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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 29 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.

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House of Commons

Wednesday 29 April 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Mr Speaker: I wish the Trainbearer, Gary Barlow, well, as he is 40 today.

Oral Answers to Questions

WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

The Minister for Women and Equalities was asked—

Sexual Assault Survivors: Isle of Wight

1. **Richard Quigley** (Isle of Wight West) (Lab): What assessment she has made with Cabinet colleagues of the adequacy of support available to survivors of sexual assault on the Isle of Wight. [908910]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): No one, regardless of where they live, should ever experience such heinous crimes. The Government are absolutely committed to supporting all victims and survivors. My Department, through the Hampshire police and crime commissioner, provides my hon. Friend's local area with core grant funding to support victims of all crime types, including sexual assault. In addition, we provide ringfenced funding for domestic and sexual abuse services.

Richard Quigley: I thank the Minister for her answer. On the Isle of Wight, the absence of a sexual assault referral centre means that survivors of rape and sexual assault are often required to make a long ferry journey to Portsmouth or Southampton—sometimes in the very clothes they were assaulted in—to access the specialist support they need. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can finally address and overcome that injustice faced by women and girls on the Isle of Wight?

Alex Davies-Jones: My hon. Friend is a tireless champion for tackling violence against women and girls. Ensuring that victims receive the right, timely support is central to the Government's strategy to tackle these heinous crimes. I would be delighted to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that. I will ensure that we have a joined-up approach with the Department of Health and Social Care to better understand the experiences of women and girls on the Isle of Wight who need help.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): As the Minister said, sexual assault survivors from the Isle of Wight and all across the United Kingdom must be heard. Virginia Giuffre took her life just one year ago. She had shared her abuse by convicted paedophile financier Jeffrey Epstein, the friend of Peter Mandelson. On 16 April, Lisa Phillips—another courageous survivor—supported by Carly and Sam from the Sexual Predator Accountability Institute, came to Parliament seeking transparency from lawmakers. The clear question for the Government is: when will they go from giving platitudes to victims to tackling trafficking and cover-ups and delivering adequate support and justice for all women and girls?

Alex Davies-Jones: I welcome the shadow Minister's question. She will know that this Government are putting victims back at the heart of our criminal justice system by investing the biggest ever settlement—over half a billion pounds—in victim support services for the next three years. I had the privilege of meeting the victims she mentioned. Of course, they remain at the forefront of my mind and the Government's mind, which is why we are working with them and the National Police Chiefs' Council to ensure a joined-up approach to take their concerns seriously without prejudicing any sub judice issues that may come about.

Autism: Employment

2. **Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support people with autism into employment. [908911]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): We are committed to supporting autistic people into work. Our supported employment programme Connect to Work will be open throughout England and Wales by the summer. It has in its supported employment quality framework a specialist pathway for neurodivergent people and those with a learning disability.

Alison Hume: I thank the Minister for his answer. I recently chaired an employment roundtable with the all-party parliamentary group on autism where individuals with lived experience highlighted that a significant barrier to employment is a fear factor among some employers. That stems from a concern about getting it wrong when recruiting or supporting autistic employees, which can result in employers opting out of recruiting them altogether. Will the Minister outline what steps the Government are taking to address that fear factor and incentivise employers to recruit people with autism?

Sir Stephen Timms: I commend my hon. Friend's important work as chair of the all-party group and thank her for hosting me at the roundtable. This year, we funded ACAS to deliver masterclasses on recruiting neurodivergent people to 1,800 small and medium-sized enterprise representatives, addressing exactly the concerns that she raised. My Department has also set up the online support with employee health and disability service specifically to help employers on those issues. We will be considering what more we can do.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Conservative-run East Sussex county council has shut down its CLASS+ service, which supported people with autism towards independent futures, including with employment. With elections for East Sussex county council just around the corner, does the Minister agree that we should be expanding services to support autistic people into work and not shutting them down as the Conservatives are doing?

Sir Stephen Timms: I am sorry to hear about what has happened in the hon. Member's constituency, and I very much agree with him. We recently received the report of our expert academic panel on neurodiversity in the workplace, which was set up last year, and are carefully considering its recommendations. We will act as he suggested.

Conversion Practices

3. **Jack Abbott** (Ipswich) (Lab/Co-op): What steps she is taking to ban conversion practices. [908912]

5. **Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ban conversion practices. [908915]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey): Conversion practices tell people that their identity is wrong, that it can be changed, and that they should be subjected to physical and emotional abuse to change it. These acts are abusive, they are abhorrent, and the Government will outlaw them as soon as possible.

Jack Abbott: As the Minister says, conversion therapy is dangerous, widely discredited and frankly barbaric, and it is about time we got rid of it. Suffolk Pride's fringe festival starts next month with Pride Blooms. I ask the Minister to make a powerful statement today, and to say that this terrible practice will end under the Labour Government.

Olivia Bailey: My hon. Friend is right. Conversion practices are dangerous, discredited and abusive, and I can make a commitment to everyone taking part in Suffolk Pride that this Labour Government will ban them. I am working on legislation as a matter of urgency; I know how important it is for the community, and we will publish draft legislation as soon as possible.

Rachel Taylor: I thank the Minister for the comments that she has made so far. Conversion practices have devastated the lives of LGBT people for many years, making them feel ashamed of who they are and leaving them with long-term physical and mental harm. The upcoming King's Speech marks eight years since a ban on so-called conversion therapy was first promised. Can the Minister reassure me that a Bill will come to the House early in the next Session, and that we will not be waiting any longer for these cruel and inhumane practices to be outlawed for good?

Olivia Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for being such a fantastic champion of the LGBT+ community. This Government will deliver our manifesto commitment to a trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices. My hon. Friend is right to say that successive Governments have promised to do that, and this Labour Government will be the ones who actually do it.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm exactly what conversion practices she plans to ban.

Olivia Bailey: I think I have been clear in my answers so far, but let me be very clear: conversion practices tell people that they should be subjected to physical and emotional abuse to change their identity. I think that is unacceptable, the Government think it is unacceptable, and we will ban it.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): One school in my constituency is concerned about a year 6 pupil with significant support needs. As a result of his progress, with the school's help, he has been assessed as not needing specialist provision at secondary school, which his teachers feel to be wrong. What will the Minister do to ensure that children are not punished for the success of their previous schools when making the transition to other schools?

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not sure that that was linked to the right question. Let us move on.

Violence against Women and Girls

6. **Cat Smith** (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle violence against women and girls. [908916]

10. **David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help tackle violence against women and girls. [908922]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Alex Davies-Jones): Our cross-Government violence against women and girls strategy, published on 18 December, sets out our strategic direction and concrete actions to prevent violence and abuse, pursue perpetrators and support victims, delivering our unprecedented commitment to halve the levels of violence against women and girls within a decade.

Cat Smith: Survivors of male violence often take a long time to rebuild their lives. I am supporting a constituent at the moment whose perpetrator is about to be released from prison but who is receiving no support from Lancaster city council, her housing provider, to enable her to relocate to another area so that the perpetrator is not released into the same community. What advice can the Minister give me, and my constituent, to support that housing move so that she and her children can feel safe?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for supporting her constituents so diligently, and for raising this matter with me today. The Government are committed to ensuring that victims of domestic abuse can access the support that they need to get safe accommodation to rebuild their lives. Under part 4 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, local authorities in England are required to assess the need for safe accommodation and commission specialist support for victims and their children. To support that delivery, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government will provide nearly £500 million over the next three years for accommodation for domestic abuse victims who are homeless and eligible for that accommodation. Offenders released from prison are subject to licence requirement conditions, and my hon. Friend's constituent should be receiving support from her victim liaison officer.

David Williams: There have been a number of deeply disturbing cases of women being targeted and attacked on the basis of their perceived religion, including two horrific cases in the midlands. What steps are being taken across

Government to tackle this form of targeted violence against women and girls and ensure that our communities are properly protected?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for making that fundamentally important point in the Chamber. I, too, am horrified at the horrific racially motivated sexual attacks that seem to be increasing at the moment. This Government are committed to tackling all forms of hate crime. Violence and abuse directed at women and girls because of their race is totally unacceptable and heinous. Where attacks are racially motivated, police can pursue them as racially aggravated offences, which attract tougher and higher sentences. These offences often include assault, harassment and criminal damage, and I am proudly working with some brilliant organisations, such as Southall Black Sisters, Karma Nirvana and Hibiscus, as part of our strategy to halve the level of violence against women and girls.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Violence against women and girls is often focused on what women and girls can do to keep themselves safe, but the Minister will know that the pernicious attitude of toxic masculinity has a huge impact on teenage boys, young women and girls. What can the Government do, preferably cross-party, to send a better message to young men and boys about how to deal with young women in school and elsewhere, in order to preserve safety and dignity?

Alex Davies-Jones: I welcome that really important question from the hon. Gentleman, and he is right to address this issue. A core part of our violence against women and girls strategy is tackling the online proliferation of harmful narratives that are being pushed on our young men and boys. Last week, the Deputy Prime Minister and I hosted a roundtable across Government, with the Secretary of State for Education present, to look at how best we can support our men and boys in a positive way to provide them with opportunities going forward, so that they are not being pushed the message that they are to blame and are toxic. I want to be very clear that "toxic masculinity" does not mean that all men are toxic—that is a really important point to make.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Jean Taylor set up the organisation Families Fighting for Justice after her daughter, Chantel Taylor, was violently and savagely murdered. The murderer then desecrated and concealed her body. Jean Taylor wants to make sure that that is a crime in its own right, not just an aggravating factor. Not only could she not grieve for her daughter or bury her—Chantel's three children could not do so either—but serious evidence was hidden by the hiding of the body. The murderer is now out on the streets. Will the Minister please meet me and Jean Taylor to discuss a Chantel's law?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the right hon. Lady for raising that issue. I had hoped to drop in to the event that she hosted yesterday in Parliament to meet Jean directly. Ministerial responsibilities meant that I was unable to do so, but I will commit today to meeting her and Jean to discuss this matter. The right hon. Lady will know that the Law Commission is looking specifically at desecration of a body; that work is ongoing. The Government will look carefully at the report to see what more we can do. I know that this is an issue, and I will happily meet her and Jean.

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

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): Following the Women and Equalities Committee's work on misogyny in music, we are now looking at women's experiences in comedy. In 2018, Chortle found that a quarter of female comedians had been sexually assaulted by a fellow comic and that one in 13 had been raped by another performer. Given recent high-profile cases against male comedians, does the Minister think that this sorry situation has improved? What are the Government doing to ensure that all self-employed women are protected in the future?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee for raising this issue. It is a horrific statistic that she cites, but sadly it is not uncommon across all professions, including comedy and music. Our violence against women and girls strategy is holistic, so that we can take a whole-society approach to tackling the issue that she raises, which includes changing the culture going forward. I have been pleased to work with a brilliant organisation called No Stage for Abusers, which looks specifically at this issue. I would be happy to work with my hon. Friend and the Women and Equalities Committee to see what more we can do to support self-employed women and to tackle the harassment that they face in the workplace.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): A quarter of female teachers have been subjected to misogynistic abuse in the classroom in the last year. They report feeling humiliated and violated, and we know that impressionable young boys are targeted on social media with algorithms that pump misogynistic content to them. Will the Minister push the Government to act as swiftly as possible in restricting access to social media for young boys, so that we can educate them on how to treat women and girls before the manosphere influencers get to them first?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, which builds on another question that I previously answered. We need to take a holistic approach to tackling violence against women and girls, which means involving every Government Department. I am really pleased that the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology was present at the roundtable hosted by the Deputy Prime Minister last week, which looked at how best to support men and boys and at how we can tackle the issue she raises. This is about working with Ofcom to look at what more we can do to support the regulator and to prevent algorithms from pushing harmful content to our men and boys, but it is also about supporting teachers in the workplace to ensure that they feel safe and can escalate issues as they occur.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): Since I last raised the subject of suicides after domestic abuse, the domestic abuse homicide project has reported on the previous 12 months and seen a significant rise in cases. This morning, I held a roundtable with some of the organisations campaigning to ensure that suicides in cases of domestic abuse are investigated from the outset as homicides, and they all agreed that action is needed now. One small change that they said would make an important difference is requiring police officers to turn on their body-worn

cameras when attending sudden deaths in domestic settings and tagging it afterwards, which means important evidence will be preserved. Will the Government encourage the College of Policing to update its guidance to introduce such a requirement?

Alex Davies-Jones: I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for her question. I had the privilege of meeting the Katie Trust last week to discuss that precise issue, and later today I am meeting Advocacy After Fatal Domestic Abuse and Dr Anna Hopkins to look at what more we can do. The hon. Member will know that the Law Commission is reviewing the law of homicide to look at precisely the issue she raises. That work is ongoing, and the Government will examine the recommendations when they come forward.

Special Educational Needs Support

4. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to support children with SEND at school. [908913]

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): We all know that the current SEND system fails too many families. Our proposals will deliver a reformed SEND system backed by £4 billion of investment so that every child can achieve and thrive. A three-tier framework will provide targeted and specialist support, strengthened education, health and care plans, early intervention, access to specialist services and better outcomes for all of our children.

Robbie Moore: Last week, I met Alice Jones, the headteacher of Oxenhope primary school, to talk about the funding challenges it is facing in supporting children with SEND and her deep concerns about this Government's planned SEND reforms, which include shifting EHCPs to individual support plans, therefore limiting protection for EHCPs to only the most complex cases. That will reduce the necessary financial support for children in mainstream schools. What reassurance can the Minister give Mrs Jones, and the many other headteachers in my constituency who have contacted me, who believe that the Government's SEND reforms will not address the current challenges?

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise the serious point that the hon. Gentleman sets out, and we have launched a consultation so that we can hear directly from school leaders, parents and young people about what we need to do to make the system work better. I encourage school leaders in his constituency to review that and to share their views. However, I want to be clear that this is about improving support, providing earlier support and making sure that all children are able to access what they need as quickly as possible. The current system is too adversarial, it is not working and I have heard from too many parents who have been badly let down by the system that he and his party left behind.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): I welcome the Government's commitment to making sure that every child with SEND in Gloucester gets the support they need at the earliest stage of their education. I also welcome the £4.6 million investment in the Experts at Hand service in Gloucestershire coming for the next academic year. Can the Minister update the House on the discussions she is having with the Department of Health on its workforce plan to make sure we have the workers needed to deliver that support in Gloucester?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is a true champion for children and young people and families right across his community. He raises an important point. The SEND consultation we have brought forward is a joint document with the Department of Health and Social Care, because we know that this is about having a system that better responds not only to children's educational needs when they are in school, but to wider health needs. That is why our Experts at Hand initiative will make sure there is better, targeted specialist support for all children who need it, avoiding the lengthy waits, the arduous process and the adversarial system that too many parents have to endure at the moment.

Topical Questions

T1. [908924] **Tony Vaughan** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): From this month, employers can publish new voluntary action plans to tackle the gender pay gap and support women in the workplace going through the menopause, which is a vital step forward in improving workplace equality. We are working with employers and encouraging them to take the meaningful actions we know can work. With our women's health strategy, the landmark Employment Rights Act 2025, stronger protections for maternity and pregnant women, and expanded childcare, this Government are supporting women to thrive at work.

Tony Vaughan: Following the Supreme Court's ruling in the For Women Scotland case, I met several constituents who raised concerns about the Equality and Human Rights Commission's draft code of practice and guidance. I thank the Folkestone Bookshop for hosting those meetings. As the Government lay the updated guidance before Parliament, what assurances can my right hon. Friend give that businesses and groups can confidently be trans-inclusive, and that it will be clear how everyone can be protected from harassment and discrimination?

Bridget Phillipson: I completely agree that we must ensure that women and trans people feel safe and are protected from harassment. We will treat everyone with the dignity and respect they deserve, because those are our values, and that is made clear in the Equality Act 2010. We have also been clear that we expect duty bearers to follow the Supreme Court ruling, and to seek legal advice where necessary. I recently received an updated code of practice from the EHRC. I am grateful to it for its work. My intention is to lay the draft code before Parliament in May, as soon as possible after the election period.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con): Nurses have been hounded and harassed by the NHS simply for stating that biological sex is real. The Minister met some

of them at my request, and I am grateful for that, but that was months ago. What has happened since? Has she got an answer from the Nursing and Midwifery Council about how many more nurses face such witch hunts? Has she got a date from the Health Secretary for when the NHS will ensure single-sex changing rooms for staff? In short, what can she say to those hard-working nurses whose lives have been ruined by senior people in the NHS?

