in two women over 50 will suffer a fracture caused by osteoporosis, as will one in five men. In terms of years lost to premature mortality and disability, those fractures are the fourth most consequential medical condition in the country. At any given time, around 7% of NHS beds are occupied by patients with fragility fractures, many of them because early warning signs were missed and opportunities to intervene were lost. Behind those figures are lives changed in an instant.

It is not just older people. One young woman told me:

"I thought my bones were something I wouldn't have to think about until I was much older",

only to find herself dealing with low bone density in her twenties after medical treatment. Some risk factors for osteoporosis include smoking, alcohol misuse, previous fragility fractures, low body mass index and long-term steroid use. Every single one of those factors needs to be looked after. We cannot look at osteoporosis as a one-condition problem; we must look at the whole lifestyle.

Through the work of the all-party parliamentary group on osteoporosis and bone health, which I chair, I heard from patients whose stories are not easily forgotten. A woman in her early sixties fractured her wrist after a minor fall. She was treated and discharged, but no one joined the dots. Within two years, she had suffered multiple further fractures, including to her spine. She now lives with constant pain from repeated spinal fractures, affecting everything from how she breathes to how she moves.

I think of those who never recover their independence—of people who go into hospital with a hip fracture and never come home. For many, that fracture marks the beginning of the end, with over a quarter dying within one year. What unites these stories is not bad luck, and they are not isolated tragedies. They are systemic failures: a missed referral, an overlooked warning sign, treatment not initiated, and a second fracture that should not have happened. That is why it is essential that, after a first fracture, every patient is identified, assessed and supported on to an appropriate treatment plan. One fracture must not become many.

Too often, the fall that brings someone into hospital is treated as a single event, rather than as an accumulation of undiagnosed and untreated conditions. We therefore miss the opportunity to change the course of someone's life. Through the work of the APPG on osteoporosis and bone health, I have also seen stark variations in access to treatment across the country. Prescribing rates for critical second-line therapy are three and a half times higher in areas where GPs can prescribe it freely compared with areas where there is a need for specialist referral. A report has also found that GPs in more affluent areas are much more likely to be able to prescribe freely than their counterparts in the most deprived areas.

For people in many parts of the country, the barriers do not stop at the prescription pad. When shared care arrangements are not in place and GPs cannot prescribe, patients must attend hospital for routine injections that could be delivered safely in the community. As the Government develop the neighbourhood health service, there is a real opportunity for a multidisciplinary team approach to bone health, one that includes at its heart our allied health professionals, including physiotherapists, dieticians, occupational therapists, falls teams, consultants and advanced practice clinicians. Prevention, prevention, prevention is the key. The importance of a holistic approach is essential to prevention for those who may be susceptible to poor bone health. We should help those people lead healthier lives by stopping smoking, reducing alcohol intake and increasing exercise.

Talking of prevention, I need to welcome the Government's commitment to fracture liaison services, which are the gold standard for fracture care and play an important role in identifying, assessing and treating osteoporosis in people over the age of 50 with a fracture. FLSs reduce fracture rates by up to 40%, and will prevent 74,000 fractures over five years, including 31,000 hip fractures. FLSs are also incredible value for money, breaking even within 18 to 24 months, with a return on investment over five years of £1.88 for every £1. Preventable osteoporotic fractures contribute to 1.5 million days off sick, costing employers £142 million in sick pay.

I also welcome the new DEXA—dual energy X-ray absorptiometry—scanners that the Minister's Department has delivered, and the Government's commitment to

ending the postcode lottery for fracture prevention services. The Minister understands the scale of what is at stake. This must be only the start of managing osteoporosis and bone health.

Looking ahead, we know that the challenges will grow. By 2047, an estimated 4 million people in England will be living with osteoporosis, an increase of more than 700,000 on today's figures. We know the scale of the problem, we know the treatments, and we have the evidence. What we have lacked for too long is urgency. There has been clear progress, and the Minister deserves credit for that.

I have three recommendations for the Department. First, we should roll out fracture liaison services to all parts of England. We are a Labour Government, and reducing inequalities is in our blood. We pledged to end this postcode lottery by 2030, and it is crucial that we deliver that. Secondly, we should introduce questions about bone density and osteoporosis in the health check for over-40s. Such pre-emptive measures, including risk stratification, lifestyle advice and early intervention where appropriate, can help people to deal with these issues before they become too serious. Thirdly, we should introduce targeted case finding and proactive bone health management for those aged 70 and above, particularly those at high risk of falls. That should include timely access to DEXA scanning, community-based treatment pathways, and co-ordinated fall prevention to help reduce fractures and associated mortality.

Osteoporosis is not an unavoidable consequence of ageing. It is a condition that we can prevent, predict and treat, yet for too many and for too long the first sign—the fracture—is missed. We know what works and we have the tools. Under the 14 years of the previous Conservative Government, we were missing consistency, urgency and the willingness to act. If we get this right, prevent the first fracture and intervene decisively after it, and ensure equal access to care regardless of postcode, we will not only save the NHS significant cost, but preserve something far more valuable: people's independence, dignity and quality of life.

I hope that the Minister will consider my three recommendations and meet me to discuss them further. Osteoporosis is not just a clinical issue; it is a test of whether our health system truly prioritises the long-term health of everyone across the United Kingdom, and not reactive, short-term measures.

4.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mrs Sharon Hodgson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) for securing this important debate. She continues to work as a physiotherapist alongside her role as a serving MP, so she brings a wealth of valuable professional clinical experience and knowledge to this debate. I would be very happy to meet her afterwards to discuss her three recommendations.

I also thank her for her as the chair of the APPG on osteoporosis and bone health. As an MP for 21 years, I have done lots of work on APPGs, and I am—as I know our Chair today is—a big supporter of all APPGs. The work they do is so important and can really make changes to policy. My hon. Friend's APPG does important

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

work in raising awareness of osteoporosis, advocating for improvements to the care that patients receive, and promoting behavioural and system changes that are designed to strengthen bones and prevent osteoporosis.

Osteoporosis is estimated to affect more than 3 million people in the UK, and each year over half a million patients present to hospitals with fragility fractures. It is important that we acknowledge the significant impact that osteoporosis can have on individuals and their loved ones. It can seriously impact every aspect of a person's life, as we have heard, and has a significant impact on the NHS and the wider economy. We hear too often—as we have today—of patients experiencing painful fractures that could have been prevented, of patients living in fear of having further fractures, and the impact that that has on their independence, wellbeing and quality of life. We recognise the importance of bone health and the benefits that early identification of people at risk of osteoporosis and the prevention of fragility fractures can bring.

The 10-year health plan sets out a vision for a health and care system that delivers more personalised, integrated and proactive care for people with long-term and complex conditions, including osteoporosis and other musculoskeletal conditions. More tests and scans delivered in the community, better joined-up working between services and greater use of technology will all support people in the management of osteoporosis. The neighbourhood health service, supported by the neighbourhood health framework that we published last month, will ensure that people can better access care that is joined up, personalised and designed to proactively meet their needs. Initiatives such as Diagnosis Connect will also directly refer patients to specialist charities at the point of diagnosis for personalised advice, information, guidance and support.

Resources are already in place to help support healthcare professionals in the early diagnosis of osteoporosis, such as the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence clinical knowledge summary on osteoporosis and the prevention of fragility fractures. The Royal College of General Practitioners also has an e-learning module for GPs on the diagnosis and management of osteoporosis, developed in collaboration with the Royal Osteoporosis Society—I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley was telling me that she was the chair or the president of the society.

Sonia Kumar indicated dissent.

Mrs Hodgson: It must have been another body—I am giving her jobs that she has never had.

That e-module is designed to support the early diagnosis of osteoporosis by highlighting which groups are at higher risk of osteoporosis and fragility fractures.

