

Thursday
4 June 2026

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 4 June 2026

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

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

*The term “Independent” may denote—

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

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

House of Commons

Thursday 4 June 2026

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Support for Farmers: Fuel Costs

1. **Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to support farmers with fuel costs. [900133]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): This Government are taking decisive action to support farmers with rising fuel costs. We have cut red diesel fuel duty to its lowest level in 20 years, reducing rates by a third, and we have asked the Competition and Markets Authority to ensure that there is no market abuse.

Claire Young: During the nearly three months it took the Government to decide to cut duty on red diesel, farmers in my constituency had already had to take steps to mitigate costs for fuel, energy and fertiliser. With changing weather patterns also threatening food security, will the Department look at other reliefs for our farmers, to ensure food security is not compromised while the war continues and its impacts ripple for years to come?

Emma Reynolds: The National Farmers' Union president, Tom Bradshaw, said:

"The government's decision to scrap the planned rise in fuel duty is good news, and the cut to red diesel duty is a welcome, well-targeted measure."

I think I heard the hon. Lady welcoming that measure. Of course, we are keeping all plans under review and all scenarios, given the conflict in the middle east. We are consulting on plans to change fertiliser rules, so that farmers can diversify their sources of fertiliser, and we are working with farmers to give them access to Government tools to boost the efficiency of their fertiliser use.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): May I start by saying how deeply saddened I was by the news that three Royal Navy personnel based out of Royal Naval Air Station Yeovilton in my constituency tragically

lost their lives on a training exercise in Devon the night before last? My thoughts are with their families, friends and colleagues at this incredibly difficult time.

Fuel is one of the biggest operating costs for farming businesses. Soaring red diesel and fertiliser costs, driven by Trump's war in Iran, are squeezing already tight farming business margins. While the red diesel duty is welcome, it cannot paper over the wider crisis facing farm finances, with farm cash flows and profitability under real pressure. Farmers are now looking to the sustainable farming incentive 2026 as a lifeline. Can the Minister confirm how quickly applications will be processed and then the first payments made to farmers? Can she also give the 28,000 farmers with agreements that are expiring this year certainty that they can apply ahead of their current agreements—

Mr Speaker: Order. You cannot go on and on; we have only a very short time.

Emma Reynolds: I thank the hon. Lady for welcoming the cut to red diesel fuel duty. I can reassure her that we have recently published draft guidance for SFI 2026 and will be opening the first window soon for small farms and those without an agreement. We are looking at what can be done—I think she was about to ask this—about farms with agreements that are expiring either later this year or early next year, to see whether we can ensure that they can apply before their agreements expire for the coming period.

UK-EU Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement

2. **Seamus Logan** (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): What discussions she has had with Scottish fisheries on the UK-EU sanitary and phytosanitary agreement. [900135]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): I have engaged directly with Salmon Scotland on the UK-EU SPS agreement, and colleagues have discussed the deal with the Scottish Fishermen's Federation. We will continue that close engagement as negotiations progress, and we are committed to supporting businesses and providing clear guidance, so that they are ready to benefit from the agreement from day one.

Seamus Logan: The Scottish White Fish Producers Association is concerned that the worst elements of the common fisheries policy could reappear in these negotiations. For exporters, time is everything. Even small delays at the border can mean lost value for highly perishable goods. The SPS agreement must deliver faster, more streamlined export processes, because without that, the benefits will not be felt by fishermen, processors or coastal communities who rely on trade with the EU. Can the Minister guarantee that as the negotiations continue, Scottish fishing communities and their representatives will be listened to during the process, and may I repeat my very warm invitation to her to visit the north-east of Scotland?

Dame Angela Eagle: Now that certain democratic processes have taken place, I am looking forward to being able to come north of the border. I can assure the hon. Member that I am well aware that 65% of all UK seafood is exported to the EU, and therefore the more

friction we can take away from that border crossing, the more certainty there is and the more value those exports have. Given that as a nation, we tend to export a lot of the fish we catch rather than eat it ourselves, this is clearly a very important issue.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): As more and more fishermen and fisherwomen in Scotland and across the UK are struggling to keep their businesses afloat due to soaring fuel costs, they are marking the one-year anniversary of the Government selling our fishing industry down the river in their negotiations with the EU. Twelve years of access for EU boats to UK waters was signed away as part of that deal, and in return there is still no access to the EU defence fund. Fishermen and fisherwomen are yet to see a penny from the fishing and coastal growth fund, and we remain in the dark about whether we will get a gene-editing carve-out and practical transition period in the SPS agreement. A year ago, we Conservatives warned that Labour was trading away our precious UK fishing waters for little or nothing in return. Twelve months on, the evidence speaks for itself. We were right, weren't we?

Dame Angela Eagle: We are cleaning up the mess left by the Conservatives' botched Brexit deal that reduced exports by 22%, so I will not take any lessons from the hon. Gentleman.

Support for Farming: Wales

3. **Ann Davies** (Caerfyrddin) (PC): What steps she is taking to support the farming sector in Wales. [900136]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): The Government are taking decisive action to support our farming sector, with farmers in Wales benefiting from measures such as cutting the duty on red diesel to its lowest rate in over 20 years. I look forward to meeting Wales's new Rural Resilience and Sustainability Minister and working closely with him to support the farming sector.

Ann Davies: Global instability and the war in Iran are taking their toll on farmers in Wales. We have heard about diesel and fertiliser prices, whose consequent impacts for farming business viability and future food supply chains are really serious. The new Plaid Cymru Welsh Government are determined to work in partnership with Welsh farmers, so will the UK Government use their powers to do the same and support the farming sector to withstand these major pressures?

Dame Angela Eagle: Farming is devolved, so the first port of call for Welsh farmers is the Welsh Government. As I said, I am looking forward to meeting the new Minister and will do my best to work with all the devolved Administrations, including in Wales.

Mr Speaker: I am not sure about this, but I call Perran Moon.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Meur ras, Mr Speaker. Horticulture plays a significant part in the farming economy of Wales, as it does for Wales's

Celtic cousins in Cornwall. The seasonal worker scheme is only announced at the end of the year, when the horticultural industry begins picking—

Mr Speaker: Order. That was a poor effort, to be honest.

Cost of Fertiliser

5. **James Wild** (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps she is taking to help support farmers with the cost of fertiliser. [900139]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): We are working across Government to respond to the pressures created by the middle east conflict. I have asked the Competition and Markets Authority to consider industry concerns about fertiliser and we have increased the frequency of official fertiliser price reporting, which is now published weekly by the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board giving farmers faster and more transparent information.

James Wild: North West Norfolk is home to the leading UK producer of liquid fertilisers, whose production depends on urea ammonium nitrate. With no domestic supply and conflict in the middle east constraining global markets, the United States is our primary reliable source. Will the Minister urge the Department for Business and Trade to suspend the 6% import tariff on US origin UAN in order to protect farmers and food prices?

Dame Angela Eagle: May I point out that UK production of fertiliser using those processes was made reliant on America because the last Government decided to close the ammonia factory? In looking at resilience, the Chancellor has announced a business engagement exercise to consider whether targeting tariff cuts on fertiliser would be of assistance, so that is an ongoing issue.

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): Buckinghamshire farmers are hugely exposed to the global volatility in the fertiliser market, and many farmers in my constituency have faced increased costs of over 14%. Will the Minister update the House on what other efforts the Government will make to support the supply chains for farmers in Buckinghamshire so that they can be competitive and sustain domestic food production?

Dame Angela Eagle: The Government are committed to ensuring that fertiliser markets work fairly for farmers and to strengthening resilience in the supply chain. We are ensuring that we can have a more reliable source of fertiliser and more efficient use in our own country, and we are doing a lot of work on this issue as I speak.

Mr Speaker: I welcome Aphra Brandreth to the Opposition Front Bench.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I regularly hear from farmers in my constituency. The shadow Farming Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), is today at the Royal Cornwall Show 2026, where he will no doubt

hear about the challenges that farmers face as a direct result of this Government's damaging policies. Add to that soaring energy and fertiliser costs, and it is no wonder that food prices continue to rise under this Government. Will the Minister demonstrate that she understands the urgency of this issue for farmers and consumers and urge the Chancellor to follow the Conservative plan to scrap the fertiliser tax—the carbon border adjustment mechanism—so that we can keep food affordable and back British farmers?

Dame Angela Eagle: I am in close contact with domestic fertiliser suppliers. I held a ministerial roundtable with them and industry leaders across food farming and the supply chain to hear about the pressures and confirm our readiness to act when required, so the hon. Lady can be assured that we will do that. Let me take this opportunity to welcome her to her role on the Opposition Front Bench—she is a sort of constituency neighbour, really.

Water Quality

6. **Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): What steps she is taking to help improve water quality. [900141]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): The Government are serious about holding water companies to account and maintaining high drinking water standards. Just this week, South West Water has rightly been fined £1.85 million—a record fine for a drinking water offence—for failures that led to a cryptosporidium outbreak in the Brixham area of Devon. We will keep taking action so that communities can have safe, clean and reliable drinking water.

Dr Chambers: The Government's own Veterinary Medicines Directorate is really concerned that pet flea treatments sold in supermarkets are washing pesticides into Britain's lakes, waterways and chalk streams and killing aquatic life. Those treatments include ingredients such as fipronil and imidacloprid, which is banned from agricultural use to protect bees. Millions of pets are blanket-treated every month, whether they need it or not, and we already require professional advice before selling similar products to treat parasites in farm animals. Will the Minister commit to reclassifying these products so that they can no longer be sold off a supermarket shelf without professional advice? A chemical that is too dangerous for use in agriculture probably should not be available over a counter.

Emma Hardy: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman's expertise in this area. This is a serious issue; a scientific group is looking at it and will give advice to Ministers on what is the best course of action to take.

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): I recently joined Surfers Against Sewage on the River Ouse, where the consequences of the failure of Yorkshire Water were plain to see. Does the Minister agree that we should compel water bosses to personally clean up excessive pollution and that they should be sent into the river with some overalls and a pair of wellies to have the opportunity to get reacquainted with their products?

Emma Hardy: It would be difficult to identify whose product it was in the water, but I am sure that is not quite what my hon. Friend meant. I wholeheartedly agree with him on the issue of making water bosses clean up the mess that has been created. That is why we passed the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which introduced tough accountability measures that sadly have been lacking for the last decade.

Food Welfare Labelling

7. **Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Whether she has made an assessment of the potential merits of improving the transparency of food welfare labelling. [900142]

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): As set out in our welfare strategy, we are working with the farming and food industry, vets and scientists to explore how improved animal welfare labelling could improve consumer transparency, support farmers and promote better animal welfare.

Sam Rushworth: I like to buy British, because I know that our farmers have some of the best quality and welfare standards in the world, and I know that my constituents feel the same. However, that is difficult when everything is labelled with Union flags and fake farm names. May I invite the Minister to meet with members of the Labour Rural Research Group to discuss honest food labelling, which we are campaigning for?

Dame Angela Eagle: I am happy to meet the rural research group to talk about these important issues, but under UK food labelling rules, food that is not of UK origin cannot be labelled with a British flag, and if the primary ingredient is not British, it cannot be labelled as such without pointing out that the primary ingredient is not British. If my hon. Friend has any examples of where that is happening, I would like to see them.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Of course, it is not only Labour Members who are concerned about this issue, so I hope the Minister would be prepared to meet a cross-party group of MPs. The problem we face in this country is not just the use of the Union Jack; there is a high risk that we are sucking in imports that do not meet the animal welfare standards we have in this country, which even now we are rightly seeking to improve.

Dame Angela Eagle: I am more than happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to talk about this important issue, if he so desires, or a cross-party group of MPs. I point out that in the recent trade deals, both with the Gulf Co-operation Council and India, we have protected both the poultry egg and poultry meat sectors from the kind of approach we saw in the trade deal that the Conservative Government did with Australia.

Access to Nature

8. **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve access to nature. [900143]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he did for us during his time in DEFRA. This Government are transforming access to nature in this country, delivering three new national forests and nine new national river walks, as well as launching the Wainwright coast-to-coast walk as a national trail in March. East Worthing and Shoreham is benefiting from this—it is home to a spectacular section of the recently launched King Charles III England coast path, which at 2,700 miles is the longest waymarked and maintained coastal walking route in the world.

Tom Rutland: I thank the Minister for her answer and her kind words. The recently inaugurated King Charles III England coast path winds its way through my constituency, passing Lancing's wonderful Widewater lagoon nature reserve, which I worked with the community—including the World of Widewater committee—to save when it was drying up last summer. Can the Minister set out what health and tourism benefits the newly inaugurated path will bring to coastal communities such as mine?