Bridget Phillipson: My message to nurses and to anyone working in our NHS is that they deserve dignity at work. They deserve to be treated with respect, and they should not face abuse, intimidation or harassment. We have seen some shocking cases, and that is completely unacceptable. The right hon. Lady will appreciate that the regulator is independent of Government. It is independent for a reason, and that is the right approach. She will also know that the code of practice that I intend to lay before Parliament does not apply to employment, but employers should be following the law.

Claire Coutinho: I thank the Minister, but this is the classic problem. She is not on top of her brief. She is absolutely allowed to write to regulators and ask whether they are breaking the law. Let me try another question. The Muslim Vote campaign is telling people how to vote, depending on what God they pray to. This is divisive, sectarian and has no place in Britain. The last time I asked the Minister to condemn that, she said that she was not aware of what I was describing, but in these local elections, the Muslim Vote has once again endorsed the Green party and Plaid Cymru. I will give her another chance: will she condemn this group and the divisive sectarian role it is playing in British politics?

Bridget Phillipson: No one should face pressure or undue influence around their voting behaviour; let me be absolutely clear on that point. But let me also be clear to the House that I am fed up to the back teeth of Opposition politicians coming here time and again to sow division across our country. I am proud of the tolerant, compassionate and respectful nation that we are, and the shadow Justice Secretary should have been sacked for his shocking and shameful racist comments against Muslims in our country.

T2. [908926] **Rachel Taylor** (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Leaked guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission suggested that it would be lawful for transgender and gender non-conforming people to be excluded from changing facilities based on a perception that their appearance did not correspond with societal gender norms, irrespective of their actual sex. Can the Minister reassure the House that such an obvious licence for bigotry and discrimination will not be included in the final guidance when she publishes it next month?

Bridget Phillipson: I thank my hon. Friend for her important question. She will appreciate, I am sure, that I cannot comment on the draft code of practice, but I want to reassure the House that trans people will continue to be protected from discrimination under the Equality Act. We will not treat this issue as a political football, as many others have done in the past. As I set out in earlier answers, I intend to lay the draft code before Parliament as soon as possible, once we are through the election period.

T3. [908927] **Rupert Lowe** (Great Yarmouth) (Restore Britain): Women all over Britain, including in my constituency of Great Yarmouth, primarily on King Street, feel intimidated, harassed and abused in their town centres. Disproportionately, this unacceptable behaviour is committed by young foreign men imported from cultures and religions that treat women like dirt on the bottom of their shoe. Will the Minister today commit to a national audit of street harassment, intimidation and sexual offending by nationality and immigration status, so the British people can finally see the scale of the problem?

Bridget Phillipson: Here we go again, Mr Speaker. I note that an investigation by a King's counsel into the hon. Gentleman's conduct concluded that there was "credible evidence" that he had mistreated two female team members in a way that seemed "to amount to harassment". I do not want to hear anything from him about violence against women and girls or harassment.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [908932] **Gurinder Singh Josan** (Smethwick) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 29 April.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): The state visit by His Majesty the King is a powerful reminder of the deep and special relationship we have with the United States.

In this Session of Parliament, this Labour Government have delivered the biggest upgrade in workers' rights in a generation, the biggest improvement in renters' rights in a generation, and more action than any other Government to tackle child poverty. In the King's Speech, I look forward to setting out what more we will do to change our country for the better.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. I shall have further such meetings later today.

Gurinder Singh Josan: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for meeting me recently to view 1,000 paper cranes folded by residents in Bearwood in recognition of the diversity of Smethwick, where neighbours and communities just get on with each other.

Residents in my constituency and across Sandwell benefit from the lowest council tax in the west midlands and investment in new leisure centres and parks, and all our libraries are kept open. Sandwell is the third-best council in the country for fixing potholes and has expanded breakfast clubs and free school meals and ensured cheaper school uniforms for our children. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is all down to well-run Labour-led Sandwell council and the changes brought about by this Labour Government, which were opposed at every opportunity by the Tories and Reform?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his work to give every child in his constituency the best start in life. I am very glad that this Government have done more than any other to lift children out of poverty. Thanks to our work this Session, the Government have passed laws to deliver more rights at work, build new homes, save British steel, clean up our waterways, secure our borders, deliver record funding to our NHS and so much more—change delivered by Labour, and opposed by the Tories and Reform.

Mr Speaker: We come to the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): It is the end of this Session, and what a contrast with the beginning. Back in July 2024, the Government Benches were full adoring new MPs asking sycophantic questions; yesterday, the Prime Minister was reduced to begging those same MPs to save his own skin. He has broken his promise to grow the economy; the only thing that has grown is the welfare bill. Can the Prime Minister tell us how many more people are out of work and claiming universal credit since he took office?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady talks about what we have done, in relation to people out of work. We have put in place the youth guarantee for young people; we have raised the national minimum wage, thanks to our Chancellor; we have helped young people into work by cutting NHS waiting lists, thanks to the work of the Health Secretary; we have put more police on the streets, thanks to the work of the Home Secretary; and we have cut energy bills for young people, thanks to the work of the Energy Secretary. I am very proud of what this Labour Government have delivered in the first Session of this Parliament.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister does not want to say how many more people are out of work and claiming universal credit since he took office; perhaps he does not know. Let me tell him: it is 1.5 million people. That is the entire population of Leeds, Cardiff and Edinburgh put together. Hard-working people are being taxed more and more to pay for a ballooning benefits bill. Can the Prime Minister tell us why, on his watch, for the first time ever, we are now spending more on welfare than we earn in income tax?

The Prime Minister: The welfare system the Leader of the Opposition complains of is the one the Conservatives put in place. We are reforming it to improve it—and what did they do when we put that forward? They voted to keep the same broken welfare system.

Mrs Badenoch: That answer was as honest as the Prime Minister's reason for sacking Olly Robbins; perhaps he would like to apologise for it right now. Let me tell him why we are spending more on welfare than we are earning in tax. It is because of him and his terrible policies—this is all under him. We are spending so much on welfare that we cannot afford to defend the country. If he will not listen to me, perhaps he will listen to the former Labour Defence Secretary, Lord Robertson, who said:

"We cannot defend Britain with an ever-expanding welfare budget."

I agree with Lord Robertson. Why doesn't the Prime Minister?

The Prime Minister: This is the Labour Government who increased defence spending, with the highest sustained spend since the cold war. What did the Conservatives do? When they came into power, defence spending was 2.5%; when they left power, it was 2.3%. Even their own Defence Secretary admitted that they "hollowed out" our armed forces. We will take no lectures from them on defence.

Mrs Badenoch: Talking about more defence spending is not the same as giving more money for defence. The Prime Minister has been in office for nearly two years. He has a welfare plan until 2031, but he has not produced a defence investment plan. We have gone backwards on defence under him, because we are borrowing to pay for welfare. Yesterday we learned that the cost of Government borrowing is at its highest in two decades; that is under him. Instead of getting a grip on the economy, the Chancellor is briefing out that there could be rent controls, in order to curry favour with left-wing Back Benchers. This is not a serious way to run the economy. It is time the Prime Minister gave her an easier job, so will he listen to businesses and the country and reshuffle the Chancellor?

The Prime Minister: At the spring statement, the Chancellor was very proud to say that inflation was down to 3% and falling; interest rates have been cut six times; and we have seen the growth figures for the early part of this year. The Leader of the Opposition says, "Well, the cost of borrowing's gone up." Yes—because there is a conflict in Iran. And what did she want to do? When I said we would not be dragged into that war because I had thought through the consequences, including the economic consequences, what did she do? She said we should jump in with both feet, without regard to the consequences. She cannot complain now about the implications.

Mrs Badenoch: I did not hear the Prime Minister say that he is not reshuffling the Chancellor; it sounds like she's toast. Meanwhile, the former Deputy Prime Minister is on manoeuvres. This Government are like a bad episode of "Game of Thrones". The Prime Minister's own people have turned against him, and all the while, he is holed up in his castle, wetting himself about a visit from the king in the north. Yesterday, one Labour MP actually said that his days are numbered. It was one of them—I wonder who, because they are all looking guilty as hell. Isn't the real reason the Prime Minister cannot cut welfare that he has squandered all his political capital saving his own skin?

The Prime Minister: The Leader of the Opposition talks about playing political games. That is what she was doing yesterday. This House considered her motion, and rejected it decisively, because everyone saw it for what it was: a desperate, baseless political stunt ahead of the May elections. While she and the Opposition were playing games here, I was chairing a Cobra meeting, going through the contingencies and managing that war in the middle east. They think political games are more important than managing the implications of the war in the middle east, which will affect every single one of their constituents. None of them asks any questions about it; none of them wants to debate it; they just want to debate silly political stunts. Even though we did not join the war—no thanks to her—my duty is to protect the British public from its consequences, and nothing is going to distract me from what matters to the British public.

Mrs Badenoch: I think the whole country is sick of this man's tone-deaf, pompous moralising. Last week, we all saw him punch the Speaker's Chair. This is not a man who is in control. Since the last King's Speech, it has been one disaster after another: cronyism, jobs for friends of convicted paedophiles, peerages for other friends of convicted paedophiles, broken promises on taxes, and U-turn after U-turn after U-turn. He has lost a Deputy Prime Minister, two chiefs of staff, two Cabinet Secretaries, the support of his Back Benchers and all his credibility. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members can jeer as much as they like; they are going to have to go to their constituency and explain to all those people why they did what they did last night. The fact is that the Prime Minister was reduced to whipping his MPs to save him, and to pleading with a tax dodger to rejoin his Cabinet. How much longer do we all have to put up with his shambles?

The Prime Minister: I changed my party and I won a general election. She has changed her party, because when I became leader of mine, the Conservative party was three times the size it is now. She has changed it, and it is now even smaller than when she started as leader, because half of them are up there on the Reform Benches. The stunt the Conservatives played yesterday was because they do not like what we are delivering: more rights at work, more security for renters, and half a million children lifted out of poverty. That is our mandate, that is our mission, and nothing is going to hold us back.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): It was 18 months ago, I remember, that my late friend Terry Etherton was sitting up in the Gallery beaming down at the Prime Minister because he had just announced the Government scheme to give compensation to those who had been wrongly sacked from the armed forces for simply being gay. I have a constituent who lost his job at MI6 in the 1980s for his sexuality, and he has no compensation. Those in the security services also put their life on the line for their country; it is just not fair. Will the Prime Minister find the time to sit down with my constituent and me, so that together we can work out how we can extend Terry's scheme, so that those who were in the security services can also get justice?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for her dedicated work on this. I am very proud of the work that we have done to recognise LGBT veterans. On top of that, people in our security services are some of the bravest and most professional who serve our country. That some of them lost their job because of their sexuality is a historical wrong, and I confirm today that the Security Minister is assessing this closely. I will make sure that my right hon. Friend is updated and has the meeting that she has asked for.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): Yesterday, we heard Christian Turner, Peter Mandelson's replacement as US ambassador, say that the only country Trump has a special relationship with is Israel; that the Prime Minister's job is in danger after next week's elections; and that in the US, Jeffrey Epstein's associates have evaded responsibility for their actions. The Prime Minister has had to fire one US ambassador for lying. Does he fear that he will have to fire a second for telling the truth?

The Prime Minister: Given what I have had thrown at me in the last two weeks by all the Opposition parties, that is the least of my problems. I know that the right hon. Gentleman likes stunts, but I was surprised that he joined in with the one yesterday. His business spokesman said last week that he was satisfied that I had not misled the House. The right hon. Gentleman's opening position was that it was inconceivable that officials would give clearance to Mandelson and not tell Ministers that it was against the United Kingdom Security Vetting recommendation. That is what he said, and it did not happen. I expect frivolous accusations from the Leader of the Opposition. Clearly, I was wrong to expect anything better from the man in the wetsuit.

Ed Davey: I have got my drysuit on today, and let me tell the Prime Minister that when Boris Johnson was faced with that motion, he did not whip his MPs. There was a difference there.

Experts are warning that food prices will rise by 10% this year as farmers' costs soar. Trump's war has exposed how weak Britain's food security is, yet under the system brought in by the Conservatives, England is the only country in Europe where farm payments do not actively support farmers to produce food. So will the King's Speech include a good food Bill to fix that mistake and ensure that people can afford the food they need?

The Prime Minister: Of course food security is important, and that is why I was considering that, among other issues, in the ministerial meetings yesterday in Cobra. That is what I was spending my afternoon doing: ensuring that we were prepared and managing the risks of a conflict that will affect every single one of our constituents. What was the right hon. Gentleman doing? He was wasting his time in here on a baseless allegation and engaging in party political issues. He should have been working on the single most important issue of the day, but he wasted his time on a baseless political stunt.

Q3. [908934] **Chris Hinchliff** (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): The war in Iran has exposed how dangerously reliant we are on imports for our food, fuel and medicine, but the reality is that climate breakdown will make the current instability look trivial. Will the Prime Minister use the upcoming King's Speech to address this fact and redirect our economy towards food security, energy security and security in the supply of our medicines?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight the real risk of climate change, both internationally and at home. I am proud that we have restored the UK's position as a global leader on climate action. That means cutting emissions with our carbon budget, investing £7 billion in nature recovery and driving ahead with renewables. They are the right steps to protect supply chains, to protect our economy and to protect working people.

Stephen Flynn (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Depending upon the results in the elections next week, this may well be my final PMQs. I suppose that the same is perhaps true for the Prime Minister as well. But before then, does he understand that, yes, it is because of inaction on the cost of living crisis; yes, it is because of the debacle of the winter fuel payment; yes, it is because of the thousand jobs being lost a month in Scotland's North sea and the closure of Grangemouth; and yes, it

is because of his judgment on Matthew Doyle and Peter Mandelson; but above all else, the reason that his time in office will soon be coming to a close is that he promised change but has delivered chaos?

The Prime Minister: I am proud of what this Labour Government have achieved and I am proud of what we will achieve. If this is the right hon. Gentleman's last session here, let us reflect on his great achievements in Westminster. He kicked out his predecessor and then lost 39 MPs at the next election. I hope he can keep up that record in Holyrood next week.

Q4. [908935] **Rushanara Ali** (Bethnal Green and Stepney) (Lab): This Labour Government's £29 billion of investment in the NHS and £2 billion in life sciences is critical to fixing our NHS and tackling health inequalities. The Barts life sciences cluster in Whitechapel will become one of Europe's leading NHS-centred clusters, and we have already secured £800 million in private investment. Will the Prime Minister direct the Office for Investment to co-sponsor this initiative and ensure that the National Wealth Fund co-invests, so that we can turn east London's health inequalities into a driver for UK life sciences growth, transforming the future of healthcare in London, the UK and globally?

The Prime Minister: I am proud that Labour is investing in life sciences. I thank my hon. Friend for championing that project for over a decade. The national wealth fund is designed to co-invest, alongside private investors, and Ministers are happy to discuss those proposals with her.

Today I can announce a significant new investment by AstraZeneca, which is investing £300 million in UK life sciences, made possible by the pharmaceutical arrangement that we have struck with the United States to future-proof thousands of jobs in Macclesfield and Cambridge. That is a major vote of confidence in the UK and Labour's plans to strengthen our economy.

Q5. [908936] **Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): In an earlier answer, the Prime Minister made it clear that he understands that global uncertainty makes national economic resilience ever more important, and that energy security and food security are central to that, so why is policy making one the enemy of the other? Twelve per cent. of our most fertile and productive land—for the food that we need to feed the nation—is being eaten up by giant industrial developments, including pylons with the accompanying infrastructure and huge solar developments. Will the Prime Minister meet me and colleagues who feel similarly? By corroding Britain's food security now, we risk compromising our nation's future.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise food security. Obviously, that is one resilience that we need and must protect in this country. We also need to move to secure independence of energy, because one thing that is making life so much harder for all those in the food sector is that their energy prices go up every time an international conflict affects the prices here. By getting energy independence, which requires infrastructure, we can protect them from that and therefore make them more resilient.