Progress is being made on increasing early diagnosis and management of osteoporosis. Last year, more than 16,000 extra bone density—or DEXA—scans were delivered compared with the previous year, but we recognise there is still much more we can do. That is why on 1 March, the Government announced funding for 20 new DEXA scanners across England, supported by £2.4 million of investment. Tens of thousands of

patients will benefit from faster access to bone scans as a result, and it will help ensure that people with bone conditions, such as osteoporosis, get diagnosed earlier.

Fracture liaison services can play a vital role in reducing the risk of refracture, improving quality of life and increasing years lived in good health, which is what we all want to see. The Government and NHS England support the clinical case for services that help prevent fragility fractures and support the patients who sustain them. We are committed to rolling out fracture liaison services to every part of the country by 2030. Integrated care boards remain well placed to make decisions according to local need. The renewed women's health strategy published last week sets an expectation that ICBs prioritise community-based models when commissioning new fracture prevention services.

However, we need to be honest about the scale of the action needed, the challenges faced across the health and care system, and that change will not be possible overnight. Musculoskeletal community services have the longest waiting lists of all adult community services in England. We know that patients, including those with osteoporosis, are waiting too long for care and treatment, and that needs to change.

To support people with MSK conditions, such as osteoporosis, to access services when they need them, we are delivering the “Getting it right first time” MSK community delivery programme, which is working to transform MSK community services, reduce MSK community waiting times, improve data and metrics, and implement referral pathways to wider support services. As part of a major transformation of the NHS under the 10-year health plan, patients with MSK conditions, such as osteoporosis, will also soon be able to bypass their GPs and directly access community services, including physiotherapy, pain management and orthopaedics, in the NHS app.

The landmark change will deliver faster treatment for the flare-up of existing conditions, while enabling GPs to focus on more complex cases, reducing pressure on hospitals and freeing up GP practices. As we have heard, osteoporosis affects around one in three women, compared with one in five men. We know that women are at greater risk of osteoporosis due to the decrease in oestrogen production at the menopause, which accelerates bone loss.

Since 2022, two new drugs have been recommended by NICE for the treatment of osteoporosis in post-menopausal women. I was so glad to hear the intervention from my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), who said she had taken some of those new medications. They help to strengthen bones and prevent bone loss, reducing the risk of fractures. The renewed women's health strategy published last week sets out our ambition to support healthy ageing, maintain independence and improve quality of life for women, while also reducing avoidable pressure on hospital services.

Turning to work and health, the Government are committed to supporting disabled people and those with health conditions, including MSK conditions such as osteoporosis, with their employment journey. We therefore have a range of specialist initiatives to support individuals to stay in work and get back to work. We are joining up health and employment support around the individual through the WorkWell programme, MSK hubs,

the MSK community delivery programme, and the individual placement and support in primary care initiative. Measures also include support from work coaches and disability employment advisers in jobcentres, and access to work grants.

We also recognise the benefits of physical activity in improving bone strength and reducing the risk of fractures. We are exploring ways to expand access to MSK physical activity hubs in the community, enabling the delivery of evidence-based physical activity interventions for individuals with MSK conditions. By aligning with employment support at local level, this project will seek to improve both health and work outcomes for people with MSK conditions, such as osteoporosis, while prioritising those experiencing unmet MSK health needs and living in areas of deprivation, with the aim of addressing health inequalities.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley again for securing this important debate and all the work she does in this area, and I thank other hon. Members for being present and for raising insightful points during the debate. I hope hon. Members are reassured by some of the measures I have outlined. I recognise that we must go further, but I reaffirm the Government's commitment to support the millions of people in the UK who are living with osteoporosis to ensure that they get the support they need, including improved diagnosis and management. I look forward to meeting with my hon. Friend.

Question put and agreed to.

Car Insurance Industry: Fraud

4.46 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of fraud in the car insurance industry.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. Before I start, I thank the Minister; the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier); and my hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) for being here to respond to the debate. This issue cuts across several Departments, and my main ask is for a co-ordinated response to it across Government.

I will touch on many types of fraud in the car insurance industry, but I want particularly to draw the Minister's attention to paid ad spoofing, which came to my attention after a constituent fell afoul of the scam. Because their case is yet to come to court, I cannot give any specifics of it—I can reassure you, Ms Lewell, that I have checked the content of my speech with the Clerks—but it is typical of the problem.

On its website, the Association of British Insurers describes paid ad spoofing as follows:

“Paid Ad Spoofing involves scammers who use paid advert spoof websites to appear at the top of search engines usually to trick drivers into thinking they will be directed to the website of the genuine insurer. Scammers target motorists when they're most vulnerable after road traffic accidents. When a driver uses their smartphone to start initiating a claim from the roadside, they may be directed to the website of an unscrupulous firm instead of their insurer. Scammers will ask for personal details to provide ‘support services’ and potentially make a claim. They use psychological tactics to befriend, reassure and pressure victims, while all the time collecting personal information for financial gain.”

Let us imagine a scenario: you are driving along in a blame-free manner, and some idiot pulls out of a side road and hits you. It is unfortunate, but these things happen. Nevertheless, you are very shaken up. You both pull over and agree to swap insurance details. If your car is not moveable, you will need to arrange for it to be towed away. You do not have your insurance details on you, but you know the company you are insured with, so you google their phone number. You see your insurance company and its logo at the top of the results. You ring and you get through to someone who sounds very sympathetic, and they arrange to tow your car away.

Over the next few days, you are repeatedly in touch with them. They convince you that you need to hire a car, they sort out your repairs and they send you paperwork to sign for all those things. At no point do they tell you they are not your insurance company, but the reality is that they are not, and the fees that have been racked up for the tow truck, the repairs and the car hire are potentially excessive. They may also have invited you to see a doctor, maybe in a hotel or other obscure location, and convinced you that there is a valid claim for whiplash or other injury as well.

What is the problem with all this? Basically, behind the fake ad is an organisation that will claim for all these costs in a court case, based on the fact that it was not your fault. If they lose that court case, you are on the hook for the exorbitant costs. On top of that, you

[Helen Morgan]

will have had an accident and failed to tell your insurance company, and there are potential legal ramifications of that as well.

I have been shocked to find out that there are qualified solicitors working for no win, no fee firms involved in this type of scam. These firms are fully registered with the Solicitors Regulation Authority. How can that possibly be ethical? It is clearly dishonest, and for that reason I would argue it is barely legal.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The hon. Lady is setting out an extraordinary situation. I want to draw her attention to another real challenge facing drivers: collisions with people who are not insured. Uninsured drivers cost the economy £1 billion a year, and they are disproportionately likely to be involved in collisions, speeding and hit-and-run incidents. That is why I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill last year to increase penalties, and I was delighted to see the Government take up that call for action in their road safety strategy. Is the hon. Lady aware of the massive issue of uninsured drivers, as well as the scams she is reporting on, and does she welcome further action on it?

Helen Morgan: I am aware, because I was once hit by an uninsured driver. It is incredibly stressful not knowing how to get the car fixed and whether it is going to be written off. I was very young and did not know how I was going to afford to deal with that problem. I welcome any measures to deal with uninsured drivers. At the heart of this issue is the fact that insurance fraud is not a victimless crime. The victim is put through an extremely stressful time, and everyone else pays through higher premiums. I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue.

Let me return to my point about solicitors, who are supposedly bound by the ethical codes of their regulator. I am a chartered accountant. In every profession, there are individuals who let us down from time to time, but there are clearly described ethical standards to which members of our organisation should adhere. We must undertake annual training on spotting problematic ethical situations, which for an accountant may not always be clearcut.