Mary Creagh: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he did on the protection of Widewater lagoon—holding the water on the land when it is raining and ensuring that it is there during very dry spells is one of the challenges we face. The coastal path will boost everybody's mental and physical health, and will bring significant opportunity to his businesses in Worthing. We know that visitors to England's coastal paths already generate £350 million in spending in local coastal economies each year and support nearly 6,000 jobs.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Earlier this year, children from Pannal primary school went to their forest school in Sandy Bank woods, only to find that the path was cordoned off and trees had been felled. What steps is the Minister taking with her colleagues in the Department for Education and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure primary schools have access to forest schools all year round?

Mary Creagh: I am very happy to look into the case that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned. It depends on the ownership of the land—sometimes there is legitimate tree felling that has to be done at a certain time of year, normally before the bird nesting season—but if he gets in touch with me, I would be happy to look into that issue.

Global Biodiversity Loss and Ecosystem Collapse: National Security Assessment

9. **Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green):** What assessment she has made of the potential implications for her policies of her Department's report entitled *Nature security assessment on global biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and national security*, published on 20 January 2026. [900144]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): I am getting a bit of a workout this morning bobbing up and down,

Mr Speaker. The nature security assessment is a cross-Government strategic analysis designed to inform planning for potential shocks. It does not make predictions or set policy; it drives a more joined-up approach across Government by identifying climate and nature-related risks, so that they can be managed and anticipated early.

Adrian Ramsay: Turning to a second report that sets out grave risks to our national security, DEFRA civil servants have said that there is a realistic possibility that by 2030, our food, water and natural ecosystems will be at risk of collapse. That conclusion could not be more stark. An article in *The Times* states that it was the conclusion of a 2024 report commissioned to inform the new Government, but it was not included in handover briefings. Can the Minister confirm whether she has seen that second report, and what action is her Department taking to address its stark findings?

Mary Creagh: I have not seen the report that the hon. Gentleman is talking about, but I believe my hon. Friend the Minister for farming has seen it. In December, we published the 2025 environmental improvement plan, which sets out our ambition over the next five years to accelerate progress towards our targets under the Environment Act 2021. Those include ecosystem protection, wildlife reintroductions, species abundance, reducing species extinction risk, and creating more than half a million hectares of wildlife-rich habitat, which will provide critical ecosystem services. We are also delivering our international commitment to protect 30% of the UK's land and sea by 2030, and we will make more announcements this summer about that.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I am sure the Department is already gearing up for the biodiversity COP in Armenia later this year, but what discussions will the Department be having with the Foreign Office about the equally important desertification COP that is taking place in Mongolia, where important issues such as water shortages, the degradation of land and much more will be on the agenda?

Mary Creagh: I know that there will be attendance from Foreign Office officials on that, and I agree with my hon. Friend that the Mongolian COP in August is equally important. It is important with these COPs that we do not look at climate, desertification and nature separately. We need to bring the three Rio conventions much closer together so that we get the synergies. Desertification has not traditionally been seen as a problem in this country but, as the planet warms and our climate changes, we need to take the issue seriously.

Clean Waterways: Thames Valley

10. **Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help clean waterways in the Thames Valley. [900145]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): We are taking decisive action to clean up waterways in the Thames valley, tackling pollution from water companies, agriculture and urban run-off. The Environment Agency carried

out more than 800 inspections of Thames Water assets this year, holding water companies to account and improving water quality for local communities.

Peter Swallow: Last week there was a major fire in Bracknell, and I pay tribute to the emergency services, Bracknell Forest council, local businesses and the community, which all came together to respond. Alongside the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds), I have since contacted the Environment Agency to raise residents' concerns about the environmental impact of the fire, including on Bracknell's waterways, and I thank the EA for its ongoing work to mitigate the impact. What policies are in place to support nature and waterway recovery following such incidents?

Emma Hardy: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important issue to the House, and I join him in paying tribute to the Environment Agency, all the emergency responders and everybody who has been working so hard. Public health advice has been issued, including precautionary guidance to avoid contact with potentially contaminated material. The incident is under investigation to assess regulatory compliance and to determine whether enforcement action is required, and I am happy to meet him to see whether it has been dealt with to his satisfaction and whether there is any more help I can give him.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): One of the sources of contamination that the Minister did not mention is human waste being discharged over the side from slum boats on EA land. The EA claims that its statutory obligation is only to register boats on its land when an application is received, and that it is discretionary. It basically does not police slum boats on its land. Will the Minister have a look at this issue and discuss it with the Environment Agency, so that slum boats on EA land can either be registered properly and policed, or moved on?

Emma Hardy: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point; I would be happy to look at it with the Environment Agency.

National Farmers' Union of Scotland

11. **Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): When she last met the National Farmers' Union of Scotland. [900146]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): I met NFU Scotland on 6 May for a constructive discussion about the impact of the middle east conflict on input costs, food security and supply chains, alongside wider farming issues in Scotland. We remain in active, ongoing engagement with the organisation.

Graeme Downie: Given that many of the key pressures facing farmers in Scotland, such as food security, input costs and trade policy, are determined on a UK-wide basis, will my right hon. Friend commit to continuing that contact and to regular, structured and direct engagement with NFU Scotland, as well as other devolved unions, to ensure that their expertise and the distinct needs of Scottish agriculture are properly reflected in UK decision making?

Emma Reynolds: The short answer is yes. The longer answer is that the Farming Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), and I meet frequently with NFU Scotland and other representatives in Scotland, and we continue that ongoing dialogue. As my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) said, it is a devolved matter, but there are issues we deal with that are UK-wide.

Waste Crime

12. **John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help tackle waste crime. [900148]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): Our recent waste crime action plan delivers the toughest ever crackdown on criminality in the waste sector, and fixes the broken system that the Conservatives left behind. We have closed the loopholes that criminals relied on, boosted the Environment Agency with an extra £45 million for enforcement, and launched a national Crimestoppers campaign so that we can root out the waste criminals and protect communities from their harm.

John Slinger: I welcome the new powers for councils to seize vehicles involved in fly-tipping and the Government's action to further tackle waste criminals, including guidance on covert surveillance, CCTV and drones—something on which I have campaigned on behalf of my constituents in Rugby. There have been several incidences of illegal waste sites and fly-tipping in and around Rugby, and I commend the Environment Agency for clearing it up, but can the Minister confirm how the powers will be used, how councils will be supported and, if they do not enforce action against waste criminals, how they will be helped to do so?

Mary Creagh: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour for his question. I know about the issues around Coventry and Rugby, and I share his frustration at fly-tippers. Courts now have the powers to issue up to nine penalty points on fly-tippers' driving licences, to ensure that they think twice before doing a job for their mates at the weekend. We expect these powers to be used consistently. We have the National Fly-Tipping Prevention Group, and the Environment Agency is stepping in on serious cases through increased funding, stronger powers and joint action.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I thank the Minister for her commitment and for her response to the hon. Member for Rugby (John Slinger)? It is good to have a policy that seems to be working and, here on the United Kingdom mainland, it is very obvious that it is. I know the Minister is off to visit Northern Ireland; we have similar problems in Northern Ireland, but there does not seem to be the same drive or the same action taken. Will she involve herself with the Minister in Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Andrew Muir, to ensure that he is proactive as well?

Mary Creagh: I am always happy to visit Northern Ireland, not least because I have relatives in Magherafelt. I can tell the hon. Gentleman what we are doing about digital waste tracking. It is now impossible for a cow to

be registered, as happened under the legacy system. We will have identity checks, criminal record checks and competency checks, so it will not be a free-for-all. Waste carriers will have to show their permit numbers on advertising and on their vehicles.

Topical Questions

T1. [900167] **Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): I congratulate David Attenborough, a national treasure, on his recent 100th birthday. I also congratulate Hawkstone Farmers' Choir on winning "Britain's Got Talent".

Since the last oral questions, the Farming and Food Partnership Board has met twice to commission sector growth plans for horticulture and poultry. Our landmark trade deal with the Gulf Co-operation Council is cutting tariffs for farmers and British producers. I am sure that others will be doing the same as me this weekend and visiting a local farm for the 20th anniversary of Open Farm Sunday. I recently visited the Balmoral agricultural show in Northern Ireland, and met local businesses to discuss the sanitary and phytosanitary deal. Our clean water Bill was announced in the King's Speech. Finally, I am proud that we have reintroduced white-tailed eagles to southern England for the first time in centuries. As you know, Mr Speaker, the British people love nature and love rewilding.

Mr Speaker: Hear, hear!

Phil Brickell: The Secretary of State may know that I am a passionate white water kayaker and a firm believer in the healing power of time spent in, on and around water. England and Wales have some of the most restrictive rights of access anywhere in the world; less than 4% of inland waterways have an uncontested public right of navigation. Can the Secretary of State say a bit more about when her Department will bring forward the Green Paper on access to nature?

Emma Reynolds: I was aware of my hon. Friend's love of kayaking. I am not a kayaker, but I am passionate about improving people's access to nature. Earlier this year I was with the King when we opened the King Charles III coastal path, and last month we launched the first national river walk. As my hon. Friend says, we are also committed to publishing an access to nature Green Paper soon.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): May I, too, wish Sir David Attenborough a belated happy 100th birthday and congratulate Hawkstone Farmers' Choir on winning "Britain's Got Talent"? They are both best in show.

After a year of dither, delay and record farm closures, the new sustainable farming incentive scheme will finally start at the end of this month. How much money has the Secretary of State budgeted for the June and September phases of her scheme?

Emma Reynolds: We will make that clear at the time of opening.

Victoria Atkins: Sorry—the Government have just published the documentation for a scheme that starts in the three weeks' time, but the Secretary of State cannot tell us how much of her budget is being spent on it. Then again, we know that Labour is the party of

"Who can we tax in order to pay benefits to others?"

From the family farm and the family business taxes to the fertiliser tax, business rates and national insurance hikes, why should hard-working farmers, pub landlords, rural businesses and communities be pushed to the brink to pay for Labour's ballooning benefits bill?

Emma Reynolds: I will take no lectures from the right hon. Lady, given that the Conservatives could not even be bothered to spend their own farming budget. We have a record farming budget during this Parliament, and we have protected our farmers in trade deals, whereas they sold them down the river with their trade deals with New Zealand and Australia. We have simplified the SFI, in co-operation with the National Farmers Union, and farmers have welcomed that.

T2. [900169] **Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Farmers in my constituency are concerned about tariff suspensions and the Government's need to strike a balance between quite rightly reducing costs, and protecting and actively encouraging domestic production capacity. What discussions is the Minister having with Treasury Ministers about the principles and direction of travel of future tariff suspensions to ensure that domestic production is not harmed, but is in fact encouraged?

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): I think "robust" would probably be my summary. To help with the pressure on food prices, we are planning to cut tariffs on over 100 everyday food products such as olive oil, biscuits and chocolate, saving consumers more than a £150 million a year. We have ensured that the items selected for tariff suspension have little to no production in the UK, so protecting and securing our vital domestic production.

Mr Speaker: I call Katie Lam—not here.

T3. [900170] **Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Even ahead of the global instability this spring, the Labour rural research group was calling for a spring push on farm profitability. Since then, our Government have announced a review of the regulation that farmers face and brought the Groceries Code Adjudicator back in-house at DEFRA to help level the playing field for British farmers. Can the Minister tell me what is next for our mission to get British farmers' operating profitability back to where it should be?

Dame Angela Eagle: The farming and food partnership board is looking at profitability, and the sector growth plans for horticulture and poultry have already been announced. We have reduced red diesel duty, we will open the reformed SFI and will shortly publish our 25-year farming road map, our response to the Batters farming profitability review.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): In Dewsbury and Batley, Yorkshire Water has dumped sewage for more than 1,597 hours so far this year, exceeding the confirmed total sewage pollution for 2025. Yet the Environment Agency has not completed any prosecutions against water companies for sewage dumping committed in the past five years. What exactly in this system constitutes effective enforcement and accountability, and what are this Government doing right now to strengthen it?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): The answer is a huge amount. The EA has carried out over 10,000 inspections of water company sites in 2025-26, compared with the 4,000 before Labour came to power, and we have provided a record £189 million to fund hundreds of enforcement officers, because this Government are actually taking action on this issue.

T6. [900173] **Kerry McCarthy** (Bristol East) (Lab): Cleaning up perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or forever chemicals, costs water companies and bill payers huge amounts every year. Does the Minister agree that polluters should foot the bill for remediation, and can the “polluter pays” principle be included in the clean water Bill?