Q6. [908937] **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): Like many MPs, I will head up to my constituency later to campaign for the local elections. When I am out on doorstep talking to voters in the Shipley constituency, I am proud of the difference that this Labour Government are making. Renters are no longer worried thanks to secure tenure, families are supported by free breakfast clubs and extended free childcare support, and workers are no longer on exploitative zero-hour contracts. What is the Prime Minister most proud of, and what is his message for voters in my Shipley constituency and across the UK?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. This is the first Government in a generation to take key services back into public ownership, to give rights and powers to workers, renters and the less fortunate, and to invest in public services and lift children out of poverty. As we face war on two fronts, we will do more. A stronger economy, stronger energy security, stronger on defence—that is the difference that this Government are making.

Q7. [908938] **Sir Jeremy Wright** (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): Many of us across this House worked hard to pass the Online Safety Act 2023, not because we thought it would be the last word on online safety, but because we believed it was an important step forward in making online platforms more accountable for the content on their services and for the algorithms that curate it. Can the Prime Minister reassure us that whatever his Government decide to do to restrict our young people's access to social media will not be used as cover by social media companies to do less themselves to keep young people safer online?

The Prime Minister: I can give the right hon. and learned Gentleman that assurance. Those platform providers need to take responsibility. He will have noticed the fight that we had with Grok just a few months ago—disgusting images were being created on social media, and we took that on in a fight, which we won, across the House—as well as with chatbots. We need to build on the legislation that we have, and we definitely need more protection in general, particularly for children, but his point is valid: that should not take any responsibility away from those that provide the platforms in the first place.

Q8. [908939] **Natasha Irons** (Croydon East) (Lab): With £158 million in fair funding, £20 million of Pride in Place funding for New Addington and funding for new trams, this Labour Government are finally giving Croydon the backing that it needs. Building a Croydon for all starts with ensuring that our residents have the dignity and stability of a decent home, but hundreds of families in my constituency face homelessness because of no-fault evictions, so will the Prime Minister outline how the Government are progressing on their plans to fix the private rented sector and ensure that renters in Croydon have the security and peace of mind that they deserve?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a brilliant representative for Croydon, and she is right: for too long, renters have been at the mercy of rogue landlords, pushing thousands into homelessness. I am delighted to confirm that this Friday no-fault evictions will be scrapped once and for all. That sends an important message to

anyone living in a damp, unsafe home, anyone who has suffered an unfair rent increase, and every family forced to move over the last year to year. Change is here, delivered by Labour, and opposed by the Tories and Reform every step of the way.

Q10. [908941] **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Please could the Prime Minister explain to the House why, if he has done nothing wrong and process has been followed, he needed to force his MPs to vote against an investigation? Is it because he is worried that they do not believe his version of the truth?

The Prime Minister: No, it's because they can see a baseless allegation and political stunt when they see it. The hon. Gentleman is a former GP, so here is the truth: we have recruited 82 more GPs and upgraded his medical centre. Opposition Members want all the benefits, but they never want to pay for them.

Q9. [908940] **Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Derby is a manufacturing powerhouse, but too many people in our city have not felt the benefit of that success. That is why tomorrow we are delighted to be launching Team Derby with our East Midlands Mayor Claire Ward. Does the Prime Minister agree that with our brilliant Chancellor and our Labour Government backing our city, Team Derby can ensure that every pound of investment in Derby delivers real change for our residents, so that everyone feels part of our success story?

The Prime Minister: I think we should all back Team Derby. Our investment is helping to renew our submarine fleet, building new nuclear reactors and creating jobs and growth. I am proud to see Labour MPs working with the Labour Mayor and a Labour Government to deliver a brighter future for Derby.

Q13. [908944] **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Despite the Government's ambitious house building targets, the charity Shelter believes that the current approach is not providing enough social and genuinely affordable homes. Will the Prime Minister end his Government's warm embrace of the developer-led model, and instead heed Liberal Democrat calls for 150,000 social homes per year, and new powers for local councils to build them?

The Prime Minister: We are going to build 1.5 million homes. We are upgrading the rights of renters, because we know how important it is for everyone to have a safe and secure roof over their head. The hon. Member's challenge to me would have more force if the Liberal Democrats had not abstained on the measures that we are taking to move this forward.

Q11. [908942] **David Burton-Sampson** (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): While our NHS across England has seen noticeable improvements thanks to the work of this Labour Government, Southend hospital and the wider Mid and South Essex NHS Trust has continued to struggle. I thank the Department of Health and Social Care for working with me and my colleagues on that issue, and for placing the trust on the intensive recovery programme. Does the Prime Minister agree that that is the right action, and will he meet me to discuss our wider plans to improve healthcare in Southend as part of our Opportunity Southend initiative?

The Prime Minister: After years of failure being tolerated, and failing staff and patients, our new intensive recovery programme is targeting sites that need tailored support. There is more to do, but we are seeing real progress across our NHS—*[Interruption.]* Opposition Members have never heard this from a Government. Waiting lists are the lowest for three years—that did not happen in 14 years—and A&E waiting times are the best for five years. They do not recognise any of that because they did not do any of it. We have the fastest ambulance response times in half a decade. Do not forget that the Opposition parties opposed the record investment that was necessary to make all that happen.

Q14. [908945] **Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Everything international law is supposed to protect is being violated: a genocide against the Palestinian people, the catastrophe in Sudan, the Gazafication of Lebanon. Against that backdrop, last week the Government closed the international humanitarian law unit and stopped funding access to the Centre for Information Resilience database of 26,000 human rights and conflict incidents across Israel, Palestine and Lebanon. That database underpins decisions on IHL breaches, arms export suspensions, and whether the UK is acting within the law. Usually, criminals or their accomplices are the ones destroying evidence of their crimes, not a human rights lawyer or a Government who are apparently committed to upholding international law. My question is simple—

Mr Speaker: Order. You have taken far too long. Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: Let me reassure the House that the work of the international law unit has not ended. It will simply be done by a different team under a restructure. We will, of course, continue to monitor international humanitarian law in Gaza and elsewhere, and invest in conflict prevention and resolution.

Q12. [908943] **Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): This Labour Government have backed the reopening of Doncaster Sheffield airport from the very start. It means jobs, investment, growth and opportunity, not just for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme, but for the whole region. Reform councillors in Doncaster are considering reversing their decision to support the investment that would currently facilitate the airport's reopening. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that the airport remains a huge priority for the area, and will he continue to work with us to find a way forward to make sure that we get our airport back open?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is a champion for this crucial local project, and I thank him for his work. I know from visiting Doncaster just how vital reopening the airport is for local residents. It will be a huge boost for South Yorkshire and unlock thousands of jobs. I am deeply concerned by reports that decisions by Reform in Doncaster could put the reopening in jeopardy. Labour put the plan in place; Reform should honour its promises, stop playing games and get the airport open.

Q15. [908946] **Robin Swann** (South Antrim) (UUP): In a parliamentary Session that started out with a degree of anticipation, a level of expectation and a promise of

change, in what could be the Prime Minister's last Prime Minister's question time, may I ask him why does he think it went so wrong? Was it his failure to support our WASPI women, his failure to support our farmers, or his failure to support our Northern Ireland veterans and victims of the Northern Ireland troubles? Or was it those around him, who seem more interested in themselves than in the country?

The Prime Minister: I am very proud—this Government are very proud—of the biggest upgrade in workers' rights in a generation and the biggest upgrade in renters' rights in a generation and of doing the most any Government have ever done to reduce child poverty. Those measures will have a lasting impact on working people across the United Kingdom. That is the change we are bringing about and I look forward to continuing it.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): As this parliamentary Session draws to a close, it seems like a good moment to reflect on the legislation passed since the general election—not all of it, of course. Many of us have walked through the Lobby to pass 60 Bills that have touched almost every aspect of British life, from the care of cats, dogs and ferrets to space industry indemnities, along with a whole host of measures seeking to improve life for renters, carers, investors, football fans, NHS patients, serving personnel and more. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that this is a pretty good first Session report card? Does he also agree that the best is yet to come?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the 50 pieces of legislation—the 50 Bills—that we have put through. We whipped to change the country—we all voted to change the country. The Opposition parties, of course, opposed almost all of it. That is why we have got stronger rights for renters and why we have got stronger rights for workers, investing in our roads and railways, reforming special educational needs and disabilities provision and driving down waiting lists—all opposed by the Opposition parties. And we are only just getting started. We are going to go further on a stronger economy, on energy security and a stronger defence.

Mr Speaker: I call Sarah Gibson to ask the final question.

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): Before we leave the House for several weeks, I feel it is absolutely necessary to raise an issue in my constituency, about which I have been trying to get an answer from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and from the Environment Agency. We have a landfill site in Calne that is producing a sulphurous smell that is causing residents to need to close their windows and leading to children with sore throats, but I am not getting answer except that the Environment Agency itself admits that

"controls may not be working effectively".

Like my constituents, I find it really disappointing that we are not getting any serious response. This is not the kind of thing we expect in the UK—we do not expect the air that we breathe not to be safe. I urge the Prime Minister to help me to get a response from DEFRA and the EA on what measures can be put in place to reassure my constituents that they are not suffering ill health.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Lady for raising the issue. Now that she has raised it with me, I will make sure that I go away and chase it up so that she gets the reply that, importantly, her constituents are entitled to.

Points of Order

12.35 pm

Catherine West (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The whole House will be very concerned to hear about the dreadful stabbings this morning in the borough of Barnet. As the Member for Hornsey and Friern Barnet, I am very worried about this repeated violence against the Jewish community. I want to reach out to the whole House to say that we condemn these alleged attacks and wish the police, the council and all the community services the very best in solving this and bringing to justice the perpetrators of these violent crimes.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: Prime Minister, do you want to respond?

The Prime Minister: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, which I learned about before Prime Minister's questions. It is deeply concerning to everyone in this House. There is now a police investigation, and we all need to do everything we can to support that investigation and be absolutely clear in our determination to deal with any of these offences, the like of which we have seen too much recently.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, I am the secretary to the National Union of Journalists parliamentary group, and I raised earlier this week a point of order concerning the role of the US agency APCO in undertaking the investigation of journalists for Labour Together, which resulted in the smearing of those journalists. I explained that as a result of concern about the reach of APCO's investigation, a number of hon. Members have submitted subject interest requests to the company and to Labour Together. There has been a delay in the response from Labour Together to those requests, but APCO has confirmed, in a very redacted form, that information on MPs was being collected.

I referred this week to information from a whistleblower —a freelancer involved in the Labour Together inquiry— indicating that APCO had instructed this person to destroy files and material related to the inquiry. Only hours ago, we had it confirmed online by the *Financial Times* that tapes exist that include conversations by APCO's head of media relations for Europe, Tom Harper, discussing the deletion of an email account and saying

"they will be able to see that through digital forensics or something like that"

with regard to references and this inquiry. He also refers to processes to "muddy the waters" and the audit trail.

I can also report—*[Interruption.]* I am sorry for the delay. I can also report that evidence was submitted to the inquiry being run by Sir Laurie Magnus, the Prime Minister's ethics adviser, by Paul Holden, one of the journalists and victims of the smears, but evidence was not supplied by the Cabinet Office to the secretariat to the Sir Laurie Magnus inquiry.

On behalf of the NUJ parliamentary group, I express our concern—*[Interruption.]* This is important. The NUJ parliamentary group is concerned about the smearing of journalists. We need to know what surveillance, if any, was taking place of hon. Members and for what purposes. We call again for an independent inquiry into the role of APCO and Labour Together in this issue.

Mr Speaker: This is a very serious allegation, and I take it seriously. Members of Parliament are here to carry out their duties. What is being alleged is very serious, and I believe that it needs to be investigated thoroughly. The right hon. Gentleman has been here for a long time, so he will no doubt use the Table Office as part of the avenues to pursue what he has said—there may be other ways. There may be serious security implications for this House, which I will take up via other avenues.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) visited my constituency yesterday without notifying me. This is not the first time that the usual courtesies of this House have been disregarded by Reform UK when visiting Portsmouth. Further to that, is it in order for a former Immigration Minister who helped to shape the current asylum system to visit constituencies and push campaigns that mislead and cause hatred and division? Given the blatant disregard for this convention and courtesy to the House and the absolute lack of integrity and respect, can you advise what recourse is available to me as a constituency Member?

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: I think there is another point of order on the same matter.

James MacCleary: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It seems that the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) was very busy yesterday, as alarmed residents in the town of Seaford in my constituency reported sighting him too. He was apparently there campaigning to support the Reform candidate for Seaford North, who is set to lose his seat to the Liberal Democrats. I understand that it is a common courtesy in this place for Members to inform one another of official visits to their constituencies, but on this occasion, that did not happen. Could you advise me on this issue?

Mr Speaker: I thank both hon. Members for their points of order. As I have reminded the House on numerous occasions, Members must notify their colleagues if they intend to visit another Member's constituency, except for purely private purposes. I expect Members on all sides of the House to show that courtesy to their colleagues. Whether they are Front Benchers or not, it is a courtesy, and I expect it to be done that way. I hope that those Members who have failed to do so will apologise to the Members concerned. It is election fever time; we do not need any more of it, so please observe the courtesies of this House.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Leader of the Opposition, who is no longer in her place, said that 1.5 million extra people were on universal credit. She will know that this is a deeply misleading number, because it is largely a consequence of the transition from legacy systems to universal credit—her background is in IT, so she should know how it works. In fact, more people are in work now than under the Tories, so given—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am not quite sure that that is a point of order for me—*[Interruption.]* You are trying to correct the record on a matter of political judgment. If somebody has inadvertently misled the House, it is

[Mr Speaker]

for them to correct the record, not me, and I certainly do not want to reopen the questions that we have just closed. Thank you for bringing that matter to the attention of the House—it will now be in *Hansard*.

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. How do I gain your advice on a point of order that is inadvertently misleading about what the Leader of the Opposition said? The Leader of the Opposition—

Mr Speaker: Order. That is danger with what I have started. We have had some very serious points of order; let us leave it with those serious points of order. We do not have the time to play around.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on two matters relating to the completeness of ministerial answers to this House. On 24 April, in answer to a written parliamentary question tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester East (Shivani Raja), the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), referred to an attached spreadsheet that was not provided. This is the third time in recent months that this has happened. In addition, I wrote to the same Minister on 2 March, seeking clarification of an earlier written answer in the light of remarks he made in Westminster Hall on 27 January, and I have yet to receive a reply. Could you advise me on how Members can secure timely and complete information when matters referred for answers are—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think we have both grasped the nature of your question. You know the answer better than I do, Mr Holden. As a former Secretary of State and Minister, you know very well how these things happen.

I thank the right hon. Member for his point of order. He will know that I am not responsible for ministerial answers. However, all Members should receive full and timely answers. Members on the Treasury Bench will have heard his concerns, and I hope that they will be passed on to the relevant Minister. I also note that the Leader of the House is in the Chamber, and he shares my concerns about the time it is taking to answer letters. It is not good enough. It is not acceptable. We are entering a period of calm, and hopefully when we come back, we can get all the outstanding questions answered.

In-Person Banking Services

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

12.43 pm

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the delivery of in-person banking services; to require the Financial Conduct Authority to set standards for the provision of in-person banking services; and for connected purposes.

In places such as Hayling Island and Emsworth in my constituency, if individuals cannot bank online or travel to the next town, they cannot bank at all. Across the country, this is not an isolated problem; it is the reality for millions of people. There are now nearly 50 constituencies —represented by Members on both sides of the House— without a single bank branch left, and over 90 more are down to their final branch. Since 2015, more than 6,600 bank branches have closed. That is around two thirds of the network we once had. In-person, face-to-face banking services have, in many places, simply disappeared. While online banking works for many, it does not work for everyone. The latest Financial Conduct Authority figures confirm that more than 3 million people in the UK do not use online banking.

When it comes to older people in particular, Age UK reports that nearly four in 10 over-65s who have a bank account do not manage their money online, and three quarters still want to carry out at least some banking in person. Which?, the consumer rights organisation, makes the important point that when branches close, people do not just lose a building; they lose access to help when things go wrong. For older people, people with disabilities, small businesses handling cash and people in rural, suburban and coastal communities, it is not about convenience, but independence, practicality, dignity and fairness.