I know that other professional bodies have a similar approach to this issue—yet a solicitor can work for a firm benefiting from this type of scam activity, and the firm might be fully registered with the Solicitors Regulation Authority. I argue that the SRA needs to up its game, because those individuals are bringing their profession into disrepute, seemingly with the blessing of the organisation that is supposed to uphold standards. Will the Minister have conversations with her colleagues across the Government to deal with this problem? Surely, people in this country should be able to trust a legal professional, and the Government should be taking steps to ensure that the profession has its house in order.

There is a related point: the websites and search engines that host these paid ads are clearly designed to defraud and mislead. When will we hold the tech companies to account for the content that they host? Surely, they should have a duty to do a basic level of due diligence on the ads they place at the top of their search results.

The online world is a free-for-all, where some of the most powerful companies in the world absolutely disregard basic levels of morality so long as they are paid. What can be done to introduce some sort of regulation to crack down on fraud and prevent it from happening in the first place—essentially, when it is perpetuated online? The only people who are not paying anything are the owners of the companies that host the problem.

As I said in response to the hon. Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow), fraud is not a victimless crime. In the case of motor insurance fraud, every driver is paying in the form of increased insurance premiums. When someone is the victim of a scam, they are left shaken, with their confidence knocked, and potentially significantly out of pocket too. My constituent is a retired professional. The realisation that they have fallen victim to a scam has had a profound effect on their self-esteem.

Paid ad spoofing is not the only type of motor insurance fraud. I thank the ABI, Aviva, Admiral and the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers for getting in touch in advance of this debate and providing briefings. Fraud remains the single greatest threat facing the UK, accounting for about 44% of all crime reported in England and Wales. It continues to pose a serious and systemic challenge to the insurance industry, and ultimately to honest motorists and consumers who are forced to pay the price.

In 2024 alone, £1.16 billion of fraudulent general insurance claims were identified, which was a further increase on the already staggering £1.14 billion detected the year before. Motor insurance remains the area most affected, with insurers uncovering more than 51,700 fraudulent motor claims worth £576 million. That is 5% higher than in 2023 and represents more than half of all detected insurance fraud.

The ABI has written to me to say that insurers are investing heavily to tackle the problem. Its members spend more than £200 million each year to combat fraud, including funding the Insurance Fraud Bureau, which leads the fight against organised insurance crime, and the insurance fraud enforcement department in the City of London police. Unsurprisingly, motor insurance fraud is the most prominent focus of investigation and enforcement activity. However, I argue that, in the case of paid ad spoofing, where there are properly registered firms clogging up the courts with excessive claims that could have been sorted out through the normal insurance settlement process, those organisations are operating in plain sight. I urge fraud specialists to investigate that.

Other types of fraud are equally serious. One of the most concerning trends is the rise of ghost broking, which is a crime where fraudsters sell fake or invalid car insurance policies to unsuspecting customers. Criminals obtain policies using false information to reduce premiums, then manipulate documentation to make those policies appear legitimate. The consequences for their victims are severe. Many believe that they are fully insured, only to find that they hold no valid cover under UK law. That often only comes to light when they are stopped by the police or attempt to make a claim following an accident. Drivers caught without valid insurance face vehicle seizure, potentially unlimited fines and even driving bans. Victims are then left to cover repair costs themselves and find new insurance, often at a much higher premium.

Although ghost broking was once carried out face to face, social media has transformed its reach. Fraudsters now routinely target people online, with younger drivers particularly at risk. That group are more likely to seek cheaper insurance options and engage with sellers via social media platforms. The scale of the problem is deeply concerning. Data published by Aviva in November 2025 shows that ghost broking cases have risen by 22% over the past two years. Almost one in three people surveyed reported buying car insurance through social media, and 84% of those who purchased a fake policy online suffered serious negative consequences, including police intervention and identity theft.

On average, those victims lose around £2,000, excluding the additional costs of fines, vehicle seizure, legal consequences and higher future premiums. That is a heavy burden to place on people who believed they were just doing the right thing. Again, the social media and online companies who host those adverts are the only ones not paying the price. I repeat my concern that this area is effectively unregulated.

As I have said, fraud is not a victimless crime. It drives up premiums for everyone and leaves individuals facing financial and legal consequences through no fault of their own. Tackling it effectively requires robust enforcement, proactive investigation and a willingness to change harmful practices wherever they occur, particularly when they are happening in full view of the system.

In the interests of time, and because many of them have been well rehearsed over the years, I have not touched on the other types of fraud for which we all must pay: fake claims, orchestrated crashes and even inflated claims, which large numbers of people admit to even though it is a criminal offence. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, particularly regarding the unethical practices of some in the legal profession and the steps that can be taken to prevent online giants helping to perpetuate this problem. I particularly look forward to her describing how we can look at this problem across Government, because I fear that it is falling between the stalls of the various Departments that have an interest in it.

4.59 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is again a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. We are going for a hat trick this afternoon, and we are on a roll.

I thank the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for allowing me to come and highlight the pressures my constituents are facing. I thank her for her incredibly detailed speech. I will give some stats for Northern Ireland—I always give a Northern Ireland perspective—so that hon. Members understand why the issue of fraud in the car insurance industry is so important to us.

We are often told that the high cost of living in Northern Ireland is a product of global markets or unavoidable inflation, but there is a hidden tax on our driveways: a fraud premium that every honest motorist is forced to pay. Fraud is not a victimless, white collar crime; it is a systemic crisis that is pricing our citizens—especially our youth—off the road.

Let us look at some of the cold, hard facts from Northern Ireland. The 2025 Police Service of Northern Ireland annual report showed that motor insurance was

the single largest motoring offence group detected in the last year. We are talking about 6,453 detections—17%, or nearly a fifth, of all motoring offences in Northern Ireland, which gives hon. Members an idea of the problem. Behind that number are thousands of people who think it is acceptable to drive without valid cover or to lie on an application to save a few pounds, but saving a few pounds for the individual means a massive loss for the collective—for everyone else.

Across the United Kingdom, motor insurance fraud is a staggering £576 million industry—that is massive. In practical terms, it adds roughly £50 to every single one of our premiums. That is £50 stolen from our pockets by ghost brokers on social media, those who front the policies and those who stage crash-for-cash scams. The situation in Northern Ireland is particularly dire. Although England and Wales have seen some reforms, we remain a litigious outlier. A shocking 40% of claims in Northern Ireland reach the courts, compared with just 3.5% here in the mainland. The environment of high legal costs and high settlements creates a perfect storm for fraud to thrive.

The real victims are not the big insurance corporations, but our young people—people such as my grandchild, who is just starting to drive. As of January 2026, the average premium for a young driver in Northern Ireland is £1,470. That is for third party, fire and theft; fully comprehensive insurance is over £3,000, with a black box—a box in the car that tells the company if the person is doing something they should not be doing. If they do something they should not be doing, their insurance is withdrawn. Those are the second highest premiums in the whole of the United Kingdom, surpassed only by London. We are effectively telling our young people and students that mobility is a luxury that they can no longer afford, because we have not clamped down hard enough on the dishonest few.

We cannot continue to treat insurance fraud as a victimless shortcut. It is not—the stats tell us that. In Northern Ireland, many young people want to drive but find that the premiums are too expensive, never mind the cost of the car. It does not matter how expensive the car is; if they get third party, fire and theft, the whole cost is in their insurance. That is a drain on our economy, a burden on our police and a direct tax on the honest driver.

I believe, as the hon. Member for North Shropshire said, that it is time for stricter enforcement, better education and a refusal to accept that fraud is just part of the system. The Government must prosecute to the fullest extent of the law all those who have broken the law and who have driven up prices for law-abiding citizens. We must also stop the insurers from capitalising on this through higher premiums, but that is a debate for another day.

5.4 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I genuinely thank the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for securing the debate. I will confine my remarks to ghost broking, which she referred to. I gave a speech on that subject at the Association of British Insurers last year, and I have a keen interest in it, given that I had a career in counter-fraud.