Emma Hardy: I am really proud that our country has world-leading drinking water quality—in fact, our PFAS standard of 0.1 micrograms per litre is among the tightest in the whole world. I completely accept the “polluter pays” principle, although that is quite challenging for PFAS, because much of it is historical contamination. We are now working through that to make the principle work effectively in practice, while acknowledging that it is sometimes very difficult to identify the original source of PFAS.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Agriculture offers enormous growth opportunities in the UK, and when it comes to precision breeding and plant protection, it is vital that the SPS deal maintains the UK’s right to diverge on the basis of its own scientific assessments, particularly in those sectors. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give such growth sectors in agriculture that that autonomy will be retained in any future deal?

Emma Reynolds: We are well aware of the concerns of the farming sector, and I can reassure the right hon. Gentleman that we are taking its very strong views and concerns into account. As I am sure he understands, I cannot give him a running commentary on the negotiations.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It is estimated that illegal waste dumping costs the taxpayer over £1 billion. Given that this activity can and does happen at permitted sites, can the Minister assure the House that the waste crime unit has access to both the permit return data to the Environment Agency and the landfill tax returns to His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, so that that fraudulent activity can be identified? Will she meet me to discuss the Hespian Wood landfill site in my constituency?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend. She is right to draw

attention to the loss to the Exchequer from landfill tax fraud and evasion. Our Joint Unit for Waste Crime is made up of EA and HMRC staff, as well as other arms of law enforcement, to ensure that all intelligence sources are tapped in to disrupt waste criminals. The waste crime action plan I mentioned earlier will see the unit strengthened by £45 million over the next three years: more boots on the ground and more drones in the air.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Following the brilliant news that the River Thames at Ham and Kingston is to be designated as a bathing water area, does the Secretary of State think that Thames Water’s proposals to pump treated sewage into the river just a few metres further downstream at Teddington are compatible?

Emma Hardy: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for her excitement at having the first ever bathing water designation in the city of London. There will obviously be extremely high standards when it comes to any waste water that comes from any treatment plant. One thing we are doing through the White Paper—in fact, I met Sir Chris Whitty yesterday—is to look really seriously at public health and waste water, and what we can do to ensure the highest possible standards so that it is safe for people to enjoy all designated bathing areas.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Some 80% of the world’s cut daffodils come from Cornwall. The horticultural industry is totally reliant on the seasonal worker scheme, but the numbers for that are only announced annually at the end of the year, whereas the daffodil harvest begins in Cornwall in January. Can Ministers help me to lobby the Home Office for a rolling two-year scheme announced no later than October each year?

Dame Angela Eagle: I lobby the Home Office constantly on quite a lot of things; I will certainly make sure that daffodils are also taken into account.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Given that an estimated 1,446 species in our chalk streams will become extinct without conservation efforts, will the Minister outline what steps the Department is taking to protect against biodiversity loss?

Mary Creagh: We have just announced our largest budget ever for species protection and restoration. We have lots of exciting plans to introduce and reintroduce iconic species. I am particularly excited about the glutinous snail. It is extinct in England, but exists in Lake Bala in Wales. There will be all sorts of exciting reintroductions, from rare sea grasses to exciting snails.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): The great work by my hon. Friends to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas risks being undermined, particularly in the eastern region, where a biomass-fuelled power station is at risk of closure due to the end of Government support. More than half a million tonnes of poultry litter risks being spread on to the land, impacting our water networks. Will my hon. Friend meet me to discuss how we can prevent that from happening?

Mary Creagh: We are working on successor schemes to the green gas scheme. It is imperative that that poultry litter is not spread on land and that an alternative is found. I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this topic.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker, as long ago as September 2024, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs was notified of a category 1 incident, the most serious category of pollution incident, which occurred near Whittlesey in my constituency. When no prosecution occurred following the incident, I raised the issue on the Floor of the House in March and the Minister promised to write to me. When no response was received after a number of weeks, I escalated it to you, Mr Speaker, in a letter at the end of April. The Department committed to a reply by 8 May. We are now a further month on from that date and still there has been no reply. If the Government have changed their policy and are no longer prosecuting the most serious category 1 water incidents, should that change of policy not be notified to the House, or is it that Ministers simply, despite repeated requests, have no idea what is happening in their own Department?

Mr Speaker: Does the Minister want to respond?

Emma Hardy: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. May I take this opportunity to apologise to the right hon. Gentleman for the lack of response? I will follow it up immediately with the Department. I am happy to meet him personally and will ensure that this happens within the next couple of weeks. I am sorry for the lack of response, which is not acceptable. We will make changes to put it right.

Mr Speaker: That completes questions to the Secretary of State.

Before we come to questions to the Solicitor General, I note that the Fordingbridge rape cases have been referred to the Court of Appeal. The matter is therefore sub judice. I am granting a limited waiver so that the case can be discussed, but Members should not speculate about sentencing issues, and they should not criticise judges, except on a substantive motion.

SOLICITOR GENERAL

The Solicitor General was asked—

Victims: Right to Review

1. **Andrew Pakes** (Peterborough) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment she has made of the potential merits of extending the victims' right to review scheme pilot. [900175]

3. **John Whitby** (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the victims' right to review scheme pilot on victims of rape and other serious sexual offences. [900177]

The Solicitor General (Ellie Reeves): The victims' right to review pilot gives rape victims the opportunity for their case to be reviewed by another lawyer if the Crown Prosecution Service is considering dropping the prosecution. I have personally pushed for its roll-out, as

it helps ensure that victims are given fairness and dignity and are heard. In April, the pilot was extended to a fourth area, CPS Wales, and I am determined to see national roll-out before the end of the summer.

Andrew Pakes: I put on the record my thanks for the personal commitment and dedication of the Solicitor General to the scheme and its work. She will know as well as any of us that these cases are the most heartbreaking and difficult that families deal with, and that we support as constituency MPs. It is an important scheme, so can she tell us more about what she is doing to promote it, so that families and those involved are aware of its existence?

The Solicitor General: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and for highlighting the importance of the scheme for victims. We have already seen evidence of cases—which would otherwise have been stopped—continuing because of the pilot scheme. My hon. Friend is right that it is essential that victims are made aware of their right to request a review, if their case falls under the scheme, and that the CPS provides information about the scheme and how to access it. I hope we will see further roll-out of the scheme as soon as possible.

John Whitby: I welcome the steps that the Government have taken to improve the conviction rates for rape and other serious sexual offences, including announcing a new independent legal advice service for rape victims, changes to stamp out rape myths in court, and expanding the victims' right to review scheme, which is particularly significant given that only about 3% of recorded offences result in a suspect being charged or summoned. Could the Solicitor General provide a progress update on the victims' right to review scheme pilot for victims of rape, and indicate when the scheme might be rolled out nationally?

The Solicitor General: I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting some of the steps already taken to support victims of rape and serious sexual violence. I am particularly proud of the introduction of independent legal advisers, which is something I worked on in opposition. It was a manifesto commitment, and I am pleased to see the Government deliver on it. The victims' right to review pilot has now been rolled out in four CPS areas, and I hope to see a national roll-out before the end of the summer, so that victims across the country get the benefit of the scheme.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): I thank the Solicitor General for her previous answers. I have been contacted by constituents whose son was among the 79 British victims formally recognised in the Canadian proceedings against Kenneth Law. While families welcome that their loved ones have finally been acknowledged in court, many are devastated that there will be no prosecution in the UK, following the decision not to pursue extradition, particularly as they were informed only just before the decision was made public, leaving little time to process it. What assessment has the Solicitor General made of the potential merits of extending the victims' right to review scheme to cases involving bereaved families affected by major cross-border prosecutions such as that one?

The Solicitor General: I thank the hon. Lady for raising this incredibly harrowing case. As she will be aware, Kenneth Law has pleaded guilty in Canada to 14 counts of aiding and abetting suicide. Every one of the 73 victims who died in England and Wales has been formally named and recognised as part of those proceedings. Extradition proceedings carry significant legal risk and run the risk of the victims in England and Wales not being involved in proceedings. As I understand it, the victim impact statement from those affected in England and Wales will now form part of the sentencing procedure in Canada. I know that the CPS is working with the victims' families and the Canadian authorities to ensure that the bereaved families in England and Wales are at the heart of that process in Canada.

Violence against Women and Girls

2. **Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): What steps she is taking to help increase prosecution rates for cases involving violence against women and girls. [900176]

6. **Sean Woodcock** (Banbury) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of levels of Crown Prosecution Service prosecutions of cases involving violence against women and girls. [900183]

The Solicitor General: I first pay tribute to former Ministers Jess Phillips and Alex Davies-Jones for all their work to tackle violence against women and girls. At the CPS Crown advocacy conference last month, I highlighted the steps being taken to increase the volume of advocates available to prosecute rape. Since the summer of 2024, that group has grown by more than 50%, meaning that more rape cases can be heard and fewer will be vacated or abandoned. The Government have also set aside £6 million over the next two years to introduce independent legal advisers for victims of adult rape to help ensure that cases make it to prosecution.

Mr Speaker: Order. For future reference, you are meant to refer to MPs by their constituency, not their name, but not to worry.

Tom Gordon: Does the Solicitor General agree that public confidence in the justice system and supporting victims is crucial to improving prosecution rates for violence against women and girls? What further actions is she taking with the CPS to reassure victims that sexual offences such as rape and other crimes are robustly prosecuted and treated with the gravity they deserve, and that justice will be delivered for victims?

The Solicitor General: The CPS has introduced an enhanced service for victims of rape and serious sexual violence. All victims of rape and serious sexual violence are now offered a meeting with the prosecution team before the case gets to trial and are allocated a dedicated victim liaison officer in the CPS to support them through the process. As I said, we are also introducing independent legal advisers. I have secured £5 million of funding to pilot that enhanced service, providing a prosecution team meeting and victim liaison officers to victims of domestic abuse in the Crown courts. I assure the hon.

Gentleman that we are doing everything at our disposal to tackle violence against women and girls from within the CPS.

Sean Woodcock: We know that 60% of victims drop out of rape cases before they go to trial. I would appreciate it if the Solicitor General could set out what she is doing to ensure that victims remain central to the work of the Crown Prosecution Service.

The Solicitor General: I point my hon. Friend to the measures that I have set out, including that enhanced offer for victims of rape and serious sexual violence and the pilot to extend that service to victims of domestic abuse in the Crown courts. It is important that we do everything we can to meet our ambition to halve violence against women and girls within a decade, which is why we have introduced measures such as Raneem's law, embedding domestic abuse specialists in 999 call centres, and rolled out domestic abuse protection orders. We need to do everything we can to tackle the scourge of violence against women and girls.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Too many abusers are escaping justice in family courts, and my constituents have suffered as a result. Kaleidoscopic UK in my constituency has long called for independent experts to help to spot and advise against the manipulative tactics used by abusers in family courts. When will the Minister commit to implementing independent domestic violence advisers in family courts?

The Solicitor General: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, and I commend the work of Kaleidoscopic UK in his constituency—I know how hard many organisations are working to tackle these issues. The Government are committed to rolling out child-focused courts nationally in the next three years, and we are investing £17 million to fund the next expansion, but I will happily pass his comments on to my colleagues in the Ministry of Justice who specifically deal with the issue of family courts.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The first time I met the Prime Minister was when, as Director of Public Prosecutions, he came to Parliament to meet a group of MPs to outline his 10-point plan for tackling female genital mutilation. Since then there have been hundreds of reports of FGM cases but very few prosecutions. What is the Solicitor General doing, whether through prosecutions or a multi-agency approach, to try to rescue young girls from this horrific mutilation?

The Solicitor General: I thank my hon. Friend for her really important question. There have been three successful prosecutions for FGM in this country, but that is not good enough. Last month I hosted the first ever FGM summit, bringing together colleagues across Government to discuss how we can tackle FGM by working not just with the justice system, but with health, education, communities and local government. It is really important that we tackle FGM. It is a form of violence against women and girls, and it must be stopped.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Recent CPS data shows a welcome reduction in victim attrition in domestic abuse cases where the defendant was charged. However, the same CPS dataset shows little evidence of corresponding improvements in charging rates, timeliness or wider prosecution performance. By what metrics will the Solicitor General measure the success of the recent £5 million investment in CPS pre-trial support for victims of domestic abuse across pilot regions, alongside the CPS's "Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy 2025-2030"? What specific outcomes do the Government expect to see in order to determine whether they are delivering meaningful improvements for victims and the wider criminal justice system?

The Solicitor General: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question—I know that he is a huge champion on these issues. I was really pleased to secure that £5 million investment to enable victims of domestic abuse in the Crown court to be offered meetings with the prosecution team before a case gets to trial and to have the benefit of dedicated victim liaison officer.

We know that attrition rates in these cases are still too high. That is why we are doing everything we can to bring them down. In Wales, for example, a domestic abuse charging pilot is going on, which enables the police to charge in some domestic abuse cases. We are seeing that significantly shorten the amount of time it takes to get a case into court, and we know that the quicker a case gets to court, the lower the attrition rate is likely to be. We are doing everything we can to tackle this issue.