I have so far outlined some of the challenges, but I should also state that significant progress has been made. It was the last Conservative Government who took action. Through the Financial Services and Markets Act 2023, we protected access to cash and supported the roll-out of banking hubs across the country. Today, those banking hubs are a Conservative success story. The trade body UK Finance reports that nearly nine in 10 customers would recommend using a hub.

I recognise the vital role that banks have played in this transition. Many have worked together to support and fund the roll-out of banking hubs, and they continue to provide services in communities where branches are closed, such as through mobile banks and pop-ups. I pay tribute to the post office network and its staff, who play a vital role in providing access to cash and basic banking services in communities across the country represented by Members across this House.

The introduction of banking hubs was the right approach. It was necessary, and it is already making a difference, but we now face the next challenge. Post offices and cash machines are an important part of the system and provide access to cash, but they were never designed to replace the full range of services provided by a bank branch. Now we must go further and protect access to face-to-face banking, because banking is not just about paying in or withdrawing money; it is about fixing a blocked card, resolving a failed payment, sorting out fraud, and getting advice and help when it matters most.

There are 3 million fraud cases a year, and most begin online. When something goes wrong, having someone to help in a face-to-face context can be the difference between stopping the fraud early and someone losing their life savings. For those who are offline, it is not just a theoretical issue. A pensioner with a frozen account should not have to travel miles just to speak to a human being. A small business should not be left waiting on hold when it needs to pay its customers, suppliers or staff. A first-time buyer should not have to navigate the complex mortgage market from just an app. Those are just some of the gaps in the current system, and this Bill would address those gaps and more.

The Bill would develop a model that is not only fair but sustainable, and that works for consumers, banks and the long-term future of our high streets and communities. It would shift the focus away from access to cash to access to wider in-person banking services, and it would ensure that banking hubs provide what people actually need: help to manage their money face-to-face when it matters most.

I have seen this issue play out at first hand in my Havant constituency. Since 2015, we have lost more than 90% of our bank branches. Barclays, HSBC, NatWest, Halifax and Lloyds have all closed, leaving just one building society branch—Nationwide—in Havant town centre. I have worked with residents, Ministers and Link over several years to secure a new banking hub for our community, and it is due to open in the coming weeks.

That progress shows that the model can work, but it also highlights its limitations, because under the current law, hubs are only delivered when access to cash is judged to be inadequate. If there is an ATM on the high street or a post office providing deposit and withdrawal services, a banking hub may not be deemed necessary, despite the lack of wider banking services in the area. In practice, that means that many people, including in places such as Emsworth and Hayling Island, cannot get basic banking services or basic banking problems resolved. They are still travelling miles, still struggling to speak to someone, and still left without the support that they need. This is not a failure of the idea; it is a gap in its design, which this Bill would resolve.

It is worth being clear that the Bill is not about mandating a return to the old model of bank branches on every high street. Instead, it is about ensuring that the modern banking system that we have created works for everyone.

In developing the Bill, I have engaged with a wide range of stakeholders including the Post Office, UK Finance, Which? and Age UK, all of which recognise the need to go further in ensuring access to in-person banking services outside traditional branches. In return, I have aimed to be equally pragmatic when drawing up the Bill and leading the campaign for more banking hubs. For example, I recognise that many people can rely solely on mobile or online banking and rarely have to step into a bank branch or a banking hub. I am also not wedded to a banking hub being a bricks-and-mortar building with fixed high costs. A hub could be a modular building, a pop-up, a mobile unit or located inside existing buildings such as a supermarket, a post office or a community centre. What is important is the ability to speak to someone face to face.

The Bill is not about turning back the clock, resisting innovation or looking to the past. Instead, the Bill and my wider campaign are about the practical evolution of a system that is already working—a timely refinement to reflect how people actually use banking services today. In fact, the Bill is about making sure that progress works for everyone, because we cannot allow a two-tier system to emerge, with one for those who can navigate apps and algorithms and another for those who cannot.

I welcome the constructive engagement that I have had with the Treasury and the City Minister on this issue. There is clear recognition on both sides of the House that more must be done to expand banking hubs. The Bill offers a practical, proportionate and sustainable way forward. Let us build on what works and fix what does not, and let us ensure that banking hubs deliver not just access to cash but access to banking, because no one should be locked out of managing their own money simply because they cannot do it online. I urge colleagues across the House to support the Bill, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Alan Mak, Sir Jeremy Hunt, John Glen, Joy Morrissey, Andrew Griffith, Claire Coutinho, Laura Trott, Jack Rankin, Nick Timothy, John Cooper, Neil O'Brien and Lewis Cocking present the Bill.

Alan Mak accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 8 May, and to be printed (Bill 442).

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE (TODAY)

Ordered,

That, at this day's sitting, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House, if a Message from the Lords Commissioners is expected, until that Message has been received.—*(Stephen Morgan.)*

12.53 pm

Sitting suspended (Order, this day).

MESSAGE TO ATTEND THE LORDS COMMISSIONERS

1.30 pm

Message to attend the Lords Commissioners delivered by the Gentleman Usher of the Black Rod.

The Speaker, with the House, went up to hear His Majesty's Commission; on their return, the Speaker sat in the Clerk's place at the Table.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to acquaint the House that the House has been to the House of Peers, where a Commission under the Great Seal was read, authorising the Royal Assent to the following Acts:

National Insurance Contributions (Employer Pensions Contributions) Act 2026

Grenfell Tower Memorial (Expenditure) Act 2026

Ministerial Salaries (Amendment) Act 2026

Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026

Victims and Courts Act 2026

Crime and Policing Act 2026

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026

Pension Schemes Act 2026

English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026.

His Majesty's Most Gracious Speech

Mr Speaker: I have further to acquaint the House that the Leader of the House of Lords, one of the Lords Commissioners, delivered His Majesty's Most Gracious Speech to both Houses of Parliament, in pursuance of His Majesty's Command. For greater accuracy I have obtained a copy, and also directed that the terms of the Speech be printed in the *Journal* of this House. Copies are being made available in the Vote Office.

The Speech was as follows:

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

My Government has been focussed on laying the foundations for economic growth and driving up living standards across the country.

The focus of my Government's fiscal rules has been to keep public finances on a sustainable path. Legislation was passed to ensure that no government can announce fiscally significant measures without being subject to an independent assessment, thereby improving transparency and accountability. Action has been taken to bear down on inflation and ensure that GDP continues to rise over the next 10 years.

My Ministers have encouraged economic stability, attracted investment and supported British businesses. Laws were passed to enhance financial stability and improve my Government's ability to manage bank failures. Measures were also introduced to crack down on fraud against public authorities. Data reforms will boost digital innovation and new laws will ensure the UK remains the global destination of choice for dispute resolution.

My Government has taken steps to ensure growth and security by investing in the future. Legislation was passed to support the production of sustainable aviation fuel and enable the United Kingdom to become a world leader in this emerging technology. Swift action ensured the continued, safe production of British steel.

Action was also taken to overhaul the planning system, removing barriers to housebuilding and the development of critical national infrastructure.

My Government delivered legislation to modernise employment rights, benefitting 18 million workers across the country. This included new protections for people on zero or low hours contracts and a day-one right to sick pay, bereavement leave and paternity and unpaid parental leave.

To provide greater security for those in retirement, measures were passed to consolidate pension funds so that people should receive better outcomes from their pension savings.

My Government is committed to ensuring that critical public services are accessible to all, represent value for money and improve people's everyday lives. Public investment has been maintained at the highest sustained level in four decades and capital spending will increase by more than 120 billion pounds over this Parliament. My Government has raised the national minimum wage to ensure that those on the lowest incomes are rewarded for their hard work.

My Ministers have sought to improve the experience of using public transport. Local leaders have been given greater control over bus services in their area and rail passenger services have begun to be brought back into public ownership. My Government has set out plans for the creation of Great British Railways, a new publicly owned company that will transform the rail network.

Legislation was passed to give water industry regulators the powers to hold water companies and executives to account for polluting waterways. Great British Energy was established to power the nation with clean, secure, home-grown energy.

Mayors have been granted new powers to take local decisions in the interests of the communities they serve, delivering better outcomes for people and places across England.

New laws have been passed to drive up standards and ensure the safety and wellbeing of children in education and social care. My Government will reduce child poverty by giving families the financial support to give their children the best start in life.

My Government has championed significant public health intervention, creating the United Kingdom's first smoke-free generation. New legislation will give patients greater control over their care during a mental health crisis and empower NHS staff to provide more personalised support, whilst keeping patients and the public safe. My ministers have acted to address barriers to career progression for doctors trained in the United Kingdom.

My Ministers have sought to ensure that millions of private renters have more protection in their homes and are no longer threatened by discrimination, opportunistic rent increases and no-fault evictions.

My Government introduced legislation to ensure that the criminal justice system puts victims first and brings criminals to justice sooner. Changes to the sentencing of offenders will help to stabilise the prison system and ensure local communities are kept safe.

Ensuring the protection of the United Kingdom's borders, and security of public places, is a priority for my Government. New laws have modernised the asylum and immigration system by establishing a new Border Security Command and delivering enhanced powers to tackle organised immigration crime. Measures were passed to improve the safety and security of certain public venues, and help keep the British public safe from terrorism. New criminal justice reforms will give police more powers to protect the public from anti-social behaviour, tackle violence against women and girls and increase safety online.

Democratic integrity and accountability in public life are central to my Government's mission. Legislation has been introduced to impose a duty of candour on public servants.

My Ministers have brought forward legislation to extend voting rights to 16 and 17 year olds, improve voter registration and guard against the threat of foreign interference in elections.

My Government took action to ensure Parliament is reflective of modern Britain. Legislation was passed to remove all remaining hereditary peers from the House of Lords. My Government also delivered reforms to enable Roman Catholics to act as my representative to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Measures were passed to enable the building of a Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre, honouring the six million Jewish people that were murdered and

preserving their story for generations to come. Legislation passed this session will enable my Government to fund the creation of a lasting memorial to the Grenfell tragedy.

My Government has committed to the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the Cold War. NATO remains the cornerstone of United Kingdom security and my Government's commitment to the Alliance is unshakeable.

My Government has responded to the crisis in the Middle East, working around the clock to keep British citizens in the region safe. My Government will continue to work with international partners to support energy security and a return to stability in the Middle East.

My Ministers have taken action towards achieving lasting peace for both Israelis and Palestinians by formally recognising the State of Palestine as part of a broader international effort to support a viable pathway to peace.

The United Kingdom's support to Ukraine remains ironclad. My Ministers hosted the London Summit on Ukraine, co-led the Coalition of the Willing with France and have imposed over 1,200 sanctions on Russia. My Government has agreed a One Hundred Year Partnership agreement with Ukraine to deepen military, economic, cultural, and technological cooperation, as well as contributing up to 21.8 billion pounds in military, humanitarian and other financial support since Russia launched its full-scale invasion.

My Government is building a new geopolitical relationship with the European Union, including advancing cooperation through joint summits. My Ministers hosted the 4th European Political Community Summit and the Western Balkans Summit, as well as signing treaties to further strengthen relationships with Germany and France.

Legislation passed in this session will enable the United Kingdom to play its role in protecting the world's oceans and preserving the extraordinary ecosystems that are vital to the health of the planet.

My Government has invested further in our gallant Armed Forces by introducing significant pay rises for service personnel, extending childcare for forces families, and delivering a 9 billion pounds defence housing strategy. An independent Armed Forces Commissioner has been established to investigate welfare matters, oversee the service complaints system and act as an independent champion for service personnel and their families.

The Queen and I were pleased to receive the State Visits of His Highness The Amir of Qatar and Her Highness Sheikha Jawaher; The President of the French Republic and Mrs Brigitte Macron; the President and First Lady of the United States; the President of the Federal Republic of Germany and Ms. Büdenbender; and The President and First Lady of Nigeria. We were also delighted to be welcomed on an outward State Visit to the United States of America.

Members of the House of Commons, I thank you for the provisions which you have made for the work and dignity of the Crown and for the public services.

My Lords and Members of the House of Commons

I pray that the blessing of Almighty God may rest upon your counsels.

PROROGATION

Mr Speaker: The Commission was also for proroguing this present Parliament, and the Leader of the House of Lords said:

"My Lords and Members of the House of Commons:

By virtue of His Majesty's Commission which has been now read, we do, in His Majesty's name, and in obedience to His Majesty's Commands, prorogue this Parliament to Wednesday the 13th day of May, to be then here holden, and this Parliament is accordingly prorogued to Wednesday the 13th of May."

End of the First Session (opened on 9 July 2024) of the Fifty-Ninth Parliament of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in the Fourth Year of the Reign of His Majesty King Charles the Third.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 29 April 2026

[KARL TURNER *in the Chair*]

Community Infrastructure Levy: Homeowners

9.30 am

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of the Community Infrastructure Levy on private homeowners.

Thank you, Mr Turner, for presiding over this debate on an issue that is having profound life-changing consequences for ordinary families across the country. I also thank the Minister for his interest in the issue. Politics can be very tribal, but I have already met him twice to discuss it, both times with Councillor Jane Austin from my constituency—once in July last year and once in December last year, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford). I know he wants to solve the issue.

The community infrastructure levy, or CIL, was introduced for the best of reasons: to ensure that commercial developers contribute towards the cost of the infrastructure needed as a result of their developments. It was never intended as an extra tax on people doing home extensions, and certainly never as a retrospective tax that people are landed with unexpectedly after the event. Most councils understand that, but one or two have ruthlessly exploited loopholes that allow them to punish homeowners, including Lib Dem-run Waverley in my constituency, which charges over £550 per square metre, one of the highest in the country.

But it is not just there. This morning, I heard about a case in Sevenoaks, where the district council pursued a stay-at-home mother relentlessly, in a case championed by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott). For many families the consequences have been devastating. Some have been forced to sell or remortgage their homes, and the financial burden, alongside the stress and uncertainty, has been immense. Some have fought their councils for years, hitting brick walls at every turn. I am aware of 15 families in Waverley alone who faced unexpected charges, ranging from £26,000 to £235,000.

There are now more than 100 known other cases across the country. Here are some examples: Steve Dally and his wife Caroline have been forced to remortgage their home to pay a £70,000 CIL charge on a home extension in Godalming. As they explained to me and local councillor Jane Austin, they are not developers; they simply extended their home. They hit a brick wall when they challenged Waverley and had to risk additional penalties and compounded interest in the process.

Another Godalming couple were hit with a £70,000 bill because they were living in rented accommodation while their home was being renovated. In Milford in my constituency, a homeowner was forced to pay a £120,000 CIL bill when forced to submit a retrospective planning application because two walls of his existing home fell down. For failing to give notice of the walls falling down he was charged £2,500 in penalties because he had failed to submit a commencement notice, something he had never heard of.

Enton resident Helen Grant reluctantly settled a £56,000 CIL charge on the family home, only to be sent a bill for a further £3,000 in interest charges when the council reviewed her case, which had already been closed. It is not just Waverley; I pay tribute to the CIL Injustice Group, which operates across the whole country. Many of its members are watching from the Gallery today, including people from Wokingham, Tonbridge and Devon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Member for bringing this issue forward. I remind him of the cautionary tale from Northern Ireland. We operate without a CIL-style levy. Instead, we rely on bespoke section 76 agreements, which avoid the tax-like rigidity of CIL. That has left us in Northern Ireland with a multibillion-pound funding gap for infrastructure—specifically, for our waste water systems—which is now halting thousands of developments across 25 cities and towns in our 11 council areas. Does he agree that we must ensure that this measure is not just a sales tax on development value but a ringfenced guarantee for the specific pipes and roads that make those homes habitable? The cautionary tale from Northern Ireland is an example of where this has gone wrong.

Sir Jeremy Hunt: I thank the hon. Member; he always makes very thoughtful contributions. He makes two very important points. The first is that we do need developers to contribute towards infrastructure costs. The risk of the appalling injustice that I am drawing attention to today is that we lose social consent for very important contributions that enable much-needed infrastructure to be built. Secondly, he is absolutely right to say that not having CIL at all would be very bad. In my area in particular, there is constant concern about the lack of infrastructure to keep pace with new housing developments.