[Mr Luke Charters]

The first point that I want to make is about the nature of the phantom protection that consumers so often receive when they purchase ghost car insurance cover. I am increasingly concerned about the use of AI in fabricating insurance documents. They look genuine to many consumers, so we really must ensure that there is consumer awareness around such uses of AI.

I am also concerned that, with ghost broking in particular, there are some instances where it is operating at scale. It is not just the product of a few rogue actors operating from their basements, or something like that; often, it is a systematised attack used by organised crime groups to target vulnerable groups. I will talk next about what I see as systemic predation and the predatory behaviour of some of these ghost brokers.

Let us imagine a young driver, aged about 17 or 18. They might have a little C1 or another small car, something with a 1.0 litre engine, and they might have their very first job after leaving home—a job that they depend on for their way of life and livelihood. They need that car to get to work. We all know about the very high premiums that young drivers face, so many of them unfortunately fall into the hands of ghost brokers. They face many different losses: not only the loss of their premium but, if they were to unfortunately become involved in an accident, the consequences for their personal finances. The effect of uninsured driving is very much a double whammy, especially for young drivers in such circumstances.

We heard from the hon. Member for North Shropshire that these ghost brokers increasingly operate on social media. I really believe that the Financial Conduct Authority can go further, with Ofcom and some of the social media platforms, to call out that behaviour. There is a conversation to be had about the verification process that social media platforms go through when they receive advertising revenue. Those platforms—be they Meta, TikTok or whatever—should not be making money from ghost broking ads.

The ABI was spot on in trying to create greater consumer awareness of this problem. I invite my hon. Friend the Minister to join me in saying a very common Yorkshire phrase: “If it’s too good to be true, it probably is.” That really applies to many of the policies sold by ghost brokers. The ABI has called for greater consumer awareness of the risk of ghost broking, and I encourage my hon. Friend the Minister to join me in supporting that call today.

I am concerned about the statistics from the ABI that show an upward trajectory in ghost broking—for example, there has been a 22% increase in ghost broking over the last couple of years. In addition, there are over 50,000 motor insurance scams, worth half a billion pounds in total, and up to half of all fraudulent claims could feature some aspect of ghost broking. Really staggeringly, around three in 10 young drivers have purchased insurance from illegal sellers on social media, and the average loss per victim is around £2,000, even though an annual premium is obviously less than that. This means that, for many years, many drivers have been going about on the roads uninsured.

The final issue with ghost broking that I want to talk about is the “second wave” that I have heard about anecdotally from those in the sector. Once the ghost broker is there, then, like a vampire, they have got their

victim and they steal some of their identity. They then resell that identity, or part of it, for the purposes of identity theft later on. Not only have uninsured drivers, including young drivers, bought the ghost broker’s policy—that is, they lost their premium and have been uninsured; they may even have been in an accident or whatever—but some years down the line, they might become a victim of identity theft too.

We must have a conversation about having a specific offence of identity theft. Although this does not relate to car insurance, I will briefly tell Members the story of a constituent who served abroad in the armed forces and who had his identity stolen. He found out that mobile phone contracts had been taken out in his name, and I worked with him to get his credit file back on track and to get some of this expunged—some of the credit reference agencies were very slow in righting this wrong.

In the end, there was no financial loss to my constituent, but it had a big impact on his life. He was serving overseas and his credit file had been wrecked; when his partner then found a perfect family home for them, he unfortunately realised he could not get a mortgage. He had come back from deployment, and he knew he would be in the UK for a year or two, so he wanted to use that time to settle into a family home. That was his dream—he had been apart from his girlfriend for some time—but he could not do that because his credit file had been wrecked. I had to sort that out with him, and it was all the consequence of his identity having been stolen.

Identity theft is not a victimless crime. It is particularly acute when it comes to car insurance, but we must tackle it in all its forms. As part of the next iteration of the Government’s fraud strategy, I would welcome a specific offence of identity theft. The Computer Misuse Act 1990 is a broad vehicle according to some of the police I speak to, and it would be beneficial to have a specific offence of identity theft.

Peter Swallow: At the start of his speech, my hon. Friend mentioned the involvement of AI in this. That issue was raised with me by the Thames Valley police roads team, which said it is now quite possible for uninsured drivers to use AI to generate a fake insurance document at the roadside, and in that way to prevent the police from tackling this crime. I detect that my hon. Friend may know more about this than me, so I encourage him to say a little more about it before he wraps up his excellent speech.

Mr Charters: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing attention to that example. Large language models can be in one’s pocket, and such documents can be generated even without internet connectivity. When I was in the counter-fraud sector, I used some of the AI models that criminals had in order to create hypothetical, fabricated documents. My team created some of those documents—bank statements and identity documents—and showed them to me alongside real documents—and I, an experienced fraud practitioner, could not tell the difference with my eyes. We are now having to use digital tools to detect AI manipulation; sometimes the eye of the beholder is insufficient to detect that a document has been fabricated by AI. As a fraud practitioner, one has to stay one step ahead of the fraudsters. I invite the police to think about how they could do that, using AI themselves to detect documents fabricated by AI.

It has been a hearty discussion today. I call on the FCA to work closely with Ofcom and social media companies to quickly put a stop to the revenue connected to many of these ads, because that would curtail a lot of this activity. We have to have much greater verification in place when it comes to ads relating to insurance, and the social media platforms have to do something very simple: check that the originator of the ad is actually registered by the FCA.

I hope that some of these straightforward calls can be answered, and that the Minister will join me in saying that if something is too good to be true, it probably is. We need greater consumer awareness when it comes to car insurance fraud more generally.

5.14 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Lewell. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for securing the debate. The cases she referred to make the point that everybody's insurance premium is going up as a result of this terrible activity.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the issue of fraud within the car insurance industry more broadly, and not just ghost brokers, which have been referred to already. I want to look at this issue through the lens of a constituent's case that is all too real.

In July last year, Nicholas, from Cullompton, had his Škoda Octavia parked outside when another driver reversed into it. The damage was noticeable, but it was fairly minor: a golf ball-sized dent to the bumper and a cracked number plate. The car had been knocked forward no more than 12 inches from where it was parked.

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): Order. Could the hon. Member reassure me that there are no ongoing legal proceedings in relation to the case he is referring to?

Richard Foord: Yes, I can.

The car was damaged, but thankfully the third-party driver did exactly the right thing: they came forward immediately with no dispute, no exaggeration and no injury. Like anyone else in this situation, Nicholas contacted his insurance company to arrange for repairs, and the insurer appointed a mechanic from a local partner in Exeter, who took up the job.

At the mechanic's premises, Nicholas signed a form allowing a visual inspection of the car. There was no need for the car to be taken apart, so he was shocked four days later to be sent photos of his car in pieces, with parts having been stripped off. What should have been a simple repair job ended up being a nightmare for Nicholas and his wife, who were provided with a suspicious inspection document marked up with supposed football-sized dents that did not exist.

Nicholas and his wife were told quite bluntly that the car was a write-off and that it was destined to be scrapped. That raised alarm bells for Nicholas, as he knew there was nowhere near that much damage and he had taken photos at the time of the incident to prove it. He told the mechanic who brought him the document that whoever had made the assessment needed their eyes tested. In response, the mechanic chuckled and said he could only tell him what he had been told.

Nicholas was running out of options, due to the insurance company's refusal to hear him out, but he wanted to save his car from the scrapyards enough that he got in touch with my casework team. When we got in touch with the insurer, it was suddenly prepared to arrange for a second opinion. The independent assessor found that the car was indeed not a write-off and could be repaired; in fact, they revealed that the original assessment, which had amounted to £3,600, included a respray of the bonnet and the replacement of a towbar—Nicholas was not aware his car even had a towbar. Following that second opinion, the cost was reduced to less than £2,000—much less than the initial estimate. Nicholas is still driving his Škoda today; it is unaltered, roadworthy and in much the same condition as when the insurance company claimed it needed to be scrapped. He will continue to do so for the next four or five years, and good on him. My car is approaching its 20th birthday next year and has 207,000 miles on the clock.