Jury Trials

4. **Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst** (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): What advice she has provided to the Government on the potential impact of restricting the right to jury trials on the rule of law. [900178]

The Solicitor General: This Government inherited a justice system in crisis, with a backlog of 80,000 criminal cases in the Crown court. That is why we are investing over £2.5 billion in our courts to fund unlimited sitting days, boost legal aid and, ultimately, speed up justice for victims. Let me be clear: jury trials will remain a cornerstone of our justice system, but justice delayed is justice denied.

Dr Shastri-Hurst: Imagine a scenario in which two individuals are both charged with the same offence and the factual matrix of each case is identical. However, the first defendant has a string of previous convictions, whereas the second has none. Under the Government's proposal, the first defendant would be able to elect for a jury trial, depending on the length of the potential sentence, whereas the second would not. How does that align with the Solicitor General's assessment of the rule of law?

The Solicitor General: Access to a jury trial is determined by the seriousness of the alleged offending, not by who the defendant is. As the hon. Gentleman will know, likely sentence is already used to determine court allocation and is a feature of our system. Every defendant in the Crown court will receive a fair trial, and that is not affected by the mode of trial decision.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): There is considerable scepticism across the House, and among experts outside this place, including in the Criminal Bar Association, about whether restricting jury trials will have any impact on the backlog. Does the Solicitor General understand the confusion of many Members about why we simply do not make the change temporary, and then have a review to find out if it actually works?

The Solicitor General: The impact assessment, taken with the investment in the system, suggests that around 27,000 Crown court sitting days a year will be saved from 2028-29, speeding up justice for victims. The Institute for Government has agreed that the modelling is sound. That is likely to save about 20%, in terms of time.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Solicitor General.

Helen Grant (Maidstone and Malling) (Con): Sir Brian Leveson recommended removing the right to elect a jury trial in cases involving offences that carry a maximum sentence of up to two years. Cases would be heard by a judge, sitting alongside two magistrates, in a Crown court bench division. The Government's proposals go much further. They seek to remove the right to jury trial for offences carrying a maximum sentence of up to three years. Cases would be heard by a judge sitting alone. Why have the Government departed from Sir Brian's recommendations in two important respects, both of which make serious inroads into the right to be heard by a jury?

The Solicitor General: As I set out, we inherited a courts system in crisis, with victims waiting years for their cases to get to court. We have all heard the stories of rape victims waiting three or four years for their cases to get to court. That is unacceptable, and it is why inaction is not an option, and why we have invested over £2.5 billion in our courts system. Jury trials will remain a cornerstone of our justice system. It is right, however—given the backlog that we face, and given that Sir Brian said that investment alone will not shift the dial—that we look at the jury system, which has not been looked at since the 1970s, to see what more we can do to make sure that cases get to court quicker and are heard, giving justice to both victims and defendants.

Helen Grant: Given the Justice Minister's conflicting remarks in the Courts and Tribunals Bill Committee, and given the Solicitor General's responsibility for upholding the rule of law, will she confirm whether a decision that a defendant on trial will face a judge, sitting alone, will be subject to judicial review?

The Solicitor General: I will take away the hon. Lady's comments, discuss them with Justice Ministers and confirm the position to her in writing.

Domestic Abuse: Prosecution

5. **Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): What steps she is taking to ensure the effective prosecution of domestic abuse cases. [900180]

The Solicitor General: Domestic abuse has a significant impact on victims and their families, and those who are brave enough to come forward deserve to have their

cases resolved quickly. Earlier this year, as I have set out, I secured additional funding of £5 million, so that victims of domestic abuse in the Crown court get a pre-trial meeting with the prosecution team. I also visited Crown Prosecution Service Wales, where the police and CPS are piloting police-led charging decisions in some domestic abuse cases to speed up decision making and get justice for victims quickly.

Dr Chambers: One form of domestic abuse is financial abuse and coercion. I have been made aware of a Child Maintenance Service case in my constituency that has been repeatedly dropped at the magistrate level because of one parent failing to attend the hearing. That means that the CMS withdraws the case, not prosecuting the parent who refuses to attend, and leaving the other one trapped and without any means of escaping the loop of financial abuse. Does the Minister agree that it is deeply troubling that a case is simply dropped, without any repercussions, if a parent does not attend the hearing?

The Solicitor General: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that case on behalf of his constituent. He is right to highlight the fact that many people use financial abuse as a form of coercive, controlling behaviour and a form of domestic abuse, and we should call that what it is. I commend the bravery of any victims who come forward. If he writes to me about the case, I would be happy to look into it for him.

Corporate Manslaughter: Prosecution

7. Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab):

What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to help improve prosecution rates for corporate manslaughter cases. [900185]

The Solicitor General: My hon. Friend has been a tireless campaigner on behalf of the 72 victims of the Grenfell tragedy and their families. My thoughts—and, I am sure, those of the whole House—remain with the bereaved families, survivors and those affected.

Introducing corporate manslaughter legislation was one of the great achievements of the last Labour Government. Cases involving allegations of corporate manslaughter are considered by specialist prosecutors in the Crown Prosecution Service's special crime division, which deals with some of the most complex and sensitive cases.

Joe Powell: As we approach the ninth anniversary of the fire, next Sunday, the Metropolitan police have advised that they will hand over files to the Crown Prosecution Service by the end of September. The CPS is expected to make charging decisions, including on corporate manslaughter, by the time of the 10th anniversary of the fire, in 2027. The bereaved and survivors have already been waiting nearly a decade for justice, so will the Minister please provide whatever reassurance she can that the Government will work with the judiciary and the CPS to ensure court capacity, so that we can deliver justice as swiftly as possible from this point?

The Solicitor General: I recognise that all those affected by the Grenfell Tower fire have faced a long and deeply painful wait for answers. Justice needs to be delivered as swiftly as possible. I understand that my colleagues in the Ministry of Justice have been working for months with police, prosecutors and courts to ensure that the system is ready to hear complex cases without further delay.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Solicitor General for that reply. In recent times in Northern Ireland we have successfully concluded two corporate manslaughter cases in a positive fashion; there were guilty verdicts in both cases. If it is the intention, as I think it may be, for the Solicitor General to look at making changes to corporate manslaughter cases, will she share the detail with the Northern Ireland Assembly and the relevant Minister?

The Solicitor General: It is good to hear about those successful cases in Northern Ireland. There may be lessons to be learned from those, so I am happy to look into the detail and work with the hon. Gentleman.

Russian Attacks on Civilian Infrastructure

10.38 am

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs if she will make a statement on the recent deliberate attacks by Russia on civilian infrastructure, including residential apartment buildings and other non-military targets.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Seema Malhotra):

I thank the right hon. Member for his urgent question. Once again, we are witnessing truly reckless attacks from the Russian state, not only impacting the people of Ukraine, who continue to stand up to these barbaric assaults time and again, but in Romania; a Russian drone hit a residential building there on Friday, injuring civilians. This incident represents a dangerous violation of Romania's sovereignty and a serious violation of NATO airspace, and it heightens the risk of miscalculation. We stand in full solidarity with Ukraine and Romania, and with all those impacted by Russia's actions.

Russia is now launching an average of over 5,000 drones a month at Ukraine, more than five times the 2024 average. Last month alone, Russia fired over 7,100 drones—a new record—giving rise to the highest civilian casualty count since April 2022. We condemn this clear escalation by Russia, and it is why yesterday we summoned the Russian ambassador to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, where we condemned Russia's escalation, the assaults on Ukraine, and the violation of Romania's sovereignty. But Ukraine continues to hold firm, and we and our partners and allies stand united with them.

The UK's total military, economic and humanitarian support for Ukraine amounts to £21.8 billion, and that includes £13 billion in military support. Last month, my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary announced that the UK will provide the biggest ever drone support for Ukraine, delivering at least 120,000 drones this year. As he said at the Dispatch Box on Monday, he has directed that UK delivery of air defence systems to Ukraine be accelerated. Later this month, he will chair the next meeting of the 50-nation-strong Ukraine Defence Contact Group at NATO headquarters, and will look to further step up the military aid that we and partners can provide to Ukraine together.

Russia can end this war, but in the meantime, we will continue to work with international partners. The Prime Minister spoke with President Zelensky last night. We will continue to ensure that Ukraine gets the military and financial support it needs to defend itself, while ramping up the economic pressure on Russia to force Putin to de-escalate the war and engage in meaningful talks.

Sir John Whittingdale: I thank the Minister for her reply. She will be aware that on Tuesday night, one of the largest aerial attacks so far during this war took place against Kyiv and other cities. It left 22 dead, including two children, and 130 injured. In Dnipro, there was the use of cluster munitions and, indeed, a so-called double-tap attack against one of the civilian protection units. Ukraine has developed some of the best technology in the world against the use of drones,

but Russia is stepping up its use of ballistic missiles and cruise missiles. Can she say what the Government will do to try to boost Ukraine's air defences, particularly through the supply of Patriot anti-missile defences? Can she confirm that records are being kept of the attacks carried out by Russia that constitute war crimes, and that Russia will be held to account for them, through the establishment of a special tribunal to prosecute Russia for the crime of aggression? Can she confirm that Russia will be made to pay for reconstruction of the damage, through the use of frozen assets? Finally, will she now look at formally designating Russia a terrorist state?

Seema Malhotra: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. It is absolutely clear that the strikes that hit Ukrainian cities, killed civilians and injured hundreds of people are utterly unacceptable. That underscores the fact that Russia is not serious about peace. It must end its illegal war. Some of the questions that he asked are on matters that he continues to discuss with the relevant Minister, but I want to say this: it is extremely important that we continue to maintain international pressure on Russia. He will have heard me talk about the announcement that the Defence Secretary has made. We continue to work with our international allies to ensure military support for Ukraine's efforts. We are keeping up our sanctions effort, which he knows we have strengthened to ensure that we hold Russia to account, from every angle, for what it is doing. We are seeking to end the war, and to ensure that we have meaningful dialogue.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome my hon. Friend's answer to the urgent question. Does she agree that those of us who are children of people who went through the second world war are now the closest to remembering that we cannot appease dictators in Europe? We know what that leads to. With that in mind, is this not the time, after such a long period of war, to press home on sanctions and restrictions on Russia, which is finding it very difficult to sustain its war effort? We must step up our efforts in that regard.

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for his questions. It is essential that we continue to keep up the pressure on Russia. It is also important that we are clear about why we need to increase and to continue to review our sanctions packages. On 19 May, a new package of sanctions was laid to crack down on Russia's economy. It included a new maritime services ban on Russian liquefied natural gas, which will restrict Russia's access to UK world-leading shipping and insurance services. It will also restrict the import of refined oil products from Russian crude oil and the import, supply and delivery to third countries of Russian uranium. We will continue to keep the pressure on Russia, and we will continue to work with our allies internationally to ensure that we are strengthening that pressure and supporting Ukraine.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Foreign Secretary.

Priti Patel (Witham) (Con): This has been a sobering and devastating week in Ukraine. Britain must continue to stand with Ukraine in its fight for freedom and sovereignty and back it against the evil and heinous acts we have seen, which are constantly committed by Putin.

The latest barbaric acts from Putin and Russia have led them to brutally target civilian infrastructure in Ukraine. The world has once again witnessed his cold-blooded actions: we have all seen bodies of civilians being pulled from rubble and the deaths of young people and children. We have seen all that in the news this week. We have also witnessed his war machine hitting targets in Romania, one of our NATO allies. Putin's barbaric war of aggression continues. He has demonstrated his complete and utter lack of interest in de-escalation or pursuing a peaceful resolution.

The Conservative party in government has a proud record of supporting Ukraine in its fight against Putin. When this Government get it right, we will support them, but the recent shameful actions to loosen sanctions on Russian oil and gas are not acceptable to us. Will the Government take action in the light of the continued threat from Putin? Would they not rather drill in the North sea than loosen sanctions on Russian oil and gas?

We see that the Russian ambassador has been summoned by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, but how are the Government responding to Russia's drone attack on Romania? That is a dangerous escalation. What support is being given directly to Romania and other NATO allies in the region to protect them? What action are the Government taking to tackle the Russian shadow fleet as it continues to slip through our waters?

What work is the Foreign Secretary doing with the Ministry of Defence to ensure that both the RAF and the Royal Navy are equipped and prepared to deal with Russian proxies passing through our waters? When is the coalition of the willing next due to meet? What actions are being taken to further target Putin's ability to wage war? What proposals are coming forward to bring an end to this conflict? The UK must continue to show resolve and use every tool at its disposal to back Ukraine and our allies and defend our freedoms and values from Putin's acts and assaults.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the shadow Foreign Secretary for her comments. She will know how important it is that we maintain support across the House for our action in supporting Ukraine and putting pressure on Russia. That sends an important message to Putin from the whole of Parliament that we stand in solidarity with Ukraine.