I want to return to the CIL Injustice Group, because their accounts are extremely concerning. Some are nervous about dealing with their council because of the bad way they are treated. Others spend thousands of pounds on legal fees, often unsuccessfully. Part of the issue is that CIL is an extraordinarily complex process. Forms must be filled in in the correct order and are subject to strict timetables. Even professionals struggle. It is very unforgiving if someone gets it wrong. They have to pay within 90 days, under threat of seizure of assets and imprisonment, and if they do not comply, they get slammed with thousands of pounds in late charges and interest on top of that. There is effectively no right of appeal, and most importantly, there is no ability to correct errors. Ordinary homeowners inevitably do make errors, but there is no latitude in the system to allow them to correct those errors.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Does the right hon. Member share my view that when the community infrastructure levy was introduced, it was not designed to penalise people who were adding extensions to their homes or seeking to self-build? Rather, it was designed as a levy on large-scale infrastructure that would help through reinvestment into the community.

Sir Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Member is absolutely right, and he is foreshadowing what I will propose as one of the solutions to this issue: that homeowners should be excluded from the potential ambit of CIL altogether, because that was not its intention. It is a loophole that is being exploited, and I hope to explain why some councils

[Sir Jeremy Hunt]

have been so keen to exploit that loophole. We need to remove the root cause if we are going to deal with this issue.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): My right hon. Friend is laying out a compelling illustration of the injustices to individuals that this highly complex charge is causing. As he moves on to his solution, will he also reflect on the macroeconomic impact of this complexity and deterrence? I was Housing Minister for a year. Sadly, in those 12 months, I did not get round to sorting out this mess, but it was obvious to me that the small builder sector, which used to produce over 50% of the homes in this country, had been decimated by the crash and never returned. This disincentive to the kind of work that would encourage a really strong small builder sector, which could then contribute more to our economy, is both a brake on growth and a brake on the wider housing aspirations that both Governments have had over the last few years.

Sir Jeremy Hunt: I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend, who has much more experience of the housing sector than I do. He will know that countries like France—not very far away—that have been much more successful than us in building more houses also have a flourishing small builder sector. In this country, because of the enormous costs involved in the planning process and often the land, it is much harder for small builders to get involved. Of course, one of the other advantages of small builders is that they are more likely to get consent from local communities, because they are often from those local communities. I agree with my right hon. Friend entirely: that is one of the unintended consequences of the problems we have with the community infrastructure levy regime.

CIL was drafted with very strong teeth to ensure that developers actually pay up, but for ordinary members of the public trying to do an extension, these Orwellian processes can be utterly terrifying. Some councils—not my own Waverley borough council, alas—recognise the inflexibility of the regulations and have taken a soft-touch approach to prevent homeowners from being captured. To its credit, West Berkshire, which as it happens is also a Lib Dem council, implemented a discretionary review and refunded £400,000 to affected householders. Others have not. I recognise that the difference in councils' approaches makes the Minister's job more difficult.

So how should we fix the issue? First, we need to reform the highly complex CIL legislation to distinguish between commercial developers and householders. The problem with a system that is based entirely on the floor area of a project is that even a small increase in the size of a project—just a couple of extra metres on a patio—can suddenly mean that an ordinary homeowner is required to get planning permission, perhaps retrospectively, and can become liable, and they may not know it at the time. Homeowners should be outright excluded from the reach of the community infrastructure levy.

Secondly, even in the absence of legislation, we need clear guidance from the Government to local councils so that no homeowners anywhere are charged for the community infrastructure levy. Thirdly, we need an effective mechanism for redress and the ability to correct genuine mistakes after a liability notice has been issued. Sadly, zero rating CIL liability does not work because a charge remains on the land, which may render the property unsaleable, so the Government need to find a way not just to avoid injustice but to secure justice for the hundreds of families who have been wronged to date by the problems in the system.

Finally, we need to recognise that the root cause of the problem is that councils such as mine have been collecting the community infrastructure levy not just to build infrastructure but so that they can use the interest from unspent CIL as revenue. An estimated £9 billion is sitting in council accounts from unspent contributions by developers, of which an estimated £2.2 billion is unspent CIL. That means that some councils are effectively funding their core services from the human misery of their council tax payers. At a minimum, rules should specify that interest from unspent CIL should go back into the CIL account to avoid a perverse incentive for councils to do the wrong thing.

British democracy rests on the principle of consent and fairness, both of which demand justice for those caught unfairly by the CIL system, which was never designed to capture them. All those people deserve clarity, and this should be prevented from happening again. I know the Minister and many other hon. Members here today want just that, and I look forward to hearing the Government plans.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Karl Turner (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate.

9.44 am

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) on securing this debate. I have applied for a similar debate twice, but clearly I do not have the touch of a former Chancellor in the Westminster Hall lottery.

This is a very serious issue. The community infrastructure levy is meant to be simple: developers contribute and that money is used to fund the infrastructure that communities need. That is the principle, and that is the promise, but in parts of my constituency that promise is being broken. The regulations are clear that CIL is intended to support growth through infrastructure, yet we see millions of pounds collected and sitting idle, with little evidence of delivery. The rules exist but the action does not follow.

In Waverley where, as we have heard, CIL rates are among the highest in the country, substantial sums are being collected and left unspent—£30 million when we last checked at the beginning of the year. That alone undermines public trust, but the reality is worse than that. The money does not simply sit there; it accrues interest—£125,000 a month in Waverley's case. That interest is not ringfenced for infrastructure; it is absorbed into the general council spending. It is equivalent to 10% of council tax in Waverley's case. Residents are told that the money is for community facilities when in reality it is sitting in accounts, quietly supporting day-to-day council spending.

At the same time, inflation is eating away at the value of the original CIL pot, so when the council does eventually spend it, it delivers less than it should. Communities lose twice: the infrastructure does not arrive and the money set aside to fund it is steadily diminished.

Worse still, the system is being misapplied. Of course, it is right that developers should contribute, but individual homeowners making changes to their own properties were never intended targets of the regime. Pursuing them aggressively, as Waverley borough council does, is not just heavy-handed; it is plain wrong. Let us call it what it is: a cash grab.

CIL may be a national framework, but it is administered locally. The contrast within my constituency could not be starker. In East Hampshire, charging rates outside the regeneration zone in Whitehill and Bordon range from £95.94 to £265.68 per square metre. Even with a manual exemption system, the council actively supports residents, contacting them repeatedly by letter, email and phone to make them aware of exemptions, guiding them through the process and clearly warning them of the consequences of failing to submit the correct forms. That is what good administration looks like.

Let us compare that approach with that taken by the Liberal Democrat-run Waverley borough council. There, the CIL rates charged to affected homeowners are among the highest in the country. In Farnham, they stand at £547.17 per square metre, rising to just under £570 per square metre in Haslemere and the surrounding villages.

With those high rates comes a very different approach. I have been contacted by a number of constituents who together face CIL liabilities of nearly £1 million. They are not developers; they are ordinary residents who feel blindsided, misled and, in some cases, harassed. They are being charged for exemptions they were never supposed to pay. That is not administration. That is extraction.

The response from the Liberal Democrat leadership, supported for too long by the Farnham residents group, has been one of inertia and, frankly, contempt. Instead of being helped to navigate a complex system, residents have been left in the dark and presented with life-changing bills. This is not fairness; it is the politics of envy in action, and my constituents are paying the price.

Let me give some examples. One constituent who lives on the Surrey-Hampshire border has an East Hampshire postcode but her property falls within Waverley. She was hit with a £48,000 charge, which has now risen with interest to £60,000. In Haslemere, another constituent received a £94,000 charge because an agent failed to submit the correct forms. He was forced to put his home on the market, with the only alternative to divert the majority of his pension to pay the bill.

In Lower Bourne, a couple were issued with a £54,000 charge two days before Christmas in 2024. That led to delays and additional restart costs of between £15,000 and £20,000. Also in the Bourne, a resident faces a charge of £150,000. In Moor Park, another faces a charge of close to £100,000, triggered by a mid-project planning amendment.

Even minor administrative issues are treated with zero flexibility. A Farnham resident now faces a £25,000 charge, along with £5,000 in legal costs, following a change-of-use application for a granny annexe. These are not speculative, rapacious developers; they are people improving their homes, supporting their families and planning for their futures. The human cost is real and growing.

As has been pointed out, last year my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash and I met the Minister to discuss these issues. At the time, he appeared sympathetic, so I ask him today: what progress has been made? At that meeting, we urged the Minister to issue clear guidance to local authorities to prevent further harm while the regulations were reviewed. Unfortunately, that idea was not taken forward. I understand the concern about overreach, but what we are seeing now is not restraint; it is injustice.

I support my right hon. Friend's proposed solutions. With that in mind, I ask the Minister three fairly straightforward questions. First, what progress has been made on reforming the CIL regulations? Secondly, will he issue clear guidance to ensure that councils do not exploit the rules to the detriment of ordinary homeowners? Thirdly, will those who have been wrongly charged be refunded? Under the current system, once development has commenced, there is effectively no right to appeal. It is a rigid and unforgiving mechanism. Most councils choose not to wield it in this way, but Waverley borough council has.

The spirit of the law is being ignored, and the balance has been lost. My constituents are being treated not as residents to be supported, but as revenue to be extracted. This is not what the levy was designed to do. It was meant to build stronger communities, not penalise them. The law may permit what is happening, but it was never intended to enable it. It is time we put that right.

9.51 am

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Turner. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) on bringing this important and overdue consideration of CIL to Westminster Hall.

We have heard some powerful contributions, and it is clear that there is a widespread and serious problem. Families are facing bills of £40,000 to £70,000—in some cases over £200,000—for what often amounts to a missing form. That is an awful and unacceptable situation, and it can be life-ruining for those involved. The lack of appeal, the mounting interest and the threat of people losing their homes are all real injustices. The system is broken and needs to be changed.

The Liberal Democrats agree with much of the substance of what has been said, but I must be direct with the right hon. Gentleman: Waverley borough council's CIL charging schedule, which sets all the rules for the charging of CIL, all the forms and all the processes were put in place by the Conservative council administration a few years ago. The Liberal Democrat authority is doing its best to manage the system that was put in place by its predecessors. His party had ample time in government to fix the issue and, as we have heard, did not do so.

On the question of the discretion available to councils, the position is fairly clear. In December 2025, the High Court handed down a judgment in Luck *v.* Bracknell Forest borough council, and was unequivocal that once a valid CIL charge has fallen due, councils cannot lawfully cancel it. Councils find themselves with no

[Gideon Amos]

alternative. Depending on what lies behind the original mistake or inaccurate charge, councils simply cannot wipe away the charge, as the Court has determined.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): The CIL rules manage to be too inflexible and too vague at the same time. My constituent Ruth has had to pay a £38,000 CIL charge because unfortunately her husband did not submit the correct forms, as a result of what turned out to be Alzheimer's. As my hon. Friend said, any potential refund would be technically against the law, and the Government say they cannot intervene in the case because the correct rules have been followed. Does my hon. Friend agree that, while waiting for further legislation, the Minister needs as a matter of urgency to issue new national CIL guidelines and give councils clarity, consistency and the ability to correct injustices where appropriate?

Gideon Amos: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. He makes the excellent suggestion that not only should we have guidance, but the regulations themselves need to be changed, in many of the ways that other hon. Members have already mentioned.

Richard Foord: Does my hon. Friend recall that our hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon) tabled a new clause on CIL guidance for the debate on the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Bill, but unfortunately the Government did not accept it? Does my hon. Friend agree that we ought to look at other legislative opportunities to correct the wrongs?

Gideon Amos: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the Government should do that. There have been opportunities to do something about this; there are opportunities to change the law. He seems to have read the later part of my speech, and is quite right to mention our hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Mr Dillon), who not only made that point in respect of that Bill but brought it to the attention of the Select Committee last year. Liberal Democrats in Parliament have been trying to get resolution and a change in the rules.

In Waverley, the council has gone further than the law requires. It has set up a discretionary review process, opening a few weeks from now in June, for householders who believe they have been wrongly charged. That is the right thing to do, acting within the limits of what the law allows it to do. But the council can only act up to and within the bounds of the law, which is rigid.

Gregory Stafford: Before the hon. Member moves on, I should correct what he said: CIL was introduced in Waverley in 2019, and the Liberal Democrats took over the council one month later. The idea that the Conservatives brought it in is utter nonsense. The Liberal Democrats have now had seven years to try to fix it, and they have not. I ask the hon. Member to use his influence on his fellow Liberal Democrats to encourage them to operate a system far more like those in other parts of the country that we heard about from my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt), which operate with more flexibility.

Gideon Amos: The amount of flexibility that can be exercised depends on the nature of the error in the process that is being discussed, so not every council can operate the same redress in the same situation. The hon. Gentleman confirms that it was a Conservative administration that drew up the CIL charging schedule, the forms and all the processes that underlie and guide—in fact, not just guide but narrowly dictate—how the council exercises control over CIL. Where the hon. Gentleman is right is that the rules need to change. The best way to change them would be to change the regulations in this place.

That brings me to the Minister and the Government. The Minister has said, including when my hon. Friend the Member for Newbury raised the issue, that CIL was never intended to be applied in this way, and I believe he is right. He has named the Liberal Democrat authority in West Berkshire as a good example of exercising discretion where the law allows that to be done, but naming good examples is not enough, and we need to do more.

We need three things from the Government on this issue, and we need them in this Parliament. We need a statutory definition of what constitutes a minor administrative error, so that homeowners are not penalised by tens of thousands of pounds for a missed form. We need a statutory right of appeal against CIL charges, with clear limits for resolution, and a clear lawful basis on which councils can waive or refund charges in cases of genuine homeowner error. Currently, that option can be exercised only in certain cases, depending on the nature of the error involved. I am grateful that the Minister has indicated in previous discussions that the Government will act, but we need to see action.

While on the subject of CIL, we should be honest about the wider problem. All the Members who have spoken—I think they have all been hon. Gentlemen—were right that it is necessary to fund infrastructure, so the rationale behind CIL is worth while. As the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) pointed out, the CIL funds do need to be spent on delivering infrastructure.

The levy is a flat rate per square metre and bears no relation to the level of the uplift in land value before and after planning permission is granted. I confess that back in the 2000s when the measure was being put forward, I was part of a lively debate with bodies such as the British Property Federation, arguing that the levy should relate to the level of land value uplift. In some parts of the country, where we have clear viability challenges, there is very little land value uplift. The same level is charged as on a site with a massive land level uplift, where there is no viability problem. The state is missing out on land value uplift in places and the CIL is affecting viability in other places. We would suggest that the Government move towards a levy that relates to the land value increase that the landowner is gaining. That is necessary to fund schools, surgeries, GPs, roads, and all the rest of it.

The Minister is reportedly looking at the levy again; I urge him to be ambitious and make the changes we are arguing for. Patching the exemption rules is necessary, but it is not sufficient. The injustice that constituents are facing is real—we agree on that—but the schedule put in place by previous parties is what has guided Waverley's actions. The council is doing what it lawfully can to address the issue, but the Government need to do the rest.

10 am

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner, and to take part in this debate about the impact of the community infrastructure levy on private homeowners. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) for securing the debate; he has campaigned on this topic diligently and relentlessly alongside his neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford). I am sure those in the Chamber will agree that both of them have made powerful and persuasive speeches this morning.

The community infrastructure levy—more commonly abbreviated to CIL—is clearly not being enforced reliably, consistently or appropriately enough. What should be, and was introduced as, a sensible alternative or addition to section 106 payments has become, for many homeowners, a financial burden far beyond their wildest nightmares. CIL was specifically designed to be a levy on developers in mitigation of the impact of new developments to ensure that they contribute to local infrastructure. It was designed with safeguards, such as the fact that the levy can apply only in areas where a local authority has consulted on and approved a charging schedule that sets out the levy rates, and published that on its website.

The rates were to be decided by the local authority to ensure an added democratic oversight to the whole process. Moreover, and perhaps most importantly, CIL was established with sensible exemptions—at least on paper. Primarily, it was meant to be the case that only new developments that create net additional floor space of 100 square metres or more, or create a new dwelling, are potentially liable for the levy. That should have meant that most residential annexes and extensions, house or flats built by self-builders, local authority or housing association-provided affordable housing and charity developments are exempt.

Most importantly in the context of this morning's debate, if a householder development is over 100 square metres, an exemption can still be secured if it is applied for, but that is not a straightforward process. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash said in his opening speech, it is a rather onerous and complicated process of submitting myriad forms against tight deadlines before any building work can start.