So what went wrong for Nicholas? Well, at best this was negligence, but at worst it raises troubling questions about incentives in the system. Are insurers or their contractors advantaged financially by declaring vehicles to be write-offs? Do customers face premium increases simply for having a write-off claim on their record? And why was the insurance company so willing to challenge my constituent when his extensive photographic evidence ought to have been enough?

Nicholas pursued those questions through a complaint to the ombudsman; after four months of chasing, he was merely offered £100, with no comment regarding the case. By its own admission, the ombudsman is plainly overburdened, but delay and process congestion cannot justify failing to interrogate in this case.

The insurer was Saga, whose slogan is "Experience is everything". My constituent's experience tells of his own saga—a saga of insurance companies deferring to third-party contractors and of customers pressured to submit false classifications. We need greater oversight to ensure that insurers properly audit the firms they commission. There must be greater transparency around write-off decisions, including mandatory disclosure of financial incentives tied to total-loss classification. We must ensure that the ombudsman has the resources and the duty to examine evidence rigorously.

This debate is plainly not about one car, one insurer or one constituent. If practices like this are occurring across the country, we must act to restore trust in the system, because everybody's insurance premium will otherwise be pushed upwards.

5.20 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under you this afternoon, Ms Lewell, and I thank the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for securing this important debate. We have heard quite a lot of depressing stories about how people have been scammed and ripped off, and all colleagues will agree that more needs to be done to tackle fraud and spoofing in the car insurance industry.

Whether it is crash-for-cash scams, ghost broking or paid ad spoofing, our constituents are all being ripped off on so many levels; not just the cost itself, but the increase in insurance premiums. These practices are also harming the insurers and our wider financial services industry. The Minister will therefore agree with everyone

[Mark Garnier]

in the room that more needs to be done to tackle this problem, but I hope she will reflect on colleagues' comments about whether the Government are actually going far enough to tackle it.

To give some context, fraud is a threat that is becoming more prevalent every year. In 2024, fraud accounted for 44% of all crime reported in England and Wales, with about £1.16 billion of fraudulent general insurance claims identified. On the car insurance industry specifically, a 2024 report from the Association of British Insurers said:

"Motor insurance continues to be the area where insurers see the most illicit claims occurring, and they detected 51,700 motor scams worth £576 million."

The ABI's data suggested that that accounted for 53% of all fraudulent claims that year. It is safe to say that there is an issue that needs to be rectified, that we need to do more to protect our constituents and that we need to work closely with the industry to resolve this issue.

The thrust of this debate is paid ad spoofing, which is a very problematic but less well-known practice affecting the car insurance industry. According to the ABI, four in five people have never heard of it, so it is welcome that we have the opportunity to discuss it and raise its profile today. As the hon. Member for North Shropshire set out, paid ad spoofing is when fraudsters mimic legitimate businesses. They pay for ads to appear in search results when a customer searches for a legitimate service.

In the context of car insurance, the ads usually refer to unscrupulous claims and accident management businesses, and tend to relate to those who have been involved in an accident. As Direct Line states, the practice relies on

"the fact that in the aftermath of an accident, you might not be as vigilant as you'd otherwise be, searching quickly on your mobile and clicking on the first option you see."

Fundamentally, these organisations are relying on a consumer believing they are dealing with their own insurer. They then arrange various services that the consumer's insurer would provide, adding more cost to the process. This is all done with the aim of recovering costs from the insurer, but if the insurer challenges the charges, the drivers are the ones left to pick up the bill.

Understandably, those affected—such as the constituents of the hon. Member for North Shropshire—feel ripped off, and the companies that pretend to support them are actually exploiting them. The last Conservative Government understood that, which is why we instructed the Financial Conduct Authority to become responsible for claims management companies in 2019. As a result, firms must be authorised by the FCA to carry out their activities, and repeated violations will result in their authorisation being removed. It also means that customers can escalate complaints to the financial services ombudsman.

However, I understand that accident management activities are currently unregulated, so will the Minister outline whether the Government are considering regulating those activities of claims management companies? I would also be grateful if she could provide an assessment of the resolution process for customers, and whether she thinks improvements need to be made.

The other central issue is how these practices are allowed in the first place. Fraud is often complicated and involves many different actors. Consumers and insurers have a part to play in tackling it, but the actors, such as technology firms and social media platforms, should also bear responsibility; after all, they are the delivery mechanism for this fraud.

We should acknowledge that some technology firms have taken action, and Google is a good example. In 2021, it required companies advertising financial services to demonstrate that they are authorised by the Financial Conduct Authority, which is a positive step. But more needs to be done, and we need a joined-up approach.

The Government's fraud strategy was an opportunity to do that. Although it is broadly welcome and recognises the role of technology firms in tackling fraud, not one of its action points requires change from them. Could the Minister set out why that decision was taken and what steps she is taking to ensure that responsibility is correctly allocated when it comes to fraud?

Fraud in the car insurance industry is a serious issue, and I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Shropshire for bringing it up. Fraud in general is becoming an issue of national security, and we need to get a handle on it. The Government should continue working with all actors to stop these practices, and we will support them when they try to do so. Consumers also need to remain vigilant to these practices.

I conclude by flagging to my constituents in Wyre Forest the current advice on how to avoid paid ad spoofing. First, people need to check the website's URL to ensure that it is their legitimate insurer. Secondly, they should save the phone number on their insurance policy document to their telephone. Thirdly, if people are unsure about who they are speaking to, they should hang up and check their insurance details—caveat emptor.

5.26 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby):

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I am grateful to the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) for securing the debate and highlighting the impact that fraud can have and the devious tactics that fraudsters use. She also spoke about the interplay between those issues and the legal profession. I will address the people who run such platforms later on. I also want to thank other Members who contributed to this thoughtful and important debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow), the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer (Mr Charters), as well as the shadow Economic Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier), and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord).

Car insurance is not a luxury; it is a legal requirement. For many businesses and families, it is essential to daily life, whether taking children to school, getting to work or caring for relatives. As has been said, fraud undermines confidence in the motor insurance market. It causes direct harm to consumers and drives up costs across the system. Those costs are ultimately paid by people who do the right thing by driving with insurance, as the hon. Member for Strangford rightly highlighted.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell pointed out that some drivers—far too many, in fact—do not get insurance, but drive regardless, which is a criminal offence. I regret to say that between 2019 and 2024, the cost of claims involving uninsured drivers increased by a huge 37%. As my hon. Friend said, that increases premiums for everyone else. The Government are considering how, in the light of its seriousness, the penalties should be strengthened for that offence. I hope that he can take from what I have just said that the Government take fraud extremely seriously.

Fraud is the largest crime type in the UK. It harms individuals and businesses, as well as costing our economy billions of pounds each year. It is increasingly driven by organised crime and enabled by technology, as hon. Members have highlighted. That is why fraud is a national security priority for this Government, and we will do what we must to protect the public. In honouring our manifesto commitment, the Government published the new and expanded fraud strategy in March, as we have heard. The central focus of the strategy is disruption: denying criminals the ability to commit fraud in the first place by targeting the tools and methods they use to reach victims. That means acting across the system of Government, law enforcement, regulators, financial institutions, technology companies and telecoms providers, because no single organisation can tackle fraud alone.

As part of the strategy, we are investing £31 million in a new online crime centre that will bring together the Government, law enforcement, GCHQ and industry to identify and address the technological enablers of fraud and deliver high-impact interventions. In practice, that means better data and real-time analysis so that we can identify patterns earlier and take faster action. That could mean taking down fraudulent websites, disrupting malicious advertising networks or supporting the freezing of accounts linked to fraud. Alongside that, we have launched a call for evidence on economic crime information sharing. We want to remove barriers that can prevent firms and agencies from acting on intelligence earlier so that suspected scam activity can be identified and stopped before more people are harmed.