It is important to recognise the work we are doing on sanctions. I disagree with the right hon. Lady's characterisation of what we have done; I outlined how we have actually strengthened sanctions. In addition, on 26 May the UK sanctioned cryptocurrency exchanges operating in Russia along with entities and individuals suspected of links to the UK-sanctioned A7 network. It is important to recognise that we must continue to keep all our sanctions under review and strengthen them where we can.

The right hon. Lady's contribution emphasises the need to commit to achieving an unconditional ceasefire. The attacks on Ukraine and the drone attack on Romania are unacceptable, but it is important to say that it is Russia that is stalling and backtracking. Putin has continued to repeat ultra-maximalist demands that would end Ukraine's existence as a sovereign independent state, while dragging out talks and escalating his aggression against Ukraine. We, however, will continue to work

with international partners, as we do every week, to ensure that Ukraine gets the military and financial support it needs to defend itself and to ramp up the economic pressure on Russia in order to force Putin to de-escalate the war and engage in meaningful talks.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Given that the urgent question is about Russian attacks on civilian infrastructure, I want to bring the voice of a Ukrainian who messaged me earlier today to the Chamber:

"Today Ukraine marks the Day of Remembrance for the Children killed as a result of Russia's aggression. And this is not history—even this week, there are new deaths, new wounded children, new families destroyed. My Instagram and Facebook feeds are full of these stories: children injured on the way to shelters, mothers and grandmothers killed, little ones left bleeding while people wait for the attack to end before help can reach them. This is what Russia's attacks on civilian infrastructure mean for Ukrainians—not numbers, but children's lives being stolen."

I ask the Minister and other hon. Members to reflect on that.

Seema Malhotra: I thank my hon. Friend for those comments. It is devastating to reflect on the impact on children—the children who have been killed; the children who have been injured; the children whose schools have been destroyed; the children whose education has been affected; and the children whose parents do not live with them because they are involved in the war on the frontline or supporting the frontline.

The drone entering Romanian airspace creates even more fear of further escalation, rather than de-escalation. We continue to call for and work for an unconditional ceasefire. Time and again, Russia has shown that it has no regard for civilian life, for children's lives, for international law, or for the sovereignty of its neighbours. This must not be allowed to stand.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): The House will join me in expressing deep condolences to all those who have lost loved ones as a result of Russia's unlawful war in Ukraine.

The UN has verified nearly 16,000 Ukrainian civilian deaths and 45,000 injured civilians since Russia's illegal invasion. On Tuesday alone, Putin's evil regime fired another 74 missiles and 656 drones at residential buildings and non-military infrastructure across Ukraine, killing at least 22 people and wounding more than 100. Russia has destroyed 90% of Ukraine's thermal power generation, while continuing to profit from fossil fuel exports that fund this destruction.

Will the Minister please confirm that the Government will stop prevaricating and show leadership on the world stage by transferring the £30 billion of frozen Russian assets held in the UK to Ukraine to aid in its defence? Will the Government also ban all UK maritime services from supporting Russia's fuel exports? Finally, will the Government scrap the shameful sanctions waiver on fuel and diesel products refined from Russian crude oil?

Seema Malhotra: I have outlined how we have increased sanctions, even in the past few weeks. As the hon. Gentleman will know, it is important that we continue to work with the international community and continue our close working with the EU. He will know how much of a personal priority this is for the Prime Minister.

[Seema Malhotra]

We must continue to work actively, across the whole of the international community, towards the commitment to an unconditional ceasefire, and we must work with close partners on a shared plan for peace. It was important to hear Secretary Rubio, in his evidence to Congress yesterday, call out Russia for failing to meet its objectives. We must continue to work with the US closely on peace and also in supporting Ukraine.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): It is clear that the sanctions imposed by this Government and other Governments have denied Russia funds for attacks on both military and civilian targets, but as the war has progressed, Russia has found ever more creative ways to avoid and delay their impact. Are the existing sanctions under constant review, and what more can be done to stop the funds going to Russia and driving these attacks?

Seema Malhotra: As my hon. Friend will know, we always keep sanctions under review. We have taken recent steps and will continue to keep the pressure on Russia. It is important to say that we stand united with those who have been affected in Ukraine and by the recent drone incident in Romania, and we will always stand with all allies in defending every inch of NATO territory.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): It would be easy to see this conflict in purely geopolitical terms, but if I may be slightly philosophical for a moment, I would suggest that this is very much a battle between good and evil—between light and darkness. If seen in that context, it gives us a little bit more impetus to continue to do what the United Kingdom has been doing from the beginning of this war and to stay united across this House as much as possible, notwithstanding the comments on the temporary licences of my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) with which I completely agree.

Would the Minister like to join me in congratulating the new Government of Hungary on lifting the veto on the European peace facility, which will directly help Ukraine's war effort? Is it not the case that the attacks on Poland, Romania, Moldova and the Baltic states are not an errant missile going astray but a probing of NATO and a testing of NATO and our resolve, and that that resolve must remain tough, strong and resolute?

On the issue of Russian sanctions, which I have supported from the very beginning, is it not the case that the component parts of many of these ballistic missiles and drones are coming from North Korea, Iran and China—I thank Sir Richard Moore, the former chief of the Secret Intelligence Service, for calling out China—and we need to take more action?

Finally, may I put on record my condolences following the death of Sir Alex Younger, a former head of SIS who was a first-class public servant and dedicated his life to keeping this country and our allies safe.

Seema Malhotra: I join the right hon. Member in expressing condolences in relation to Sir Alex Younger, for all the reasons he gave. Let me respond to some of his comments; there were quite a few in his question.

It is indeed the case that Russia's recklessness in violating NATO airspace, including the incident in Romania just a few days ago, serves only to strengthen the unity of NATO and the resolve of allies to support Ukraine in its defence, and continues to send a message to Russia that we will defend every inch of NATO territory. It is also important to recognise the ongoing support that we are giving and why it is so important. I have already stated the support that we have given to the Ukraine war effort. We have committed £13 billion of total military support through our £2.26 billion extraordinary revenue acceleration loans. Since the start of the invasion, the UK has committed up to £5.3 billion in non-military support, including £4.1 billion to the World Bank loans and £1.2 billion in bilateral support. We are a leading bilateral donor.

In our work with EU allies, we continue to support those efforts. Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine continues to be met by European unity. The right hon. Gentleman will know that at the European Political Community summit in Yerevan last month, the Prime Minister announced that the UK will enter talks to join the EU's €90 billion loan, which will support Ukraine's budgetary and military needs.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): May I take this opportunity to commend the Minister and her colleagues in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office on the continuing ratcheting up of sanctions, whether it is on Russian hydrocarbons, crypto-networks or other illicit financial flows? I was not a Member of this House in the last Parliament, but I was proud as a British citizen to see that there was consensus across the political parties about the need to stand up to Putin's barbaric and unlawful war of aggression and to support Ukraine for as long as it took. Regrettably, that is no longer the case in this place. Will the Minister and other colleagues join me in condemning the remarks by the Reform UK candidate in the Makerfield by-election, when he said that Putin's Russia was "well within their rights" to annex Crimea?

Seema Malhotra: I join my hon. Friend in condemning that comment. There is no space for apologists for Putin in this Chamber. It is incredibly important to look not just at sanctions and at what we are doing, but at the impact of those sanctions because we want to see that they are taking effect. On 12 May, Russia slashed its economic growth forecast for this year from 1.2% to just 0.4%. Russia's Deputy Prime Minister ascribed that downgrade to the impact of sanctions, among other factors. It is important to recognise that we must keep the pressure on and that it is having an effect.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Is it not clear that this escalation is a portent of what Russia intends to do as it begins to lose this war? Only a few months ago there was a general view that Russia was winning, but now it is clear that Russia is losing and it will run out of money before it can annex Ukraine. What are the Government doing to ensure that we are properly prepared to face down this escalation? It is all very well Ministers coming to this House, wringing their hands and condemning these atrocities, but what are we going to do to deter this atrocity and further Russian escalation? Will the Minister make an assessment

of the St Petersburg international economic forum? It set out various scenarios for Russia in the future, some of which included the threat of nuclear weapons, so how will we deter that?

Seema Malhotra: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that Russia's failure on the battlefield is likely to be one reason why it is escalating its air raids, including on major Ukrainian cities. That is the view of analysts at the Institute for the Study of War think-tank who said that the strikes were also aimed at distracting from the impact of Ukraine's long-range attacks on Russia. It is important that we recognise that this is a sign of Russia starting to seek to have those distractions and to escalate rather than de-escalate, which is what we need to happen.

I have already outlined the work that we are doing to increase defence support bilaterally and multilaterally, and the dialogue and work we are engaged in with our European allies, as well as allies across the world. The Prime Minister is continuing to lead those efforts. That is why he spoke to President Zelensky last night—we must continue to have that dialogue—and why we summoned the Russian ambassador yesterday. We will continue to engage in this effort to support and stand with Ukraine, and to ensure that there is de-escalation and a unilateral ceasefire, and that Russia withdraws.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I think almost all of us in this House believe that Russia must pay for the damage and devastation that it has caused in Ukraine. My constituents want to see the assets seized from the Russian state and its proxies being used to start supporting Ukraine both during and after this war. Will the Minister give an update to the House and my constituents on the progress on that?

Seema Malhotra: I have sought to cover a number of points, but I will reiterate one point about our continuing support and the continuing progress in the war in Ukraine. The Secretary of State will be chairing the next meeting of the 50 nation-strong Ukraine Defence Contact Group at NATO headquarters. It is important that in every area and in every forum that we can, we continue to keep the military pressure and the economic pressure—the pressure of sanctions—on Russia.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): The SNP continues to support the military assistance that is being provided and will continue to push for further sanctions on Russia in order that it can no longer afford this war. I understand that the Minister may not have the answers at her fingertips, so I am happy for her to write to me, because I would rather have a full answer. The right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) spoke about war crimes, and targeting civilian infrastructure is a war crime. Will the Minister lay out what the UK is doing with allies to protect and preserve the evidence of those war crimes in order that prosecutions can be brought in the future?

Seema Malhotra: The hon. Lady makes a very important point about the work that is going on. The Minister who is connected with that work is unable to be here today, but I am very happy to ensure that there is that engagement with her.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Eight years ago next month, Dawn Sturgess died in my constituency as a direct consequence of Russia's attack, via Novichok, that aimed to take out Sergei Skripal. During that awful episode, it was quite clear that the work of our security services was instrumental in understanding the covert networks that Russia has across the globe. I pay tribute to Sir Alex Younger, who did so much to hold together an increasingly sophisticated capability to protect us in the United Kingdom. Will the Minister reassure us that continued investment will take place in whatever sophisticated surveillance of Russian assets across the globe exists, so we can ensure that we are one step ahead of Putin?

Seema Malhotra: The right hon. Member is right to pay tribute to Sir Alex Younger. I recognise the right hon. Member's work in relation to the horrific Salisbury attack and the impact it will have had on the community, and I know that the work continues with him. He will be aware that the strategic defence review and the national security strategy have identified the Russian state as the most acute threat to the UK's national security. We will continue to keep that matter under review and work with our international allies to ensure that we keep our country safe, put a stop to Russian state threats wherever they are happening, and continue to give Ukraine our iron-clad support.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The latest attacks by Russia should be condemned in the strongest terms. Russia has rightly been made a pariah on the international stage for its ongoing invasion of Ukraine and the crimes associated with it, but it is slowly slinking its way back into cultural and sporting events, such as last month when Eurovision boss Martin Green said that Russia could return to the stage while the war in Ukraine continues. What steps will the Government take with their international allies and across Departments to ensure that such normalisation and rehabilitation of Russia's image is not allowed while egregious breaches of international law and war crimes continue?

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. He will have seen the assessment of Russian state threats that we have made through our security reviews, and he will have heard earlier about our concerns in relation to Russia's failure to advance on the battlefield, which is of course why it is escalating matters now. We must look at all measures we can take to keep the pressure on Russia; we do so through our economic sanctions, but we will continue to do all we can to send a message to Russia that its behaviour and its violations of international law—for which it has no respect—are unacceptable, and that we will continue to back our allies across the world.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Given that our own infrastructure is under constant cyber-attack, will the hon. Lady reassure us that Russia would be right in understanding that no such attack will go unanswered, like for like?