Many people are caught out, having filled out the forms incorrectly or late. In many cases, homeowners were not even aware of the existence of CIL until it was too late. Even in the case of an entirely innocent mistake where council determines an application to be retrospective, the householder will become liable for CIL. The CIL Regulations 2010, which were created under the Planning Act 2008, fail to adequately safeguard those exemptions and have therefore not properly protected homeowners from exorbitant bills from local authorities failing to properly discharge the collection of the levy.

It is important to note that this is not happening everywhere. Around 200 councils operate CIL. As has been acknowledged in earlier speeches, some take a pragmatic, common sense and humane approach to its application. Others, however, demonstrably do not, and have followed the legislation to the letter without any regard for its overriding intention. That prompts the question: if some councils can adopt the regulations more flexibly, why cannot others?

The Sunday Times has reported cases involving large sums of money being charged to residents in Surrey, Sevenoaks, London, Shropshire, Horsham, Bracknell Forest, Basingstoke, Chester and East Sussex. The Government have not issued any official guidance to local planning authorities on the enforcement decisions on CIL charges that have previously been levied on householder developers. We have heard powerful and devastating examples from my hon. and right hon. Friends here today: the details of the homeowners often improving their greatest and proudest assets—their homes—and finding themselves with a bill for life-changing amounts of money that they were never told they were at risk of incurring.

That is a deeply troubling scenario to play out in our local areas, and it is made worse when we consider that in some cases the residents in question found themselves not only facing financial ruin but doing so with no right of appeal against the charge. This has led to people handing over their life savings or even their pensions, funding their debt through huge amounts borrowed from friends, family or sometimes unscrupulous lenders, remortgaging their homes or, in some of the most shocking cases, selling their homes to pay off the local authority, and finding themselves with nowhere to live and nowhere to go.

Let me be clear: the Opposition are not saying the original intention was wrong, nor are we saying that this situation has come about by deliberate design, because it is important that local infrastructure is not only protected from the strain of increasing housing stock, but, vitally, upgraded to match new levels of demand. However, in too many cases, CIL is simply not working that way.

Even beyond the heinous examples shared today, residents who are exempt from CIL but live in an area where it is being levied are not seeing its benefits. According to research carried out by the Home Builders Federation, that is because local authorities in England and Wales are currently sitting on an accumulative total of around £2 billion in unspent CIL money. These deposits are earning the local authorities in question millions of pounds of interest, which they are using to support their revenue budgets.

The closest alternative, section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, is not much better. It allows local authorities to secure investment in central infrastructure arising from development, similar to but not exactly the same as CIL. Based on another piece of research from the HBF, across England more than £1.5 billion of section 106 contributions are made each year towards funding, facilities and services.

However, according to the Urban Mobility Partnership, £5.3 billion of those annual contributions remain unspent in the accounts of local authorities in England and Wales. Even when they are spent, the HBF has shown that last summer local authorities reported a 20% rise in section 106 negotiation timelines, with 35% of all section 106 agreements taking more than 12 months to finalise and more than a third of councils having an average timeframe of more than 500 days.

It is clear that our systems for supporting infrastructure in our local communities are failing private homeowners on two counts: first, and most shockingly, they are landing frighteningly large Bills on the doorsteps of unsuspecting homeowners who are seeking only to improve

[Gareth Bacon]

the homes that they have worked hard to buy, sustain and improve; and secondly, the benefits of the payments are not being felt by the local community.

The Minister is a decent man, and I know he shares my concerns about this issue. He has said before that he

"recognises that procedural requirements relating to exemptions for housebuilder applications under the 2010 CIL regulations have had financial consequences for some homeowners."

He further stated that

"a series of households across the country have been very badly hit by this. It is very clear to us that the CIL regulations in question are not intended to operate in this way. We are giving very serious consideration to amending them to ensure that no one else is affected in this manner."

I do not doubt his sincerity.

The Government must address those points and do so quickly. Perhaps the Minister could commit today to finding much needed time in the next parliamentary session to solve this crisis, back homeowners and undo this regulatory mess. Would he be prepared to put a timeframe on that today? It is vital that more is done to help homeowners facing these bills and to ensure that funds find their way into the beneficial causes in our local communities, and for the Government to ensure that these outcomes are realised quickly.

10.8 am

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Turner. I warmly congratulate the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) on securing this important debate, and I commend him on his thoughtful opening remarks and the determination with which he sought redress for about 50 families in his own constituency and families affected across the rest of the country.

I thank the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) for his well-argued contribution and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), for his remarks. I am also grateful to the CIL Injustice Group for helping to ensure this issue gets the national recognition it deserves and bringing the cases in question to our attention.

At the outset, as the shadow Minister just mentioned, I want to stress that the Government appreciate fully that noncompliance with procedural requirements relating to exemptions for household applications under the Community Infrastructure Levy Regulations 2010 have had financial consequences for some owners. In a number of cases, those financial consequences have been extremely severe.

The Government recognise and take extremely seriously the concerns that have been raised about CIL liabilities applying to householder and self-build developments. We have been giving very serious consideration to the issue over many months. I have welcomed the engagement I have had with the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash and the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon. I am pleased to have the opportunity to set out the Government's proposed intentions in relation to it. As the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash was able to secure a 90-minute debate, I have the time I need to address all his points.

Hon. Members will appreciate that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on specific cases, nor on the approach taken by individual local planning authorities to those cases and the particular facts and circumstances that applied. I appreciate that that is somewhat frustrating, but I am afraid that it is the Government's position. It remains the case that local planning authorities are ultimately responsible and accountable for their own decisions on charging and enforcement of CIL. The Government none the less expect, as I have reiterated on numerous occasions, charging authorities to consider each case very carefully and in accordance with their legal obligations.

Hon. Members will forgive me if I provide a brief overview of the CIL system, but I think it is important in the context of the debate. The CIL legislative framework was introduced through the Planning Act 2008 and subsequent regulations were made under those powers in 2010. It is a local charge that local planning authorities can levy on new development in their area to help fund the infrastructure needed to support development of their area.

CIL receipts can be used to fund a wide range of infrastructure across the charging authority's area. That includes transport schemes, education and health and social care facilities, blue light infrastructure, flood defences, green spaces and other leisure facilities. More than half of local planning authorities in England charge CIL, and the Government are committed to strengthening further and improving the system. It supports development by funding the provision, improvement, replacement, operation or maintenance of infrastructure, which brings significant benefits for local communities.

Turning to the legislative context, CIL is intended to be a clear and transparent system providing certainty to developers about what kinds of development are liable to pay the rates that will apply and when payment is due. Before charging CIL, a local planning authority must consult on a draft charging schedule, which sets out the authority's proposed local set levy rates. In answer to the point made by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos), we expect that to take into account issues such as viability. The charging schedule must then undergo independent examination in public. It must be formally adopted by the local authority and published on its website.

In addition to the procedures that must be followed before an authority can charge CIL, the legislation sets out what steps must be taken to collect CIL payments. After the grant of planning permission, the CIL charging authority, more often than not the local planning authority, must issue a CIL liability notice as soon as practical, which sets out the CIL liability for the proposed development. A developer must normally pay the CIL liability within 60 days of commencement of development or within the terms of the charging authority's published instalments policy.

Charging authorities set their own levy rates, which undergo public consultation and independent examination. The levy rates are set out in charging schedules, which are published on the relevant authority's website. Authorities can specify some types of development as being subject to a zero levy rate. Further to that, development of less than 100 square metres will not be liable for CIL unless the development consists of one or more dwelling.

Other types of development can also be subject to a specified exemption or relief from CIL. That includes social housing and charitable development.

The CIL regulations were amended in 2014 under the coalition Government to introduce express exemptions for individuals who build their own homes, undertake extensions of more than 100 square metres to their existing homes, or construct a residential annexe within the grounds of their homes. To secure those exemptions, the regulations made in 2014 require that applicants must apply to the relevant CIL charging authority and receive confirmation that the exemption has been granted before development commences. That is to ensure that both the householder and the local authority are clear about any CIL liability or exemption granted before commencement of the build. That is necessary because, once commencement of development occurs, the levy becomes payable in accordance with the levy payment requirements.

The CIL regulations were designed to provide transparency, certainty and consistency for local planning authorities and developers. The procedural requirements are intended to secure those aims. As is typical for levy or tax regimes, they require that any exemption from payment is claimed through a formal application in good time. This approach helps to provide clarity on the CIL liability prior to the commencement of development, and guards against abuse by those who might seek to game the system or by those who are not genuine applicants—in this case, self-builders and residential developers.

Turning to the matter at hand, however, the Government have become increasingly aware that, in some cases, that balance has not always been achieved in practice. Therefore, it is right that we pause, reflect and consider whether regulatory changes are needed.

To obtain an exemption, a householder must first assume liability for CIL. The next stage is to formally apply to the CIL-charging authority for an exemption. Both processes require the submission of forms prescribed by the Secretary of State that are available on the planning portal. The developer must wait to be notified by the CIL-charging authority of its decision on the exemption claim before development can commence.

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government publishes comprehensive guidance on CIL, which is available on the gov.uk website. This guidance also refers to the relevant forms that must be completed. Apart from those who are building residential extensions, developers are required to serve a commencement notice to the charging authority; again, this must occur prior to commencement of development. This is for good reason—to ensure that the charging authority is aware of when the building is to commence, because that triggers the payment of the levy.

As hon. Members have highlighted, failure to complete the necessary processes before works commence on a site has resulted in some homeowners and self-builders losing their eligibility for an exemption. In such cases, the full CIL charge has been imposed. Sometimes, it has been payable immediately, with late payment interest and surcharges also applied, as was mentioned earlier.

The Government appreciate that compliance with the process requirements of CIL can appear complex, particularly for developers who might not otherwise be involved in planning and development on a regular basis, or who do not have professional builders or advisers involved in the process. A householder developer might not be aware of their CIL liability until after planning permission stage, when a levy liability notice is issued by the authority. They might not fully appreciate the consequences that arise from commencing their development between permission being granted and commencement taking place.

Furthermore, the nature of the regulations means that developments that receive retrospective planning permission under section 73A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 cannot benefit from an exemption because, in planning terms, this is the grant of a new planning permission. A section 73A permission is treated as having commenced when that permission is granted. As a result, any exemption previously obtained does not carry over and it is not possible to comply with the procedural requirement of applying for an exemption before commencement.

I want to make it clear that local planning authorities are operating within a prescribed statutory framework. Many authorities administer CIL exemptions carefully and conscientiously, often supporting householders through what can seem to be a complex process. That said, we have identified an important opportunity to provide greater clarity and flexibility for applicants and charging authorities.

Let me set out the next steps. Having considered the concerns that have been raised with me—primarily by the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash, but also by others, including the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon, and my hon. Friend the Member for Dagenham and Rainham (Margaret Mullane)—I am pleased to confirm today that the Government intend to consult on proposals to amend the CIL regulations, in order to improve the process for obtaining householder development and self-build exemptions in the future.

Through the forthcoming consultation, the Government will put forward proposals aimed at improving outcomes for householders and self-builders, while safeguarding the integrity of the CIL system and ensuring that local planning authorities can properly administer, scrutinise and enforce that system. We want to ensure that in the future, the system minimises the opportunity for procedural errors and that, when errors are made, it does not impose disproportionate penalties. We also want to prevent homeowners and self-builders from incurring significant and unexpected CIL charges, which, as we have heard today, can have significant consequences for individuals and their families.

We are also mindful of the need to ensure that any revised process continues to help local planning authorities to properly administer CIL in an effective way and to ensure that CIL liabilities are discharged appropriately. After all, as has rightly been noted today, CIL remains a vital system to support the development of an area by funding essential local infrastructure.

I appreciate that hon. Members will want to engage carefully with the detail of these proposals once they are published. The Government aim to publish a consultation on the proposals as soon as possible. Although I am loath to give a specific date, as Ministers always are, I anticipate being able to do so before the summer recess.

[Matthew Pennycook]

Before I conclude, I will briefly address what I know is probably the biggest concern that exists, which is the issue of retrospectivity. I recognise that many hon. Members who have spoken today will be concerned not only about what we do in future to amend the regulations, but about how proposals will help constituents who have already incurred a CIL charge as a result of non-compliance with procedural requirements for securing an exemption, arising from the way the regulations were framed in 2014. I am afraid I have to repeat what I said earlier: I cannot comment on individual cases and facts that are not known to me, nor on the approach taken by specific charging authorities, but I want to reassure hon. Members here today that we take such concerns very seriously. They are actively informing our work to reform the system going forward.

The regulations in question have been in force for more than a decade and there will inevitably be a significant amount of variation between cases. There are limits on what the CIL legislative framework can do in such a context, but I remain committed to addressing those concerns in a revised system going forward, and I am more than happy, as I have been striving to do over recent months, to keep hon. Members with an interest in this issue and whose constituents are affected, fully updated. It is certainly not the case that when it comes to those already affected we intend to do nothing.

I look forward to updating the House in due course in respect of the proposed steps I have set out today and in respect of the consultation and when hon. Members will have a chance to fully engage. I look forward to receiving feedback on the forthcoming proposals and debating the amending regulations before they are made. I thank hon. Members again for speaking up for their constituents and their interest in this extremely important issue.

Karl Turner (in the Chair): I call Sir Jeremy to wind up—you may take your time.

10.21 am

Sir Jeremy Hunt: That is quite an unusual thing to be told by the Chair, Mr Turner. I thank you for chairing this important debate and I thank all hon. Members present for some excellent contributions. I particularly want to thank my neighbour and hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) for his tenacious campaigning on this issue on behalf of my former constituents in Farnham and Haslemere. He made an excellent contribution. I also want to thank the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), who typically gave a very thoughtful and clear exposition of the issues we face. I also thank hon. Members from other parties who have spoken and intervened.

Before I come on to the Minister's comments, I want to comment on what was said by the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos), because it was directly about my own local authority. He was right to say that a council cannot lawfully cancel a charge after it has become liable, but that does beg the question why there have been countless injustices in some councils, but not in others, and that is because there has been an element of choice in the way local authorities have decided to go about things.

To make the point that I am not being party political here, Lib Dem West Berkshire has chosen to be reasonable, do the right thing and make sure there is justice for people unfairly caught in the CIL trap, but Lib Dem Waverley has not. It has been in power for seven years and Waverley residents, a number of whom are watching this debate, have suffered badly.

Gideon Amos: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that residents need redress. I will simply place on the record again that the nature of the errors or mistakes in charging can be different from one authority to another, which was very much the case with West Berkshire, where the nature of the charges being made wrongly was a different procedural error and therefore a different remedy could be applied. I hope that, in the spirit of being non-tribal with which he began this debate, he will accept that that is actually a fact.

Sir Jeremy Hunt: I absolutely accept that. Again, in that spirit of being non-tribal, the hon. Gentleman will know the number of times that his party and other parties have talked about the 14 years in which we had opportunities to fix things that we did not fix, so he will appreciate that the Liberal Democrats in Waverley have had seven years to fix the issue and have failed to do so. That is why so many people from Waverley are looking at this debate carefully. But he is correct to say that all councils have to operate within the law.

I want to move on to the Minister's comments. First, I thank him for the interest that he has shown right from the start. I want to put on the record that the number of people affected is relatively small in the grander scheme of things, and it would have been easy for the Minister to decide there were other priorities. It is about 100 families—maybe a bit more, maybe a bit less—so the Minister could easily have decided to focus on other areas, but he has not. He has spent an enormous amount of time trying to address this. That is the right and proper thing for a Minister in a democracy to do; if there is an injustice that even affects one person, it is incredibly important that Ministers take note, and he has really done that.

The Minister also clarified the problems with the 2014 exemptions introduced by the coalition Government, which were designed to ensure that householders were not caught up in these regulations, but did so through such a bureaucratic and cumbersome process that many inadvertently have been. The issue of particular complexity relates to householders' immediate liability from the moment that building starts, which seems entirely reasonable for a professional developer, but entirely unreasonable for a homeowner who may not be aware of that element of the law.

It is extremely welcome that the Government are going to consult on the CIL regulations. As a former Government Minister, I feel a tremendous amount of frustration and pain at the need for endless consultations. They can be of value, but they also slow things down. I recognise that the Minister wants to do this fast—I did groan when he said, "as soon as possible," but then when he said, "before the summer break," I took some encouragement. I think this is something that is moving forward.