Let me turn to paid ad spoofing and fraudulent advertising, which was raised by the hon. Member for North Shropshire. The Government recognise that paid-for advertising is being exploited by criminals to reach potential victims at scale. Spoofed ads are designed to look like they come from trusted brands, insurers, brokers, comparison sites and even public bodies. Those are particularly pernicious examples. As the hon. Member noted, they can be highly convincing. Indeed, to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer, they look too good to be true. They can appear at the top of search results and be targeted at people precisely when they are looking for help, as the shadow Economic Secretary explained.

My hon. Friend the Member for York Outer talked about ghost broking. My statistics might well be worse than the ones that he read out, because my understanding is that the Insurance Fraud Bureau thinks that ghost broking increased by 50% in the last two years. Whatever the exact statistic, there is a serious increase in the crime. My hon. Friend also highlighted a troubling example of identity theft and pointed to the links between ghost broking and follow-on activities. The story that he told was hard to hear.

All these things are not just consumer issues, but significant questions of responsibility and liability in the online ecosystem. If criminals can buy their way into prominence through paid advertising, we must ensure that the systems that place and profit from those adverts do not turn a blind eye. That is exactly why the Online Safety Act 2023 places duties on the largest social media platforms to tackle fraudulent adverts on their services. Ofcom is due to consult on those measures later this year. Once implemented, Ofcom will have the power to take robust enforcement action when it finds non-compliance, including fines of up to £18 million or 10% of qualifying worldwide revenue, whichever is greater.

The Government have also launched a new partnership between the Home Office, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and industry: the online advertising taskforce. The purpose is to strengthen and maximise the adoption of transparency standards across the wider programmatic ecosystem so that bad actors can be identified, disrupted and, when appropriate, prosecuted. That work will report back in early 2027, and the Government have been clear that we will take legislative action within this Parliament if there are not sufficient improvements.

The hon. Member for North Shropshire and the shadow EST referred to claims management companies and legal professionals who associate themselves with such companies, and the links between them and car insurance fraud. The Ministry of Justice leads on elements of that agenda but, in some areas, the Financial Conduct Authority has responsibility. I hope the hon. Member will be reassured by the fact that there is ongoing dialogue on the issue between His Majesty's Treasury and the MOJ to determine what might be done in this area. I hope she will agree that that addresses some of her important points.

I want to address specifically the link between online fraud and car insurance. Insurance fraud is a serious issue for all the reasons that I have noted, and it has been well covered in this debate. However, it has an interaction with online criminality. The spoofed ads that are used to harvest personal data, misdirect consumers to fake brokers and facilitate scams ultimately feed wider fraud, particularly serious forms of money laundering. The Government are working closely with the industry, regulators and consumer groups to close the gaps that criminals exploit. I should add that the FCA is alive to the issue of ghost broking and is looking into it specifically.

In October 2024, the Home Office launched the insurance fraud charter with key insurance firms to reduce insurance fraud. The charter supports stronger collaboration and shared action to prevent, detect and disrupt fraud, because the more effectively we tackle fraud at source, the more we protect consumers and the integrity of the market.

More broadly, the Government's motor insurance taskforce, which published its final report in 2025, included actions for regulators, industry and the Government to tackle fraud, given the unfortunate role that fraudulent activity plays in increasing claim costs and, in turn, premiums for all consumers.

It is also important to be clear about the wider framework that supports this work. Financial institutions are required to maintain robust systems and controls to detect and prevent financial crime under the Money Laundering, Terrorist Financing and Transfer of Funds

[Lucy Rigby]

(Information on the Payer) Regulations 2017. Banks must report certain suspicious activity to the National Crime Agency under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002, and they may also freeze and block accounts if suspicious activity is detected. We have also recently introduced new rules allowing banks to delay and investigate suspicious payments for up to 72 hours, which supports the interception of suspicious payments, giving firms more time to prevent funds from reaching fraudsters in complex cases and helping to break the spell that fraudsters have over victims. As we have set out in the fraud strategy, we are reinforcing the system-wide response through the Online Crime Centre and improved information sharing so that suspected scam accounts can be spotted sooner and action taken more quickly.

I do not pretend that tackling fraud is simple. Fraudsters adapt quickly, and technology, including some of the technology that we have been talking about today, moves very fast, but the direction of travel is very clear. We are shifting from a reactive model, picking up the pieces after harm occurs, to a disruption model that targets the infrastructure that criminals rely on, including the online advertising routes they use to reach victims.

Through our fraud strategy, the Online Crime Centre, strong action on fraudulent advertising via the Online Safety Act, and further work through the online advertising taskforce, backed by a clear commitment to legislate if necessary, we are taking decisive action to protect the public and disrupt the criminals behind these crimes.

I thank the hon. Member for North Shropshire again for raising these important issues. I reiterate that the Government recognise the importance of car insurance to people's lives and livelihoods, and we are determined to tackle the fraud that drives up costs for honest motorists.

5.38 pm

Helen Morgan: I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to this really interesting debate. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), as always, gave us a perspective on Northern Ireland and the eye-watering impact that the practice has there, particularly on young people. I know Northern Ireland is very rural, so I have some experience of how that feels. People are dependent on their cars, so the problem has a disproportionate impact on his area.

The hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) brought his professional insight into the issue of ghost broking and raised a number of additional issues, which really helped the debate along. My hon. Friend the Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) highlighted some of the issues around subcontractors used by insurance companies.

I also thank the Minister, the shadow Minister—the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier)—and the hon. Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) for their really encouraging responses. I think everybody is on the same page in taking this issue seriously. The problem is that fraudsters are always one step ahead, but I look forward to seeing the results of the Government's various measures. In particular, we will look at the interaction between the legal industry and the online industry—for want of a better word—and at how we can keep people safe from their instinct to trust what they can see when, all too often, that is not trustworthy and has been placed there by bad actors.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of fraud in the car insurance industry.

5.39 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 22 April 2026

TREASURY

Oil and Gas Decommissioning Relief Deeds

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson):

The Government's fiscal approach for oil and gas aims to balance supporting investment and growth with ensuring a fair return for the nation in exchange for the use of its resources.

At Budget 2013, the Government announced they would begin signing decommissioning relief deeds. These deeds represented a new contractual approach to provide oil and gas companies with certainty on the level of tax relief they will receive on future decommissioning costs.

Since October 2013, the Government have entered into 110 decommissioning relief deeds. Offshore Energies UK estimates that these deeds have so far unlocked approximately £13.5 billion of capital, which can now be invested elsewhere.

The Government committed to report to Parliament annually on progress with the decommissioning relief deeds. The report for financial year 2024-25 is provided below.

Number of decommissioning relief agreements entered into: the Government entered into one decommissioning relief agreement in 2024-25.

Total number of decommissioning relief agreements in force at the end of the 2024-25 financial year: 109 decommissioning relief agreements were in force at the end of the financial year. We have entered into one more agreement since the end of the 2024-25 financial year, but this is out of scope of the report.

Number of payments made under any decommissioning relief agreements during that year, and the amount of each payment: five payments were made under a decommissioning relief agreement in 2024-25, for £9.55 million in total. These were made in relation to the provisions recognised by HM Treasury from 2015 onwards as a result of companies defaulting on their decommissioning obligations.

Total number of payments that have been made under any decommissioning relief agreements as at the end of that year, and the total amount of those payments: 24 payments have been made under any decommissioning relief agreement as at the end of the 2024-25 financial year, totalling around £355 million.