Seema Malhotra: I think that I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. He makes an important point about risks and why it is so important that we are

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taking all the steps we can, alongside our international allies, to upgrade our defence and security systems. We will be looking to detect and deter any potential risks to our security, and we will always defend our country and our infrastructure. That is a focus for the whole of this Government.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I want to return to the issue of UK maritime services bankrolling Putin's barbaric war by supporting Russian fossil fuel exports. Despite the ban relating to LNG, campaigners have criticised what they see as a lack of enforcement of the rules. What will the Government do to ensure that sanctions are not just a paper tiger?

Seema Malhotra: It is important to note—as I did earlier—the impact that sanctions are having, which has been commented on by the Deputy Prime Minister of Russia. The UK's Russia sanctions regime is designed to maximise the impact on Putin's regime—to cripple supply chains and technological advancement and undermine Russia's war effort. The hon. Lady will also know that the UK has sanctioned over 3,300 individuals, entities and ships under our Russia sanctions regime; over 3,100 of those designations were imposed since the full-scale invasion in 2022, and over 1,300 of them were imposed by this Government. I could go on, including about our sanctioning of over 30 Russian banks, accounting for 90% of Russia's banking sector. Our sanctions are hurting, and it is important that this message to Russia continues.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for tabling this urgent question, and I thank the Minister and, indeed, every hon. Member in this House for their support for Ukraine, which sends a very strong message from this Chamber. For four years, the world has witnessed Russia waging a brutal, unprovoked war of aggression in a systematic attempt to erase a sovereign nation from the map, marked by a deliberate campaign of terror against innocent civilians, energy grids and first responders. The intensity of long-range bombardment has increased by 20% in the past year, so how can we further meet our obligations to the rule of law and take whatever steps are necessary to end the war, while ensuring that Ukraine still exists at that end point?

Seema Malhotra: I always thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. He is absolutely right that it is imperative that we see a ceasefire, an end to this war and the withdrawal of Russia from Ukraine. That remains our focus in the support we give to Ukraine and the continuing work we are doing internationally with our close partners on negotiations. It is also important to recognise the impact that our sanctions are having. Indeed, it is also worth mentioning that Russia's oil and gas revenues fell 24% year on year in 2025, and by 47% in January and February compared with the same period last year. We have to keep the pressure on, and it is important that we uphold international law and our values. We must ensure that sovereign nations can continue their lives in peace, supporting prosperity and security for their people, and not be subject to illegal wars, as we have seen in Ukraine.

Business of the House

11.16 am

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 8 June—Committee of the whole House of the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill (day one).

TUESDAY 9 June—Conclusion of Committee of the whole House and remaining stages of the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 10 June—Remaining stages of the Railways Bill.

THURSDAY 11 June—General debate on the legacy of Jo Cox.

FRIDAY 12 June—The House will not be sitting.

The provisional business for the week commencing 15 June includes:

MONDAY 15 June—The Chairman of Ways and Means is expected to name opposed private business for consideration, followed by a debate on a motion on NHS dentistry. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

TUESDAY 16 June—Remaining stages of the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill.

Jesse Norman: May I welcome my guests to the Gallery?

Part of our job at business questions is to act as a place of record, and this has been a grim week and a week of mourning for us all. First, we mourn for Henry Nowak. The whole House will know the terrible circumstances of his murder and will feel the deepest respect for the dignity of his family in the face of such a loss.

We mourn, too, the tragic loss of the three Royal Navy crew killed yesterday when their helicopter crashed in Devon, and the loss of Lance Corporal James Freeman of the Royal Anglian Regiment, who died on Sunday during a training exercise in Erbil.

We mourn the early death of Sir Alex Younger, as has already been mentioned in this Chamber. He was a friend to many in and around this House and did so much to protect this country in his long tenure as chief of the Secret Intelligence Service.

Finally, I hope I may record my personal sadness at the recent deaths of two true Conservative parliamentarians: Sir Alan Haselhurst and Sir Jeremy Hanley, who were both great public servants. In all these cases, we send our deepest condolences to their families, friends and comrades.

I have two matters to raise with the Leader of the House. The first is a matter of housekeeping. Colleagues will know of my deep concerns about the current plans for the rebuild of the Palace of Westminster, the lack of scrutiny they have received to date, and in particular the prospect of an uncapped budget potentially running up to an astounding £20 billion to £40 billion. The restoration and renewal client board last met on 2 March. At that meeting, I requested information, and I understood that my request had been agreed. Three months later,

nothing has happened, as far as I am aware. I cannot even check the status of my request, because the minutes have not been published in either of the two parallel and apparently unconnected places on the parliamentary website. This is just not good enough. It is a disrespect to the Chamber and to the Palace as a whole.

Very soon, the Government are expected to bring forward a motion asking colleagues to endorse a programme that could cost more than the original budget for High Speed 2. Just think about that, Madam Deputy Speaker—I hope all Members will think about it. At present, colleagues are manifestly under-informed and under-prepared. Can the Leader of the House therefore reassure us that there will be proper time for scrutiny, both in the Public Accounts Committee and on the Floor of the House, and that at least three weeks' notice will be given of any motion so that both Houses may prepare properly?

Secondly, I raise a matter of both local and national importance. The Leader of the House will know that thanks to the Hay festival and now *HowTheLightGetsIn*, every year at the end of May, Hay and its environs in my constituency become the world capital of ideas. As Arthur Miller once described it, Hay is the “Woodstock of the mind”, but it is also Hay-on-Wye, and the Wye—one of the loveliest rivers in Britain—remains in deep ecological distress. I have been campaigning on this issue for six years and progress, alas, has been fitful at best. The previous Government published a River Wye action plan, with up to £35 million earmarked to help deal with poultry manure and nutrient pollution, only for it to be discarded after the general election. But Herefordshire council and neighbouring councils have been working hard with farmers, conservation bodies and local partners, most recently through a new charter for the River Wye, an evocative statement of shared purpose across the catchment.

The root problem is a lack of joined-up collective action and a regulatory system that remains woefully insufficient. The river runs through England and Wales, but pollution does not stop at the border, and neither should policy. We have always needed one single approach that brings everyone together, and one source of authority for the river. That is why I am proposing statutory River Wye commissioners, an inexpensive cross-border body for the whole catchment that would be created by an Order in Council, with a single recovery plan, proper shared data, published milestones and the authority to bring all parties—businesses, farmers, campaigners, ecologists, planning, conservation and enforcement—to the same table. May we have a debate in Government time on River Wye commissioners? Perhaps the Government can pick up my River Wye (Cleaning) Bill, so that this wonderful river can be given the clear, accountable and empowered cross-border support that it so urgently needs.

Sir Alan Campbell: May I join the right hon. Gentleman in mentioning Henry Nowak? I thank him and many Members from across the House who have dealt with this tragic matter in a sensitive and responsible way. Unfortunately, it is not universal in this House, but in many ways Members have risen to the occasion. As the Prime Minister said yesterday, we need to respect the wishes of Henry's family, but above all, we need to respect Henry himself. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for the way in which he has raised this issue.

The right hon. Gentleman has also given a list of other tragic events, and I want to mention some of them. As he says, we send our deepest condolences to the friends and families of the Navy personnel who were tragically killed during the helicopter training exercise yesterday. We also pay tribute to Lance Corporal James Freeman, who was killed in a training exercise in northern Iraq. I know that the thoughts of the whole House are with his family and his unit at this desperately sad time. It underlines just how important it is that we respect our men and women of the services, who do so much on behalf of our country.

Like the right hon. Gentleman, I was saddened to hear of the death of Lord Haselhurst. Alan Haselhurst was a distinguished Deputy Speaker, Chairman of Ways and Means and Chair of the Administration Committee. He was a dedicated parliamentarian and was an MP for more than 47 years. I served with him on the Honours Committee from time to time, but more lately I met up with him in the Tea Room, where we invariably discussed cricket, about which he knew a great deal and I clearly did not.

I also pay tribute to Alex Younger, the former head of MI6, who passed away this week. He was a distinguished and dedicated public servant—and the longest serving MI6 chief in 50 years—and our thoughts are with his family at this very sad time.

I also place on record our tribute to Baroness Ramsay of Cartvale, who, sadly, has passed away. She lived an extraordinary life, and served as a role model to women everywhere. I am sure the whole House will join me in sending condolences to her family and friends.

Lastly, but by no means least, I am sure the whole House will also join me in sending our condolences to the friends and family of Gladys Dickson. She was a much-loved character in the Members Tea Room, and rightly proud of the MBE that she received. She will be deeply missed by Members across the House.

I want to mention two matters before I get on to the right hon. Gentleman's remarks. Patients across England will benefit from more services, treatments and better access to medicines from their local pharmacy under the new £340 million Government-funded deal we announced last week. We are making the most of our highly skilled pharmacists, while boosting access to services and giving patients more care right on their doorstep. I know this issue has been raised many times in business questions, and indeed elsewhere, and I hope that that pressure has influenced this decision and that this announcement will be welcomed.

At the weekend, the biggest train operator, Govia Thameslink Railway, entered public ownership, which means that publicly owned operators will deliver eight out of 10 passenger rail journeys, and millions of passengers will benefit from more accountability and reliable journeys. Railway services are frequently raised by Members with me, and in other ways as well. By setting up Great British Railways, we are putting passengers first, fixing what is broken and delivering a better railway on behalf of the people.

The right hon. Gentleman raised two specific points. He was right to raise, and it is concerning, that the client board has not yet produced the minutes of its meeting. I am sure there is no great conspiracy behind that; it is just that it has not got around to doing so, but I gave

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him the assurance that it will. I also agree with him that it is really important that we roll the pitch for any decision on R and R. I truly believe that we will need to make a decision one way or the other, because we cannot tread water for very much longer, not least because it is costing us a great deal of money to do so. Whichever route we take, it will cost a great deal of money, but there will be guidance on these governance and financial matters. Keeping tabs on the money is very important—it is at the heart of what we do—and I will therefore be bringing forward a motion, and I heard what he said about its timing. The PAC is looking at this, and we need to learn lessons from the people who have looked at this matter, so that we get the decision we will make absolutely right.

On the Hay-on-Wye festival and the River Wye, I too was at the Hay-on-Wye festival for a day. It is a tremendous event, and I encourage people to go along to it next year. The right hon. Gentleman talked about the state of our rivers. We have a clean water Bill in the King's Speech, and we are determined to go on cleaning up our rivers and our seas. The Wye, among others, is a very beautiful river indeed, and it is important that it is cleaned up for communities along its route, but also for those visiting that particularly beautiful part of the world. I offer him a meeting with the water Minister—the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy)—to make his case for the actions that he proposes and so that he can put forward his proposals for commissioners. If the Government are not forthcoming on that, there are other routes he can take. He mentioned his private Member's Bill, but there are other routes, and I know he is a determined campaigner for improving that situation.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): When Government Ministers decide to have disappearing messages on their phones as standard, or when Ministers decide to omit certain information because it seems beneficial, is there any wonder that public trust in Government and in politicians is so low? When the institutions that are meant to protect and support the public seemingly defend perpetrators of abuse instead, things need to change. So will the Leader of the House please grant a debate in Government time on the urgent and, frankly, long overdue need for a legal duty of candour and on morality and integrity in public life?

Sir Alan Campbell: I understand my hon. Friend's frustration on these matters, but I have to say that Ministers, including the Prime Minister, have complied with the Humble Address by providing all the information that they held. I think that is the right thing for them to have done. Following on from that, the Cabinet Office has then published that information, so I just want to correct the record: as far as anyone knows, nothing is being withheld.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right, however, about the duty of candour. She has done a great deal of work—I thank her for it—on the Hillsborough law, at the centre of which is candour. The Bill will be coming forward in due course and she will be able to make her case again then. It is not just candour that everyone in

public office should be accountable for; there are ministerial codes and other ways in which people can be held accountable for their actions, and I just want to reassure the House on that matter.

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

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): I start by echoing the comments made by both the shadow Leader of the House and the Leader of the House in relation to the murder of Henry Nowak and the comments made by his family. As a former police officer, I would say to those seeking to protest, or indeed encouraging those to protest, that protests involve policing and they take away the very police officers who operate in our communities, trying to tackle the scourge of knife crime. It is important that we remember that. I also echo the comments in relation to the service personnel who have tragically died in recent days, the death of Sir Alex Younger, and the former parliamentarians who we all recognise and remember.

This week, I draw the attention of the House to the Ebola virus outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda. Already, more than 60 people have died as a result of the ongoing outbreak, and the head of the World Health Organisation said yesterday that it could have begun as early as January. I fear that drastic cuts to international aid have undermined the international community's preparedness to identify and respond urgently to such outbreaks. Under the Conservative Government, aid was slashed from 0.7% of GDP to 0.5%; under Labour, it is down to its lowest levels as a proportion of GNI since 1999. We are responding to the Ebola crisis with one hand tied behind our back.