In the options that the Minister consults on—he cannot respond to this, but it is something to take away—could we find a way of removing homeowners from CIL

liability altogether? That way we move away from a system that is purely based on the square meterage of a development, to one based on the type of person doing the development. Could we change the regulations so that homeowners can at least always apply for an exemption retrospectively if an error has been made? Not being able to do so offends natural justice, and was an unintended consequence of the complexity of the original regulations.

I am grateful to the Minister for confronting head-on the fact that for many people, this is about getting justice for something that has happened, not ensuring that injustice does not continue to happen. He has been very open with me about the legal complexities involved, and I know from my time as Health Secretary how difficult it is to reopen retrospective cases. The Minister's Department has enormous influence over local authorities, however, not least through setting their grants, so if the Department chose, it could find a way to put councils under pressure, where there are outstanding CIL cases and injustice, so that those cases get solved.

I recognise that what I ask is not easy, but it is absolutely the case that local councils are extremely dependent on the Minister's Department for large chunks of their financing. I ask him to consider what levers he has at his disposal to make this happen, while at the same time thanking him for his ongoing interest and determination to address the issue. The final thing I will say is that I know someone in the Public Gallery got up at 4 am to attend this debate. I thank that person and all the CIL Injustice Group for their tenacious campaigning to try to right a truly awful wrong.

Karl Turner (in the Chair): Thank you, Sir Jeremy. The debate has also been very instructive to me.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of the Community Infrastructure Levy on private homeowners.

10.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Agriculture: Government Support

11 am

Karl Turner (in the Chair): Richard Foord will move the motion. I will then call the Minster to respond. I remind Members that they may make a speech only with the prior permission of the Member in charge of the debate and the Minister. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up, as is the convention for a 30-minute debate.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for agriculture.

It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Mr Turner. It is good to have the Minister in her place. I hope she will forgive me if I take a direct tone. It was a direct tone that members of the National Farmers' Union in my area of Honiton and Sidmouth took with me when we met last Friday in Devon.

Food security is fundamental to our national resilience. At a time of global instability, farming underpins the rural economy, although we tend to take the produce for granted.

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): Farmers across Wiltshire, especially in my constituency of Chippenham, say that Government support is not working. They are disappointed that Labour is compounding the damage left by the Conservatives, with an underspend of millions in the farming budget. Shockingly, the Government's own statistics say that in 2023-24, between 17% and 29% of farming families did not turn a profit.

Karl Turner (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that interventions should be short.

Sarah Gibson: Absolutely. I just wanted to ensure that my colleague agreed with me that we would like the Minister to consider farming.

Richard Foord: My hon. Friend rightly mentioned farming profitability. Minette Batters, the former president of the NFU, conducted a review of farming profitability in December and came up with more than 50 recommendations. It would be interesting to hear from the Minister the Government's reflections and progress on fulfilling some of those.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing this debate. On profitability, the Treasury has treated agriculture support as a discretionary expense. Does he agree that we need an increased, ringfenced, multi-annual farm support budget that is fully inflation-proof, taking into account the fact that otherwise we cannot expect our farmers to meet world-leading animal welfare standards?

Richard Foord: The hon. Member is right to talk of inflation-proof, because we have seen costs skyrocket in recent months. Fuel and fertiliser costs have shot up, while the price of feed for livestock is set to follow. Farmers are facing volatile international markets, while being told constantly that support is under review or "being monitored".

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I agree with my hon. Friend about sustainability. We are in a cost of living crisis, but also a cost of producing food crisis. It took the Government seven weeks to respond to my written question about fertiliser costs. Does he agree that the Government need to be much more on the front foot on these issues?

Richard Foord: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Farming is not just another sector; it is critical national infrastructure, just like power stations and data centres. Too often, it is an afterthought—under-supported, neglected and left exposed to global shocks.

I want to focus my remarks on international trade, tax and planning, drawing on the conversation I had with Devon farmers last Friday. At a time when uncertainty on the international stage continues, food and farming policy should be about resilience. Instead, the Government preside over continued dependence on imports, higher costs and a system of support that is unpredictable and bureaucratic. Farmers are being asked to bear the brunt of shocks at a time when many of them are struggling to make ends meet.

Let us begin by talking about trade. The UK is far from self-sufficient in food. We import about 40% of the food we eat, and an astonishing 78% of our fruit and veg. Food security is measured not only by the produce on supermarket shelves; it is also about the inputs that farmers require to grow the food.

As was mentioned earlier, fertiliser is increasing in price, such that some of the farmers I spoke with last week are seeing an additional £60,000 cost to their farming businesses this year in anticipation of next, with fertiliser prices having gone up that much. That is because of the products that fertiliser is made up of. It requires nitrogen, phosphorus and ammonia, some of which are sorely lacking in the UK. We are only 40% self-sufficient in fertiliser requirements.

Between a quarter and a third of the raw materials required for fertiliser would typically pass through the strait of Hormuz. We are heavily dependent on imported ammonia. Only 45% comes from places other than Algeria; we are heavily dependent on north Africa for ammonia. This is not resilience. This is vulnerability in an uncertain world.

Global instability over the last few years, from Ukraine to the middle east, has already pushed fertiliser prices significantly higher. Tom Bradshaw, president of the National Farmers Union, has warned that farmers are having to shoulder increased costs of inputs. Too often, they are only made aware of the price that they might have to pay for them once they arrive at the farm gate, such is the volatility of the market right now.

Red diesel tells another concerning story. Prices of red diesel in recent months have doubled, rising from 69p a litre at the start of the middle east conflict, to well over £1.23 a litre on 7 April. Responding to questions on this in recent weeks, both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have stated that the situation is "under review" or "being monitored" by the Competition and Markets Authority. For many farmers, fuel and fertiliser prices have soared simultaneously, hitting their finances incredibly hard across the board, so monitoring does not really help.

We Liberal Democrats are calling for an emergency fuel duty cut that would bring down the cost of red diesel used by UK farmers by around £5 million over the next three months, to remedy the rising cost.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing this debate. I am concerned about the mental health of farmers. There is about one suicide a week among UK farmers. Does he agree that we must do everything we can to support the mental health of our farmers?

Richard Foord: Absolutely. Farming can be a very lonely business, and that does not need to be compounded with the stress of farm profitability, or the lack thereof.

Looming over all this are the Government's efforts to secure a comprehensive agreement with the European Union on exports. We encourage the Government to conclude an agreement on sanitary and phytosanitary standards, but they need to do so in a way that does result in a cliff edge. We heard recently from the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), that such a cliff edge would be very harmful for farmers if there is very little notice.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Rural crime, particularly equipment theft, continues to cost our farmers huge sums. Will my hon. Friend join me in urging the Government to do more?

Richard Foord: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to draw attention to the plight of farmers facing crime. Some police forces do not consider this issue nearly enough. I am glad that in Devon and Cornwall we have a force that is quite alert to rural crime and has a particular focus on it, but I know that in other constituencies and other constabularies, sufficient attention is not paid to rural crime.

On trade, the Liberal Democrats believe that we need a comprehensive agreement with the European Union that guarantees enhanced access for UK food and animal products to the European single market, with minimal needs for checks or documentation.

The second area I want to focus on is the balance of tax and incentives for the farming industry. Government policy is undermining the viability of many of our family farms. Farmers are not seeking to get rich; they dedicate their lives to the intense labour required to manage their farms, and ask for some stability in return—predictable costs, fair taxes and support systems that reward their productivity.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that the 4,000 farmers in England who farm on common land, mostly in the uplands, are not able to get any funding at all because the Rural Payments Agency software prevents applications? Does he agree that the Government should change their approach so that farmers in the uplands on common land can make those claims?

Richard Foord: If I were an uplands farmer represented by my hon. Friend, I would know that I had a fervent advocate in him. He is right to raise the issue of commoners; I spoke with one last Friday who said that the sustainable

farming incentive IT system has yet to be adapted for payments to people who farm on common land. I had the same experience with people who I represent in Luppitt on the Blackdown hills in Devon.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Many farmers are relying on SFI, but it closed to new applications in March and is yet to reopen, and there is no clarity about the future budget. Delays in payments to those who have agreements have caused significant concern to many of my constituents who have faced cash-flow issues. Does my hon. Friend agree that greater clarity must be provided to farmers on the future offer across various environmental schemes, as well as a commitment to improve the efficiency of payments?

Richard Foord: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for drawing attention to that issue. Last year, farmers were devastated by the overnight closure of the sustainable farming incentive, which came with no notice. I welcome the Secretary of State's pledge at the Oxford farming conference in January that there would be no further unexpected closures of that scheme, but I did not get the sense in my conversation last week that confidence has been restored fully since that overnight closure of SFI.

Small producers are disproportionately disadvantaged under the new SFI scheme. Payment caps raise serious issues about long-term farm profitability. The system appears not to have been designed around farmers and what they want, but rather around bureaucracy and administrative convenience. The Liberal Democrats would invest in agriculture, including an additional £1 billion a year to support sustainable, domestic food production, improving our skills, resilience and supply, rather than leaving our farmers at the mercy of global markets.

Thirdly, I would like to talk about planning concerns. As I understand it, there are delays in the planning systems across local authorities that are preventing farmers from doing the right thing. Last week, I talked to one who had applied for a cover on a slurry store and was still waiting, eight months later, for a verdict on whether he could go ahead and make the modification.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): I was speaking to farmers in Winchester just two weeks ago, and planning is a huge issue, whether they want to put in a new slurry lagoon or repurpose a barn, with a wait of more than 18 months. The process is very opaque and there is no set timeline. It is impossible to make business decisions if no timeline is given as to when they might even be told when they will have to supply information to get the planning permission.

Richard Foord: My hon. Friend is right. From what I understand, there is a national shortage of planning officers, and many of them are stretched across a number of things; they might be looking at applications for big housing developments. Sometimes, farm improvements that are geared towards improving environmental practices are quite low down the list for some of those planning officers. I question whether we might have dedicated planning officers who specifically look at some of the applications from farms. That would make a huge difference by improving the contribution of farmers to the environment.

To recap, we are calling on the Government to reduce exposure to volatile global inputs by supporting domestic fertiliser production. We are calling for a tax policy that recognises that family farms need stability, rather than the Government adding to global shocks with one or two of their own. We need farm support schemes that are predictable, accessible and fair, alongside systems for planning developments that work towards following clear timetables, rather than deadlines that continue to slip.

Farmers are doing their best in very trying circumstances. They are adapting and innovating, and trying to produce food for all of us while under immense economic pressure. They do not need warm words from the Government—they do not need "monitoring". What they need now is a Government that are prepared to take action to match their rhetoric. I look forward to the Minister's response.

11.15 am

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Turner, for what I think is the first time in Westminster Hall. I congratulate the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord)—and his crew, I have to say, after that performance—on securing this debate. I thank all Members who have made contributions. We know that farming matters to every constituency because it not only supports rural jobs and communities but produces the food we rely on and underpins our national resilience.

I recognise the pressures many farm businesses face. Input costs can rise quickly and global markets, as we have seen recently, can shift overnight. That uncertainty makes it harder to plan, invest and employ, which is why the approach of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is both long term and practical: stable funding, and simpler, fairer schemes designed to make farming more resilient and sustainable in the future—sustainable both environmentally and financially.

I will first address fertiliser, because I appreciate it is the major input in an arable setting. It is a cost that is a real worry for farmers. Recent market volatility has seen a 40% increase in prices for some fertiliser products and DEFRA is monitoring the impact on agricultural supply chains. We have direct lines open with domestic fertiliser suppliers, commodity traders and farming stakeholders, including the National Farmers' Union—in fact, I have just been in a meeting with Tom Bradshaw. We all do our bit to meet as many of our farmers and their representatives as possible to know exactly what is going on where, so that it can inform our decision making.

Better information helps farmers make decisions that are up to date with the current situation, which is obviously in great flux. That is why we asked the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board to increase the frequency of fertiliser price reporting, and welcome its move to publish price data weekly, giving farmers more timely and transparent information. We also recently ran a survey to understand how the rise in fertiliser prices and supply issues are impacting our farmers and land managers on the ground. Responses are being reviewed alongside other industry intelligence to guide how we shape future support.

DEFRA's new nutrient management planning tool is supporting farmers by matching nutrients to crop and soil needs, enabling them to make the most of nutrient sources, reducing their reliance on artificial fertilisers.

[Dame Angela Eagle]

Over 500 farms have used this since it was launched. We are also consulting and gathering evidence to modernise fertiliser product regulations, improving future supply options and resilience.

The pressures imposed by events in the middle east only underline the importance of increasing the efficiency of fertiliser use. Whether through more effective use of technology or adoption of more sustainable farming practices, we can better equip our farmers and growers to produce food in a more resilient way. The Government stand ready to help farmers do just that, whether through our innovation funds and equipment grants, or our continued shift from area-based subsidy to environmental land management schemes.

Tim Farron: I want to press the Minister on the common land issue. She will be aware that the transition has made it very difficult. There are parcels of land in the uplands and the common land that are thousands of hectares, so I understand the problem. Has the Minister thought of having an offline system to allow commoners to bid for funds, so that they can maintain the beauty of our uplands and produce food?

Dame Angela Eagle: I certainly am well aware that the SFI that we have inherited is not particularly well suited to the uplands. That is why we are doing work with Hilary Cottam to see what we can do to provide a different method of support that is much more community based. I recognise the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises about common land, but I would want to see whether we can make some changes to the higher level schemes, which I think are probably more suited to supporting farmers in that kind of setting. Not everything, all the time, has to go into SFI. I am looking to see whether we can create a more coherent structure for upland farmers and also, obviously, commoners in that circumstance. I am quite happy to keep the hon. Gentleman in touch with how that is going. I am sure that, given that Hilary Cottam is doing some work in his own area, he will be at least as in touch with it as I am.

Fuel is another issue that was raised in the debate. Price spikes can feed straight into farm costs, particularly for those who rely on red diesel. Red diesel continues to benefit from an 80% discount, saving farmers almost £300 million a year. There is also a 5p fuel duty cut in place from March until September. Where concerns have been raised about price transparency, we have raised them with the Competition and Markets Authority, which is monitoring petrol and supply prices closely. Industry bodies have been clear with us that fuel production and imports are continuing across the UK as usual. The Government continue to monitor sales, deliveries and stock levels, and well-established contingency plans exist should they ever be required.

The hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth raised farming schemes and grants. I understand the pressure that the uncertainty we are now facing in the world because of what is happening in the middle east applies to farmers, coming as it does after the impacts of climate change-related extreme weather in recent years, which have damaged harvests. This Government will work with farmers to deliver long-term solutions to the risks of extreme wet and dry weather, and to increase profitability, because when farmers can run profitable businesses, it is good for the whole economy and vital for our food security.

Wendy Chamberlain: The Minister talks about profitability, but there is no doubt that the Government's failed family farm tax has had a huge impact. She also talks about building resilience for the future with schemes, but does she accept that we need next generation schemes to attract young people into the industry, because from a family perspective many of them are leaving?

Dame Angela Eagle: Entrance into the industry is a really important issue. Often, it is an issue of access to land to farm at all, and I am certainly thinking very carefully about what we might do with respect to that. If the hon. Lady has any insights from her own constituency, I am happy for her to share them with me, and we can see whether we can deal with the issue of how to get younger people into farming and get them some land to farm.

We have allocated a record £11.8 billion to sustainable farming and food production over this Parliament. Overall, farmers and land managers will benefit from an average of £2.3 billion a year through the farming and countryside programme. We are increasing investment in environmental land management schemes, rising towards £2 billion by 2028-29, because profitable farming depends on the fundamentals, which are healthy soils, clean water and resilient ecosystems.

We are also improving how support is delivered. I recognise some of the issues—

Adam Dance: On support, will the Minister give way?

Dame Angela Eagle: Let me finish my sentence. I recognise some of the issues that have been raised about the uncertainty around the schemes.

Adam Dance: Jack is a lad from my constituency with autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder and sensory issues, and he has a great ambition to work on a dairy farm. Will the Minister look into what she and colleagues can do to give support and confidence to farmers so that they can support passionate young people with special educational needs and disabilities, like Jack, into farming?