Estimate of the maximum amount liable to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements: the Government have not made any changes to the tax regime that would generate a liability to be paid under any decommissioning relief agreements. HM Treasury's 2025-26 accounts will recognise a provision currently estimated to be £133 million in respect of decommissioning expenditure incurred as a result of companies defaulting on their decommissioning obligations^[1]. The majority of this is currently expected to be realised over the next five years.

^[1] This figure which is an estimate at the last interim reporting period is unaudited and takes into account payments made subsequent to the financial year covered by this written ministerial statement. The estimate is under review and subject to audit ahead of the year end reporting period and may be updated to reflect newer information or changes required by accounting standards.

[HCWS1534]

Stamp Duty Land Tax: Periodic Tenancies

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson):

Tenant wellbeing is central to the Government's recent Renters' Rights Act 2025, which will deliver on our manifesto commitment to transform the experience of private renting and give renters much greater security and stability so that they can stay in their homes for longer.

The Act will improve the current system for both the 11 million private renters and the 2.3 million landlords in England. It will give renters much greater security and stability so that they can stay in their homes for longer, build lives in their communities, and avoid the risk of homelessness.

The Government are today setting out our intention to ensure that no one is newly brought into stamp duty land tax as a result of the changes in the Renters' Rights Act.

Although most people understand how SDLT applies when related to the change of ownership of a property, it is also charged on some rents when their net present value exceeds £125,000. In practice, the vast majority of private tenants do not reach the SDLT threshold of £125,000 and so do not pay SDLT on their rent. This is because assured shorthold tenancies, which make up the majority of private tenancies, are likely to renew regularly, so the net present value of the rent is calculated over a relatively short duration.

From 1 May 2026, the Renters' Rights Act will abolish fixed-term assured shorthold tenancies. Instead, all tenancies will be periodic, with tenants able to stay in their home until they decide to end the tenancy by giving two months' notice. This will end the injustice of tenants being trapped paying rent for substandard properties and offer more flexibility to both parties to respond to changing circumstances.

Following this change, the net present value of rent under a continuing lease will be calculated assuming a lease that continues indefinitely. This means the net present value of the rent could increase and exceed the £125,000 threshold at which SDLT becomes payable, even though the underlying tenancy arrangements have not substantively changed.

The Government intend to legislate in the 2026-27 Finance Bill so that any residential lease that will be considered an assured tenancy under the Housing Act 1988, as amended by the Renters' Rights Act, will not give rise to a SDLT charge on the rent element. The Government will set out the detail of this legislation at or before this year's Budget.

The legislation will apply retrospectively from the date on which existing tenancies become section 4A assured tenancies—as defined in section 146 of the Renters' Rights Act), which is expected to be on 1 May 2026.

HM Revenue and Customs will not collect any SDLT on the rent element of an assured tenancy from that date until the date the legislation takes overriding effect.

This measure ensures that tenants and landlords are not adversely affected by technical interactions between the Renters Rights Act and SDLT legislation, and reflects the Government's commitment to the smooth and fair implementation of reforms to the private rented sector.

[HCWS1535]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Ofgem Review: Final Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Martin McCluskey): Today I am publishing the Government's final report of the review of Ofgem, the energy regulator for Great Britain. This review delivers on our commitment to ensure that consumers remain well protected from bad practice and that Ofgem is equipped to regulate a rapidly changing energy system. The current situation in the middle east has once again highlighted the need to protect consumers, particularly during times of volatility, and Ofgem's ability to respond in times of crisis. The review has examined whether Ofgem's remit, duties and capabilities remain fit for purpose in an energy landscape shaped by rising demand for clean power, new technologies, and the need for greater resilience and fairness for households and businesses.

In particular, I am pleased to highlight that we will equip Ofgem with stronger powers to take action where needed and to deter bad practice across the sector. The review will also bring enhanced protection for energy consumers, not only by reinforcing its commitment to the protection of consumer interests, but by granting it a stronger mandate to support delivery of clean home-grown power and support investment and growth in the UK.

The review gathered extensive evidence, including over 20,000 responses to the public call for evidence, alongside detailed engagement with consumer groups, suppliers, networks, generators and investors. In addition, the review drew upon the knowledge of an advisory panel comprised of specialists appointed in their individual capacity to ensure independence and diversity of thought, bringing a wide range of experience and perspectives to challenge and guide the review.

The conclusions are clear: Ofgem plays an essential role in our energy system and its statutory duties, regulatory boundaries, and organisational capabilities must be modernised to meet the challenges now, and in the years ahead.

The review also considered Ofgem's role across the energy system as a whole, recognising the significant interdependencies between generation, networks, system operation, retail markets and emerging flexibility services. Stakeholders highlighted that the energy system is evolving rapidly with decentralised generation, electrification, digitalisation and new business models reshaping how power is produced, transported and consumed, but regulatory frameworks have not consistently kept pace. Evidence indicated that Ofgem must be equipped to oversee the system in a more coherent, end-to-end way, ensuring that decisions taken in one part of the system do not create unintended consequences elsewhere. This includes ensuring efficient network investment, enabling integration of low-carbon technologies, and supporting the development of retail and flexibility markets that deliver genuine consumer value.

To address these challenges, the Government will strengthen Ofgem's system-wide mandate and capabilities so that it can take whole-system, forward-looking decisions that reflect the interactions between different segments of the value chain. This will help Ofgem to anticipate pressures, drive innovation and competition, and support

a more dynamic, efficient and consumer-centric energy system. By ensuring that Ofgem can regulate the energy system as an integrated whole, these reforms will promote efficient investment, enable the scaling of new technologies, and ensure that consumers benefit from a system that is resilient, fair and aligned with the UK's long-term energy security and net zero commitments. The Government are therefore bringing forward a package of reforms to strengthen Ofgem's mandate, improve regulatory clarity and reduce duplication, and ensure that the regulator can act more proactively in the interests of consumers. Key measures include:

Strengthening enforcement and redress mechanisms so that Ofgem can act quickly and decisively when consumers face harm, including stronger powers to address poor service and hold senior energy company leaders to account.

Modernising Ofgem's statutory duties, streamlining them into three clear pillars of consumer protection, economic growth and delivery of net zero. This will ensure that Ofgem can take clearer, more strategic decisions that directly benefit households and support long-term national priorities. Establishing an Ofgem-specific strategy and policy statement, providing clarity on the Government's strategic expectations while preserving Ofgem's operational independence.

Boosting Ofgem's organisational capability, including digital, technical, financial and analytical expertise, to enable a more agile, confident and evidence-driven regulator.

Introducing new transparency and accountability requirements, including regular public progress updates and a five-yearly independent review of Ofgem's performance.

These reforms will create a regulator that not only protects consumers but supports an energy sector that can innovate, invest and improve the customer experience. They will help build a more resilient, fair and modern energy system as we accelerate towards clean power and strengthen the UK's energy security.

A copy of the Ofgem review final report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses. The Government will now work closely with Ofgem, industry and consumer groups to take forward the implementation of these reforms.

[HCWS1533]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Northern Ireland Troubles Bill

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I wish to update the House on the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill and the Government's commitment to put in place legislation to address the legacy of that terrible period in our history.

In the 28 years since the Good Friday agreement, there have been numerous unsuccessful efforts, in London and in Belfast, to deliver on this crucial but still unrealised aim of the agreement. Victims of terrorist violence across the United Kingdom, families of many of those who were killed, former members of our security services—and many more—have been affected by this collective failure. So the troubles Bill, and the reformed legacy commission it will create, must be capable of commanding the confidence of all communities while enabling answers to be found for those who seek them. This final chance to get legacy right has fallen to us, in this Parliament, and we will deliver it.