International development is
“important for Britain's strength abroad”—

not my words, but Tony Blair's, in his much-commented-on essay last week. I believe it is important to our national security, too. Liberal Democrats enshrined the 0.7% international development target in law while in Government, thanks in large part to the dedication of the now Liberal Democrat leader in the Lords, Lord Purvis. That law has still not been repealed, despite successive Governments flouting it. Will the Leader of the House ask the Foreign Secretary to come before the House to update us on the Government's compliance with the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to police officers, particularly those who were hurt in the appalling recent disturbances.

As colleagues will know, the current outbreak of Ebola that the hon. Lady refers to is affecting the DRC and threatening Uganda. Our estimation is that the risk to the UK population is currently low, but we keep that under constant review. We have implemented a package of broader health measures, including live information screens at Heathrow, Gatwick and Manchester airports, and NHS 111 pathways have been updated. We continue to work closely with international partners. Last month, up to £20 million of new UK aid funding helped to contain the recent outbreak in the eastern DRC, but we keep that under constant review.

I could not agree more with the hon. Lady that the aid programme is an important part of our national security. I also think it is a moral cause. We are committed to a target of 0.7% when fiscal circumstances allow. We are committing £1.4 billion a year to tackle human suffering in some of the worst humanitarian crises. We will still be the fifth-biggest funder of development aid and we will invest £850 million in the Global Fund for 2026-28. I understand what she is saying about the need to go further, but we should not ignore the fact that we are doing everything we can.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): More than 15 people have died in water-related incidents in the recent hot weather, including 17-year-old David Tita Junior, who sadly lost his life at Pickmere lake near Northwich last Tuesday. My thoughts, and the thoughts of the entire House, are with David's family at this difficult time. The tragic incident highlights the importance of water safety education, and particularly the risks associated with cold water shock. Will the Leader of the House arrange to have the Minister responsible look at this and other recent cases, and consider how water safety education in schools might be strengthened?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in sending condolences to all the families of those who have tragically died, including David. As part of the Beat the Heat campaign, the UK Health Security Agency promotes safer choices around where, when and how people swim. As my hon. Friend rightly points out, primary schools are required to provide mandatory swimming instructions. Primary school leavers should be able to swim 25 metres confidently; if there are reasons why that is not happening, I will ask the relevant Department to find out what they are. The number of deaths is tragically high and the issue will affect a number of constituencies, so I urge him and others to attend the Westminster Hall debate next Tuesday, to raise questions directly with the Minister.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): The Backbench Business Committee met on Tuesday afternoon, with six of the eight Members who are due to be on the Committee. Our quorum is four, so I urge both the Government and our Liberal Democrat colleagues to ensure that we are up to full strength as soon as possible so that we can continue. We added a further 12 debates to our waiting list and attempted to use the time we have been allocated effectively.

I understand that we will get a half day on Thursday 18 June, and I ask the Leader of the House for a business of the House motion so that the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee can give a Committee statement. That will be followed by a debate on the infected blood compensation scheme. The business in Westminster Hall on 11 June will be a statement from the Scottish Affairs Committee, followed by debates on freedom of religion and on secondary breast cancer. On Tuesday 16 June there will be a debate on community hospitals, and on Thursday 18 June there will be a debate on safeguarding human rights in supply chains, followed by another debate still to be confirmed.

I understand that we are due for the estimates day debates soon; I would be grateful if the Leader of the House could announce when those will be. The Committee has set a deadline of Friday 12 June for requests for debates, so there is not much time. We invite requests from Select Committees and individuals, and we will determine those debates as soon as we can.

Over the weekend was World No Tobacco Day. This afternoon we will be holding a celebration of 50 years of the all-party parliamentary group on action on smoking and health, a group I have had the honour of chairing for the last 11 years. All Members are welcome to join us in Dining Room A. We will also be celebrating the passing of the Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026, so can the Leader of the House arrange for one of the Health Ministers to give a statement to the House on the next steps after the passing of the Act, in terms of regulations and the path towards a smoke-free England in 2030?

Sir Alan Campbell: I hear the hon. Gentleman on the business of the House motion and will ensure that that happens. I will announce future business in the usual way but, as he says, we can expect estimates day soon; I will give his Committee as much notice as possible and confirm the dates as soon as I can.

The hon. Gentleman has been an assiduous campaigner on smoking, and I thank him and the APPG on smoking and health for all the work that they have done. I will talk to the relevant Minister to see whether we can get the House an update on the implementation of the Tobacco and Vapes Act.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): On 13 September 2024, Juliana, Giselle and Kyle Prosper were murdered by a family member who was able to buy a shotgun with a forged paper certificate. I recently met Giselle and Kyle's father—it is a meeting that will stay with me forever. Even before this tragedy, it was unthinkable that anyone could purchase a gun by swapping pieces of paper in a car park. Will the Leader of the House grant time for a debate on the much-needed modernisation and digitisation of firearms licensing, so that the police know exactly who in their area has licensed guns, and where, and can track down and crack down on illegal sales?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that tragic case with the House. It is important that we have strong and effective gun laws. If she wishes to raise her concerns directly with the relevant Home Office Minister, I will arrange for a meeting. She may also wish to seek a Westminster Hall debate so that she and the rest of the House can hear directly from the Minister about what the Government intend to do.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): When Lord Mandelson WhatsApped one of the Government's most senior Ministers to say that growth plans were in the hands of the Chancellor, the now Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister replied:

"It doesn't fill you with confidence".

A good illustration of that can be seen in Cambridgeshire. Just last year, after spending £80 million of public money and securing planning permission for the largest brownfield site for 8,500 homes, the Government cancelled the scheme. This week, the Government announced yet another unelected quango, the Greater Cambridge

[*Steve Barclay*]

Development Corporation, to lead on housing. That is in addition to the Greater Cambridge Partnership, which leads on housing, the metro mayor, who leads on housing, and the county council and district council, which also lead on housing—and if that is not enough, there is also Cambridge Ahead, which is the voice of civil leadership on issues such as housing. Why should having so many duplicate bodies, which cost taxpayers in my constituency so much money, give anyone confidence that this Government can deliver growth?

Sir Alan Campbell: This Government are delivering growth in difficult circumstances—not as fast as we would hope, of course, but we are doing it. We are also building more houses, which is important, because people need somewhere to live and because housing is a driver of growth. The right hon. Gentleman talks about the involvement of various agencies in decision making. The principle from Government is very simple: decisions should be made closer to the people that they affect. It is better that the organisations and agencies that he mentions make those decisions rather than attempts being made to determine those matters here at the centre.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): At the beginning of last month, there were more than 1,600 applicants on the social housing register in Wolverhampton requiring a three-bedroom property, more than 270 of whom required emergency priority. In the previous 12 months, however, only 216 three-bedroom properties became available for let. Will the Leader of the House meet me and the relevant Minister to discuss how the provision of social housing can be improved in my constituency and throughout the country?

Sir Alan Campbell: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a champion for his constituents. We are taking action to tackle the lack of social housing, including through the Social Housing Bill, which was introduced to Parliament last month. We are strengthening protections for tenants and giving local authorities the certainty they need to build new and affordable social housing. If he wishes to have a meeting with the Housing Minister to discuss these matters and how they affect his constituency, I will arrange one.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): On Tuesday evening, we lost my uncle Rory to cancer. He absolutely adored politics, so I hope it offers a little comfort to my family that we are able to remember him here today. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Thank you. I thank the doctors and nurses who looked after him. Given that one in two of us will develop cancer in our lifetimes, it is so important that we continue to talk about cancer, and in particular rare forms such as blood cancer, which my father is currently fighting—successfully, so far; I keep touching wood—and bone cancer. Could we have a debate in Government time about the importance of raising awareness and what more we can do to fight and eradicate cancer?

Sir Alan Campbell: I extend, along with the rest of the House, I am sure, our condolences to the hon. Lady’s family at the loss of her uncle, and we certainly wish her father well in his struggle.

The Government have published our national cancer plan, and we are investing £2.3 billion to deliver 9.5 million additional tests by 2029. We realise that this is a priority for people, and it is a priority for the Government, too. I will certainly take away the hon. Lady’s request and see if we can provide an update to the House on our plans.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I am an active, team-oriented and—some might even say—loyal member of the Labour crew, so I was very glad recently to visit the local McDonald’s at JunctionOne retail park and to be reminded of my time as a McDonald’s crew member at a drive-through in Gloucester. It was good to meet the franchisee and staff, and to see the hard work, high standards, and great training and career opportunities there are at that McDonald’s and others elsewhere.

I also heard about the McDonald’s work experience programme, which gives young people much-needed opportunities, including work experience, help with writing CVs and interview techniques and so on. I believe that this Government have taken their responsibility very seriously, with initiatives such as the youth jobs grant, the jobs guarantee and more, but McDonald’s and many companies like it are also taking their responsibility seriously. May we have a debate in Government time to champion the work of businesses that are taking seriously their responsibility to help our young people get into work?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend knows that it is a priority of this Government to get young people into work. It is a disgrace that there are nearly a million young people not in education, employment or training. That is why we have set up the Milburn review, which has published its interim findings, and we will come up with some recommendations later in the year.

I, too, have a McDonald’s in my constituency—I am probably not alone in that—and I absolutely agree that McDonald’s should be praised for its work experience programme and its progression programme, which trains people to manage outlets and so on. It is a fantastic organisation in much of what it does. If my hon. Friend would like to apply for an Adjournment debate on this matter, it would be a great opportunity to discuss McDonald’s and to hear from the Minister about our plans for more jobs for young people.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): From volunteer gardeners to gardening clubs, litter pickers, Wombles, community groups and church groups, across Aldridge-Brownhills there are some fantastic volunteer organisations. As most across the House know, this is Volunteers Week, so will the Leader of the House join me in recognising all those who do so much to support our local communities? In particular, some in my constituency will be recognised this evening at Manor Farm Community Association.

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join the right hon. Lady in thanking volunteers in Aldridge-Brownhills and across our country. I have said before that they are the golden thread holding our communities together, and it is appropriate this week, and indeed every week, that we thank them for the work that they do and pay tribute to them.

Paulette Hamilton (Birmingham Erdington) (Lab): My constituent Ethan Lacey from Castle Vale in Birmingham is fighting for his life in hospital in Thailand following a serious incident. His family are facing unimaginable distress as they seek to support him and navigate the challenges he is facing in dealing with medical issues from thousands of miles away. Given the urgency of the case, will the Leader of the House help me to secure an urgent meeting with the relevant Foreign Office Minister to discuss immediate support for Ethan and his family?

Sir Alan Campbell: We send Ethan and his family our best wishes. The direct answer to my hon. Friend's question about a meeting is yes.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Last week, Kenneth Law pleaded guilty in Canada to 14 counts of aiding suicide. The toxic packages that he distributed around the world are believed to be linked to the deaths of some 79 Britons, including Tom, the son of my constituent David Parfett, yet Law will not be tried in the UK following a decision by the Crown Prosecution Service. David, other victims' families and the Molly Rose Foundation have called for a public inquiry into these deaths and similar deaths connected to pro-suicide forums. Will the Leader of the House arrange for the relevant Minister to give a statement to the House on this case and the wider issue?

Sir Alan Campbell: I offer the hon. Lady a meeting with the relevant Minister to look at the details of the case and see what more can be done.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): Councillor Harry Atkinson recently marked his final day as civic mayor of the borough of Erewash with a visit to this House. At just 25 years old, he was widely believed to be the youngest mayor in the country during his mayoral year. During that year, he raised over £5,000 for charity, including two grand on an incredible journey driving a Reliant Robin across Europe to Erewash's twin towns—for the record, they are not built for that. I am incredibly proud of Harry and his work in demonstrating that public service, civic pride and democracy are alive and thriving among the next generation. Will the Leader of the House therefore consider granting time for a debate on the importance of youth involvement in politics?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in recognising the exceptional service of Councillor Harry Atkinson not only to his local community but to charity. I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for a debate as I believe youth involvement in politics would be a popular topic. As for what we do in that regard, it is important that the House reaches out in all sorts of ways, but we should not forget that we also have the Youth Parliament.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I do not know whether the Leader of the House is a boater, but if he is, I invite him to the Shropshire Union canal and, in particular, to visit the Shrewsbury and Newport Canals Trust and the excellent volunteers who do so much to help Shropshire tourism. May we have a debate on England's canals and their importance for tourism and leisure, along with hotels, pubs, fishing and hiking?