Dame Angela Eagle: It is really important that we try to give a younger generation of people the chances given by access to land so that they can farm. I certainly think that we have not had a look at farming education and the ways into the sector for a very long time. I would certainly like to be able to do that.

Sarah Gibson: On the subject of getting young people into farming, my local agricultural college tells me that when it tries to send students to help on farms, the farmers find it extremely difficult to find a use for them, because getting a licence to drive high-level agricultural equipment is so expensive that students from lower-income families are unable to get one. Therefore, when they arrive on the farms, there is not a lot they can do with them. Will the Minister consider looking at the cost to entry for people who do not have a background in farming?

Dame Angela Eagle: I think I have just said that that is precisely what I want to do. Again, if the hon. Member has any insights that she wishes to share, I am more than happy to hear them.

When I visited Harper Adams University recently, I noted that it now has a campus in an urban area. Consequently, people are likely to come across it in a way they were unlikely to come across that venerable old institution's original building, which of course it still inhabits. That extension of the university into an urban area is a good idea.

I can see that the hon. Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden) wants to intervene, so I will give way to her.

Caroline Voaden: I just wanted to make a brief intervention on the issue of entry into farming. Devon county council has several farms and it is very keen to use them as a way to get young people into farming, especially those who do not have a family farm of their own. It is quite worrying what might happen to those county farms if Devon county council is divided up in the local government reorganisation process. Is there is any way that they could be protected through the decimation of Devon, which might happen over the next year through LGR?

Dame Angela Eagle: I will not get into the decimation of Devon; I will leave that to the hon. Lady. I have clocked the existence of county farms. I think they are a good thing and I have sought some advice on what we can do to support them sensibly, because they are a way for people to get into farming that we should cherish.

I have taken a lot of interventions, so I will now press on and say a little about the future vision for farming, because supporting farmers is also about building more profitable businesses and stronger partnerships from farm to fork. We are doing that by modernising capital grants, which will be open to apply for from July, with £225 million available, which is 50% more than in 2025. These grants will help farmers to upgrade infrastructure and deliver practical improvements, including to hedgerows, water quality and natural flood management. This year, £120 million will be available in farming grants to boost productivity innovation, consisting of £70 million through the farming innovation programme and £50 million through the farming equipment and technology fund.

I also want to talk about the Batters review and its 57 recommendations. We have already announced that we will take forward a number of the review's recommendations, including the formation of a Farming and Food Partnership Board. Indeed, that board has already met and decided that horticulture will be the first agricultural sector to have a sector growth plan, which will be developed as part of the board's work. I agree with the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth that we need to consider what we can do make the growing of fruit and vegetables more resilient; he pointed out that that is the sector where we have the most difficulty in generating resilience. The Farming and Food Partnership Board is also looking at the poultry sector.

We will continue to develop our farming road map, which will be published later this year alongside our formal response to the rest of the recommendations of the Batters review. This road map will set the course for farming in England up to 2050, setting out how farming will evolve in response to changing markets, technologies and environmental pressures. In developing the road map, we have held workshops, meetings and listening sessions across the country, to ensure that it reflects what farmers need on the ground to plan for the future.

I think that this is the first time since the second world war that a Government have tried to set more of a Government direction for agriculture, so that we can work with the farming sector to ensure that we can increase resilience and give food security the proper priority it deserves. By definition, some of that work means that we have to look through the near-term pressures and problems that the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth has raised today. However, it is important strategically that we are able to do that.

I also want to respond to the concern raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley). The Government take the issue of mental health support for farmers very seriously. We are tripling the previous funding for mental health and wellbeing support for farmers, and a new fund, which overall will be worth £1.5 million over three years, will be introduced. We want this investment to help farmers to deal with the pressures and potential isolation that they face. It builds on our commitment to improve business resilience through the £30 million farmer collaboration fund, because we think that self-help and peer help are often the most important ways to get through to farmers.

That has been a very quick look around the system, Mr Turner, but I hope that it gives some idea of the work that DEFRA is doing for farming.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Written Statements

Wednesday 29 April 2026

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Energy Markets: Middle East Conflict

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): The Government are working tirelessly with international partners to find a permanent solution to the current middle east conflict, and are playing a leading role in the international effort to support the free flow of shipping through the strait of Hormuz. While this work continues, traffic through the strait remains severely restricted, and the impact of recent events will be felt across global markets for some time to come.

Over the last two months, the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North (Ed Miliband), and I have been in frequent contact with international partners, and the UK has acted alongside them to minimise disruption to energy markets, including contributing 14 million barrels of oil to the largest International Energy Agency stock release in history. I have engaged counterparts in Europe, including during a visit to Spain last week, and have just returned from Ukraine, whose energy sector the UK continues to support in the context of both ongoing Russian attacks and the wider international situation.

Alongside this international engagement, we are increasing domestic preparations to monitor and mitigate the potential knock-on impacts on families and businesses in the UK. The Prime Minister chaired a middle east response committee meeting yesterday to drive this work forward.

On energy bills, thanks to decisions we took in the Budget, the energy price cap fell by £117 a year at the start of this month, with savings locked in until the end of June. We also extended the £150 warm homes discount to around 6 million low-income households. At the start of this crisis, the Government took immediate action, announcing over £50 million of support for vulnerable heating oil customers particularly exposed to rising prices.

In line with the Government's industrial strategy, the Chancellor also announced an expansion of the British industrial competitiveness scheme, cutting bills for thousands of energy-intensive businesses. We will continue to monitor impacts on bills and stand up for families and businesses.

On petrol and diesel, we are engaging closely with industry to help keep costs down for drivers. The 5p fuel duty cut has been extended until September and the Competition and Markets Authority has put industry on notice that it is monitoring prices closely. Our fuel finder tool supports transparency by helping drivers identify the cheapest fuel locally, with over 90% of petrol stations registered. The CMA will prioritise enforcement action against retailers identified by the data aggregator who are not signing up or reporting prices as they should. In terms of supply, the AA and Fuels Industry UK are clear that production and imports are continuing as usual. The UKproduces more petrol than it uses, making it a net exporter. Supplies remain resilient, and stations continue to be well stocked.

Since the closure of the strait, we have been closely monitoring UK jet fuel stocks and working with airlines, airports, fuel suppliers and international counterparts. UK airlines typically buy fuel months in advance, and aviation fuel suppliers hold bunkered stocks. The UK imports jet fuel supplies from a range of countries not reliant on the strait, including the United States. Airlines UK has stated that UK airlines continue to operate normally and are not experiencing issues with jet fuel supply. The Government continue to work with partners to monitor and mitigate potential disruptions.

The Government continue to plan for a range of contingencies to increase flexibility on jet fuel supply. We have asked UK refineries to maximise jet fuel supply. Airport Co-ordination Ltd has updated its guidance to allow airlines to apply for slot alleviation, providing greater flexibility to plan flights. I encourage all passengers to check their rights before travelling, and in the first instance to contact their airline, travel agent or tour operator, where they have concerns. We have published a fact sheet on www.gov.uk that will be kept updated, alongside Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office travel advice.

We are determined to draw the right long-term lessons for the UK's energy security. Four years on from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, recent events have again highlighted the risks of exposure to volatile international fossil fuel markets. Last week I attended WindEurope, where I heard from the Spanish Prime Minister and others about how EU countries are responding by accelerating their transitions to clean energy.

In the UK, the Energy Secretary set out last Tuesday how we are going further and faster on our clean energy mission through three strands of direct action:

Firstly, accelerating delivery of clean, homegrown power that we control. In the first weeks of the war, we announced that we would bring forward the next renewables auction to July and speed ahead on new nuclear power. That work is being stepped up through a cross-Government sprint to unlock the potential for renewables on public land, alongside measures to deliver the grid infrastructure we need, including changes to land access rules and to the consenting process for networks.

Second, accelerating electrification across the economy. Technologies such as solar, batteries, heat pumps, and electric vehicles can cut bills and help shield households and businesses from international fossil fuel price shocks. The £15 billion warm homes plan is the largest public investment in home upgrades in British history and is being accelerated to support as many households as possible ahead of winter.

Third, taking clear action to reduce the extent to which gas prices set electricity prices, which can compound the impact of shocks like this. Plans are being brought forward to move legacy low-carbon generators, which provide about a third of the UK's power today, on to fixed-price arrangements. We have also announced that the electricity generator levy will increase from 45% to 55% and be extended beyond 2028.

Together, these measures will strengthen incentives to move on to fixed contracts and make funds available to support families and businesses with cost of living impacts.

The Government will continue to act to minimise the impact of events in the middle east on families and businesses and safeguard the UK's energy security, while learning the right long-term lessons for our country.

[HCWS1551]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Syria

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): I wanted to update the House on the situation in north-east Syria and the visit of the Syrian President to the UK on 31 March, given the interest expressed by Members of both Houses.

Presidential Visit

This was President Al-Sharaa's first visit to the UK, the first visit of any Syrian President since 2002, and his meetings with the Prime Minister and His Majesty the King cement a new era for the UK-Syria relationship. Given the breadth of UK interests in Syria, the President met a wide range of interlocuters including the Home Secretary, the Chief of Defence Staff, the Attorney General and leaders of UK businesses keen to invest in Syria. He and his delegation were also taken on a historic visit around the Houses of Parliament by myself and the Attorney General, to demonstrate the importance the UK places on democratic systems and the rule of law. Discussions focused on deepening co-operation across our shared priorities, including counter-terrorism, migration and growth, and on the importance of inclusion and transitional justice for peace and stability in Syria. In my meeting with the President and Foreign Minister I pressed our concerns on human rights and securing justice for all Syrians. The Attorney General also offered UK support on transitional justice and accountability for crimes committed during Syria's civil war and the actions of the brutal Assad regime.

It is right that the UK Government engage with Syria at the highest level, given the breadth of interests there from terrorism and migration, to regional security and human rights. Our overarching objective for Syria is stability, which is in the best interests of not only the UK, but the Syrian people and the wider region. We believe that supporting Syria's Government to achieve inclusive governance, political transition, and economic recovery is the only way to deliver that stability for the people of Syria and the wider region.

Situation in NES

Escalations at the start of the year in north-east Syria were cause for concern. Two days after my last written ministerial statement on Syria—[*Official Report*, 28 January 2026; Vol. 779, c. 39WS.]—the Syrian Government and Syrian Democratic Forces reached an agreement establishing a phased integration of north-east Syria into a single governance framework, including integrating military and civilian institutions. The UK welcomes this agreement and the initial progress made, including the agreed entry of Ministry of Interior Forces into SDF areas, the issuing of decrees by the Government enshrining protections for Kurdish rights, and the appointment of SDF-nominees into Government Ministry positions. During President Al-Sharaa's visit the Government pressed the importance of implementing the agreement in full and keeping momentum and progress alive, particularly in working through outstanding issues, including the management of internally displaced people camps and detention facilities, prisoner exchanges, the integration of women's units into the army and further Government appointments.

UK's approach to NES

The UK is interested in questions relating to the 30 January agreement and the integration of the north-east into Syria. I want to restate that in all of our engagement with Syrian Government, we have consistently advocated for an inclusive political transition and underlined the importance of protecting the rights of all Syrians, including the Kurdish community.

During the escalations, we continued to support the Kurdish communities, by acting rapidly to lead a swift and robust humanitarian response. Thanks to the strength of our relationships and aid partners in the north-east, the UK was the only international donor able to provide humanitarian support during the initial week of escalations. We immediately accessed our crisis reserves to provide critical medical care, protection services to vulnerable displaced women and girls, direct support and vital supplies for people affected by displacement, insecurity and freezing conditions. At the height of the violence, our medical partner International Medical Corps enabled the Kobane hospital to continue operating, providing care to critically injured people. So far we have provided over £9 million in support, one of the largest humanitarian responses in 2026. The UK was a leading advocate for the establishment of humanitarian corridors and we successfully lobbied the Syrian Government and SDF to open corridors which led to the successful delivery of much needed humanitarian assistance and supplies into Kobane, at a time when all access routes were closed.

Diplomatically, the UK played a role in containing the crisis, engaging leaders of both the SDF and the Syrian Government, alongside key international partners, to press for a ceasefire and a return to discussions. Since the fall of Assad, in conversations with the SDF, we were clear that a longer-term political agreement which protected Kurdish rights, while integrating civilian and military institutions, was in the best interests of the Kurdish community.

The UK also played an important role in multilateral forums, most recently on 18 March at the UN Security Council. I also attended the Global Coalition Against Daesh meeting in Riyadh in February, where members of the Coalition reaffirmed our shared commitment to defeating Daesh in Iraq and Syria. We remain concerned about the remaining IDP camps in north-east Syria, and the closure of Al-Hol camp. We continue to advocate for a role for the UN and other humanitarian actors in all camps, and provide funding to these partners to ensure their important work can continue. Since the conference, we have continued to engage the Syrian Government and international partners to address our shared national security risks, and look at areas for deeper co-operation on counter-terrorism and to ensure the enduring defeat of Daesh.

And finally, we have demonstrated our commitment to Kurdish communities through our UK engagement. I have regularly met parliamentary colleagues and Kurdish communities, both overseas and in the UK. Most recently, on 3 March, I hosted Kurdish community leaders, activists and academics to discuss the situation in north-east Syria, the 30 January agreement and their hopes for the future of Syria.

Conclusion

We have always been clear that Syria would face significant challenges during its political transition, but that a post-Assad Syria is in the UK's interests. I want to reassure the House that the UK will continue its long-standing commitment to support the Syrian people as the country seeks to rebuild and recover. We will continue to work with the Syrian Government, in support of Syria's stability and to protect UK national interests.

[HCWS1552]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Domestic Abuse Act 2021: Post-legislative Scrutiny

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Jess Phillips): The Government have today submitted a memorandum to the Home Affairs Committee and the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 Committee regarding post-legislative scrutiny of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021.

The Home Office has carried out the post-legislative scrutiny, working with key Government and operational stakeholders, devolved Administrations, the domestic abuse sector, and a range of victims' commissioners, including the Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales. The memorandum includes an assessment of how the Act has worked in practice and sets out its findings in a Command Paper to the Committees.

The memorandum has been laid before the House as a Command Paper (CP 1575) and published on www.gov.uk. Copies will also be available from the Vote Office.

[HCWS1548]

Terrorism Legislation Review

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): Jonathan Hall KC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, has prepared a report on the operation of the Terrorism Acts in 2024.

In accordance with section 36(5) of the Terrorism Act 2006, the report is today being laid before Parliament and copies will be available in the Vote Office. It will also be published on gov.uk.

I am grateful to Mr Hall KC for his report. I will carefully consider its contents and the recommendations he makes and will respond formally in due course.

[HCWS1549]

State Threat Prevention and Investigation

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Section 55(1) of the National Security Act 2023 requires the Secretary of State to report to Parliament as soon as reasonably practicable after the end of every relevant three-month period on the exercise of their state threat prevention and investigation measure powers under the Act during that period.

STPIMs were introduced through the 2023 Act and came into force on 20 December 2023. There have been no STPIM cases imposed to date.

[HCWS1550]

Written Correction

Wednesday 29 April 2026

Ministerial Correction

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

UK-India Technology Security Initiative

The following extract is from the debate on the UK-India Technology Security Initiative on 28 April 2026.

Kanishka Narayan: The TSI will secure supply chains, as my hon. Friends the Members for Weston-super-Mare and for Tamworth highlighted. Through the UK-India critical minerals guild, we are strengthening joint capabilities in critical minerals; I will closely consider its collective feedback and its particular observations on the partnership on critical minerals. Backed by £1.5 million in funding, phase 2 will now extend the scope of our joint observatory, further developing digital data infrastructure on the critical minerals value chain and establishing a new satellite campus at the Indian School of Mines in Dhanbad.

[*Official Report,* 28 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 304WH.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Kanishka Narayan):

Kanishka Narayan: The TSI will secure supply chains, as my hon. Friends the Members for Weston-super-Mare and for Tamworth highlighted. Through the UK-India critical minerals guild, we are strengthening joint capabilities in critical minerals; I will closely consider its collective feedback and its particular observations on the partnership on critical minerals. Backed by **£1.8 million** in funding, phase 2 will now extend the scope of our joint observatory, further developing digital data infrastructure on the critical minerals value chain and establishing a new satellite campus at the Indian School of Mines in Dhanbad.

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Wednesday 6 May 2026

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