Since its introduction in October 2025, the troubles Bill has been welcomed by a significant number of victims, families and representative groups. Many recognise

that, while not providing everything they may have sought, the Bill will enable families' cases to be taken forward sensitively, efficiently and lawfully. The prospect that the Bill will enable information sharing by the Irish authorities with the legacy commission, as a result of the framework agreement reached with the Irish Government, is a major step forward. And the fact that, unlike the false promise of the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, the troubles Bill does not offer immunity including for those who committed heinous acts of terrorism, and will be compliant with our Human Rights obligations, has been welcomed by all the main Northern Ireland political parties and indeed by many Operation Banner veterans.

The new safeguards the Bill will put in place for veterans and other former service personnel have also been broadly welcomed. It has been clear, however, that we must do more through the legislation to safeguard our veterans community. It is vital that those who served the state, to whom we owe so much and to whom we have a particular duty of care, are able to have confidence in the legislation.

In recent months I, along with the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary, the Attorney General and the Armed Forces Minister, have been consulting widely on

the legislation, including with veterans, on potential improvements that might be made. I have also considered the many amendments that have been tabled from across the House, and the important recommendations of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and others.

The result of these deliberations is that the Government will bring forward a substantial package of amendments designed to improve the process for victims and families, further safeguard our Operation Banner veterans and ensure oversight of their protections, and clearly differentiate between the role played during the troubles by our brave security forces and the actions of paramilitary terrorists. These amendments will be tabled for consideration in Committee.

Taken together with the large number of amendments already tabled by MPs and the strength of feelings on all sides of the House on these issues, it is important that there is sufficient time for scrutiny. Owing to the time it has taken to ensure we get the amendments right, and the clear need for the House to have longer to scrutinise them, the Bill will now return to the House early in the next session.

[HCWS1536]

Petitions

Wednesday 22 April 2026

OBSERVATIONS

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Admiral Casino on Westow Hill

The petition of residents of the constituency of Beckenham and Penge,

Declares that a 24-hours licence for Admiral Casino on Westow Hill in Crystal Palace would damage the character of the area, fuel anti-social behaviour and increase gambling harms for vulnerable people.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Croydon Council to ensure that Admiral Casino on Westow Hill in Crystal Palace is not granted a 24-hours licence.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Liam Conlon, *Official Report*, 25 February 2026; Vol. 781, c. 433.]

[P003165]

Observations from the Minister for Museums, Heritage and Gambling, Baroness Twycross: I note Admiral Casino's application for a 24-hour licence in Westow Hill in Crystal Palace, and I recognise the concerns of the residents of Beckenham and Penge. Ultimately, it is for Croydon council to consider whether the application is compatible with the licensing objectives and its statement of licensing principles. Local authorities can make use of a range of existing powers to manage gambling in their areas, both under the planning system and as licensing authorities under the Gambling Act 2005. They can also consider the profile of the area and potential risks, as well as the views of local people, when coming to licensing decisions.

As the Minister for Gambling, I recognise the strength of feeling on the licensing of high street gambling venues. As such, the Government have amended the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill to introduce gambling impact assessments—formerly referred to as cumulative impact assessments. GIAs will bolster existing local authority powers and strengthen their ability to manage gambling premises in their areas. The implementation date will be confirmed in due course.

EDUCATION

Education on methanol poisoning

The petition of residents of the constituency of Orpington,

Declares that bootleg alcohol poses a considerable danger to tourists and has, tragically, resulted in deaths in countries including Laos, Turkey and Vietnam.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that children and young people are taught about the dangers of consuming bootleg alcohol as part of the PSHE or biology curriculum in schools.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Gareth Bacon, *Official Report*, 29 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 1136.]

[P003160]

Observations from the Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): The tragic deaths caused by methanol poisoning are a reminder of the risks that young people can face, and they reinforce the Department's commitment to helping ensure that all young people are equipped with the knowledge they need to stay safe, including in relation to alcohol.

The statutory guidance for health education requires all pupils in state-maintained schools to be taught the facts about legal and illegal harmful substances and the associated risks to physical and mental wellbeing, including smoking, alcohol use and drug taking.

The revised RSHE—relationships, sex and health education—statutory guidance, published on 15 July 2025, states that by the end of secondary school, pupils should understand how to increase personal safety while drinking alcohol, including how to decrease the risks of having a drink spiked or of poisoning from potentially fatal substances such as methanol. The guidance can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/relationships-education-relationships-and-sex-education-rse-and-health-education>

Pupils should be taught that there are some legal substances that people sometimes misuse and that any substance used for purposes other than those intended can be dangerous and could even cause death. This complements content about substances within the national curriculum for science.

The updated RSHE guidance includes a new section on personal safety. Curriculum content includes how to identify risk and manage personal safety in increasingly independent situations, including in unfamiliar social or work settings—for example, the first time a young person goes on holiday without their parents.

The Government commissioned Oak academy to make lesson materials that reflect the new guidance freely available. Oak academy's newest RSHE resources for secondary pupils, which make reference to methanol poisoning, are aligned with the statutory guidance coming into effect in September 2026. This is available at:

<https://www.thenational.academy/teachers/programmes/rshe-pshe-secondary-ks3/units>

We have also worked with the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities and the PSHE Association to make sure that good-quality teaching resources are available for teachers delivering drug, alcohol and tobacco education. From September 2026, lesson plans will reference the dangers of methanol poisoning, as well as teaching pupils how to manage influences and pressure, and to keep themselves healthy and safe.

We are also working with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office to explore how we might help to promote its resources, including Travel Aware.

Schools have the freedom to ensure that the curriculum meets the needs of their pupils and the Department for Education does not advise schools on which resources to use. This flexibility will allow schools to respond to local public health and wider community issues, including current global issues presented on the news, and adapt material and programmes to suit the needs of pupils.

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Banyamulenge community

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that the Banyamulenge community in the UK are profoundly dismayed and outraged about the ongoing genocide and disastrous humanitarian crisis faced by the Banyamulenge civilians in Minembwe and the high plateau of South Kivu, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, as well as the role of the DRC Government, the Burundi National Defence Forces as well as their allied militias including Wazalendo and FDLR (the Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Rwanda), in perpetrating these atrocities.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to advocate for the resolution of the root causes of insecurity and violence

against the Banyamulenge community in the Democratic Republic of Congo; to take steps to advocate for the immediate end of use of any drones, heavy artillery, and blockades targeting Banyamulenge civilians in the DRC; to raise internationally the need for the return of displaced Banyamulenge individuals, both internally displaced and refugees in neighbouring countries, to their homeland and the destruction of villages and the looting of cattle as part of resolving the crisis with the DRC's Government; and to advocate for the inclusion of Banyamulenge concerns in relevant international peace accords, ensuring these agreements address the root causes of the conflict.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Rebecca Long Bailey.]

[P003191]

Written Corrections

Wednesday 22 April 2026

Ministerial Corrections

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Federated Data Platform

The following extracts are from the Westminster Hall debate on the NHS Federated Data Platform on 16 April 2026.

Dr Ahmed:... The FDP is fundamentally an NHS construct. It consists of multiple contracts awarded to a number of consortia, including Palantir, Accenture, PwC, Carnall Farrar and the North of England Care System Support.

[*Official Report*, 16 April 2026; Vol. 783, c. 486WH.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed):

Dr Ahmed:... The FDP is fundamentally an NHS construct. It consists of multiple contracts awarded to a **consortium**, including Palantir, Accenture, PwC, Carnall Farrar and the North of England Care System Support.

Dr Ahmed:... The FDP is part of an infrastructure—it is not the infrastructure or the only infrastructure—to resolve that gap. It is improving efficiency and generating savings across the health service worth up to £2.4 billion, according to independent estimates. Those independent estimates are being further bolstered by a commissioned study by Imperial College that will look at the economic impact of the FDP.

[*Official Report*, 16 April 2026; Vol. 783, c. 487WH.]

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**not later than
Wednesday 29 April 2026**

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