The overall offer alongside and connected to canals is worth a huge amount of money to counties such as Shropshire, but will the Government do more?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly praise the work of the right hon. Gentleman's canals trust and those elsewhere. I agree with him about the importance of canals for tourism and beyond. I encourage him to apply for an Adjournment debate so that he can make the case and see what the appropriate Minister says about further supporting that. As for joining him on the canal—this is the confession of an MP from a coastal constituency—I have a notoriously weak stomach for water. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry, but I cannot even guarantee that, on a canal, it would not be a problem.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Obstructive pavement parking is a serious and dangerous issue in many areas in my constituency, particularly in the central areas of Luton. I am pleased that our new Labour leader on Luton council, Councillor Tahmina Saleem, has made tackling that one of her priorities, particularly because over 600 people signed my petition calling on Luton council to take up new powers to enforce against pavement parking at the earliest opportunity. Will the Leader of the House provide time for the Secretary of State for Transport to update the House on when the legislation will be introduced, so that we can start to tackle pavement parking as soon as possible?

Sir Alan Campbell: Pavement parking is a serious issue, and it has been raised a number of times in business questions. The Government's English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 gives local leaders power to prohibit pavement parking. Local authorities will be given powers through secondary legislation to tackle the worst instances. My hon. Friend may be able to get an answer to her question directly from Ministers, because we will have Transport orals on 11 June.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): When it comes to planning policy, there is little I agree on with this Government. However, I hope that we can find some consensus on the point of retrospective planning applications. In the villages of Upton and Dinton in my constituency, land the size of football pitch was taken over the weekend and tarmacked, and mobile homes and caravans were installed, with no planning permission. It seems that a retrospective application enables those who breach the rules so egregiously not only to wash that away, but not to have to comply with things such as biodiversity net gain provisions, which a fresh planning application would. May we have a debate in Government time on how we shut down the ability for those who so egregiously breach the rules to obtain retrospective permission?

Sir Alan Campbell: I absolutely understand the hon. Gentleman's concern and that of his constituents when faced with such situations. I will offer to help to arrange a meeting with the Minister to make the case, which he makes very strongly, to see what further action the Government intend to take.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Last week I visited Newquay Orchard with the Co-operative party to see at first hand how local people have transformed

[Noah Law]

our green space into a thriving community asset that provides environmental education, mental health support, employability services and many more community activities. Projects such as Newquay Orchard show the power of co-operation and community-led action in tackling some of society's biggest challenges. Will the Leader of the House provide time for a debate on the role of co-operatives and community organisations in building stronger, healthier and more resilient communities?

Sir Alan Campbell: I pay tribute to Newquay Orchard for the work that it does, which is about not just good outside spaces for people to use, but mental health and other matters. Hon. Members across the House have already raised the theme of volunteering today, so there is scope for someone to seek an Adjournment debate on volunteers and community organisations, including co-ops, so that Members can explore, with Ministers, what further action can be taken.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): Many of my Woking constituents regularly commute to London by train, but they cannot rely on the service provided by South Western Railway. Delays are at the highest level since 2019, and there were 1,000 more cancellations in the second half of last year than there had ever been before. Do the Government admit that nationalisation has not gone to plan, and will the Leader of the House agree to have a debate in Government time to ensure that I can get the service that my constituents pay for?

Sir Alan Campbell: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman in the terms in which he puts the question, because this is a policy that is evolving and is relatively new, and we expect that services and accountability will improve as we go further. As I pointed out in my opening remarks, eight out of 10 journeys will be taken on railways owned by the Government, and that is the right thing. He also has the Railways Bill and other opportunities to raise those concerns if he is able to do so.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): Last week I was pleased to meet with a number of hospitality businesses from across Lincolnshire, including some in my constituency: Riverhead Coffee, Cleethorpes Lettings and the famous Steels fish and chip restaurant. They raised with me the challenging conditions they are facing, including a very burdensome tax regime. Will the Leader of the House indicate the next opportunities for us to discuss the impacts on hospitality businesses and the current overburden of tax?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is right to raise her concerns, and the Government are absolutely clear about the challenges that face hospitality in her constituency and elsewhere. We are taking action on those matters, but I understand that there is a great deal more to do. If she wishes to meet with a Treasury Minister to explore some of the options, I will help her to arrange that meeting.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): The Government are missing a huge opportunity by not pushing development on brownfield land over green belt. My constituents

believe this, and many Members across the House acknowledge it. In fact, if the Government wanted to, they could meet their housing target by prioritising development on brownfield land first. Does the Leader of the House agree that that is of the utmost importance, and that it should be debated on the Floor of the House at the earliest opportunity?

Sir Alan Campbell: If the hon. Gentleman seeks an Adjournment or Backbench Business debate, which happens very often following comments made in these sessions, he will know that others share those concerns, and therefore he will hear not just about those concerns, but from the Minister directly.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab/Co-op): I hope that my question will be more gentle on the Leader of the House's stomach than being on water. Madam Deputy Speaker, you may be pleasantly surprised to hear that Peterborough is the beating heart of one of the greatest foodstuffs in our country: fish and chips. Friars Pride, based in Peterborough, is celebrating a pukka achievement, having this year served our fish and chip industry across the United Kingdom for 50 years. This is not just about the scraps of our economy. [HON. MEMBERS: "Ugh!"]. I don't know if it gets worse. The fish and chip industry is worth more than £1 billion to our economy and employs more than 85,000 people. Will my right hon. Friend therefore join me in congratulating Friars Pride on a great 50 years as a brilliant company in Britain, recognise that it is National Fish and Chip Day tomorrow, and see whether we can have a debate on the value of the fish and chip industry to British culture?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly congratulate Friars Pride on its success over the years. I absolutely join my hon. Friend in celebrating National Fish and Chip Day. As a coastal MP, I may be averse to leaving dry land, but I am not averse to fish and chips; I know that because I have many excellent fish and chip shops in my constituency, some of which win national awards. I pay tribute to fish and chip shops, not just in his constituency and mine, but across the country.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Wiltshire council has assessed that the combination of the decision to stop the A303 tunnel at Stonehenge—despite £250 million already being committed to that, and spent—confirmation that the UK Health Security Agency will move to Harlow from Porton; the reduction to the rural grant; and Wiltshire having one of the lowest levels of police funding, as the police and crime commissioner tells me, means that Wiltshire's GDP is at risk of falling by 6%. Could we have a statement from the Government on the effect of combined Government decisions on the Wiltshire economy, and what they propose to do to assist us through this time?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government will be determined to do everything we can to support Wiltshire and the right hon. Gentleman's constituents, and I am sorry to read of the estimated effects of some of the delays that he describes. Should he seek an Adjournment debate or a Backbench Business debate on these matters, he may be able to get greater reassurance from the Minister about the future.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House—and, through him, the whole House—join me in congratulating Blackheath rugby club on its victory in the championship accession final? That puts it in the second tier of the domestic league for rugby. This is an amazing achievement for Blackheath rugby. It is the oldest rugby club in the world—so old that it is just known as “Club”. In celebrating the achievement of Blackheath rugby club, can we have a debate on sports clubs in our constituencies, so that the whole House has the opportunity to celebrate Blackheath’s achievement, and so that others can talk about the contribution that clubs make in their constituency?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in thanking Blackheath rugby club, and congratulating it on its promotion and its work, not just on the field but, I am sure, in the wider community. He will know that rugby clubs and other local sporting clubs are at the beating heart of our communities. Should he get a Westminster Hall debate on these matters, he could make the case for Blackheath, and others could make the case for clubs in their area.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): The Leader of the House will be aware that the local elections across Greater London brought seismic change to the political landscape. In my constituency, every single council seat—all 23—was won by Reform UK, and Havering council is now a Reform UK London borough. Does he accept that the political divide between inner-city London and areas that orbit the capital, such as my town and the county borough of Havering, can no longer be ignored after these results? Will he make time for a debate on reform of regional and local government around the capital, so that boroughs like Havering can regain our independence from the bureaucracy and control of City Hall and the Mayor of London—just as Margaret Thatcher, when she abolished the Greater London Council in 1986, gave real power back to local people in local boroughs?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman raised the point about the election results in his patch with the Prime Minister yesterday. It would be wrong of me to say anything other than that the electorate in his area spoke very firmly indeed. I gently point out to him that given that so many Reform councillors were elected, he should prepare himself to campaign in by-elections, because if things go true to form, a number of those councillors will be surprised that they were elected—or surprised that their position involves any work. A number of them may well end up in court, but all of them collectively will be a disappointment to the people of his area.

As for the relationship between the hon. Gentleman’s area and London, he can raise that matter; he raised it before he decided to go off to another party. He is a fierce advocate for his area, but I am not sure that the politics of division is the way forward.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): I recently attended a Glasgow schools clean air event, organised by Parents for Future Scotland, at which I met pupils from St Charles’, St Mary’s and St Patrick’s primary schools in Glasgow North. They are leading inspiring work to tackle air pollution in their communities. May

we have a debate in Government time on how we can better involve young people in addressing the climate crisis, and how we can ensure that their ideas and leadership are reflected in national policy?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a veritable champion for his constituents and on the matter of the climate crisis; I commend him for that. We are committed to improving air quality, and to delivering benefits for public health, the environment and the economy through new air quality targets, which will cut exposure to harmful particles by nearly a third by 2030. Should my hon. Friend wish, he could seek an Adjournment debate on the subject, in which he could expand further on the points he made.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Could we have a debate in Government time on performance and image-enhancing drugs? Last month, UK Anti-Doping released a survey that looked at 1,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 25; it showed that a third of them had taken IPEDs, and over 40% had seen repeated adverts for them online. This is a growing concern that I have been raising for the last number of years, and I am really concerned that the situation will get worse before it gets better. Could the Leader of the House use his offices to grant a debate on the subject in Government time, in which we could explore this issue as it relates to health, sport and education?

Sir Alan Campbell: As I have said before, the hon. Gentleman is a real champion on important matters, and I pay tribute to him for his work on the important issue of body image. I will reach out to the relevant Minister and ask them to update him on the Government’s position.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Constituents in Wynyard Mews in Hartlepool are being ridden roughshod over by their estate management company Praxis, just as residents at Marine Point are by Sela management, along with many others across the town. I met Praxis and secured an agreement that it would meet residents, but it appears to be reneging on that promise.

Time and again, Members of this House hear the same stories of excessive and unjustified charges, poor standards of service, a complete lack of accountability and residents left feeling trapped in their own homes, with nowhere to turn and no chance of selling. The most frustrating element is that Parliament legislated in this area in 2024—the powers exist—yet years later, many of the relevant provisions have still not been brought into force. Will the Leader of the House liaise urgently with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to establish a timetable for implementation, and will he provide Government time for a debate on the issue, so that hon. Members from across the House can expose the full scale of the financial abuses that many residents continue to face?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of management companies; it has been raised with me regularly. There is a strong case for greater regulation in this area. As he pointed out, we have the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. A consultation on the implementation of that Act closed in September,

[*Sir Alan Campbell*]

and we will respond in due course. It is important that we get this right, because these things can have a huge impact on people's lives. This is not a final step. In addition, we will continue to reflect on Lord Best's 2019 report, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets an update from the relevant Minister.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): In rural areas like Somerset, poor public transport prevents young people from accessing education, employment and training. At a roundtable that I held in the constituency earlier this week, Strode college representatives told me that enrolments for the next academic year have fallen by 15%, with the lack of reliable public transport playing a significant factor in that. Over 1 million young people are not in education, employment or training, and we cannot afford a lost generation. Every young person deserves a pathway into work, education or training. Will the Leader of the House advise me on how best to secure a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss this urgent matter?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will help the hon. Lady to arrange a meeting, but I just want to say that the Government absolutely agree with her that no obstacles should stand in the way of young people getting into training and work. As I said before, the Milburn review has published an interim report and will produce recommendations later in the year, but I will get her the meeting she seeks.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Questions and answers must be shorter.

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): Pupils at St Cuthbert's school are currently without teachers and support staff during their GCSEs. This follows prolonged industrial action at the St Teresa academy trust, where staff are opposing a potentially damaging restructuring of the school. As far as academies are concerned, the Department for Education appears to have little power to ensure that trusts engage meaningfully with parents. May we have an urgent debate on the Department's ability to intervene in academy trusts, especially where trusts' decisions are harming children's attainment?

Sir Alan Campbell: The disruption will have a significant impact on the children's education. I remind my hon. Friend and the House that the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 includes measures on the inspection of multi-academy trusts to ensure that decisions are subject to scrutiny, but I am happy to raise her concerns with the Secretary of State and will make sure she gets a response.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I will be brief because my question has already been asked by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn). I met exactly the same group of hospitality business at Healing Manor in my constituency and Stallingborough Grange. The list of taxes, charges and levies the hon. Lady referred to reaches a total of 68,

which is clearly unsustainable for many businesses. As well as the meeting with a Treasury Minister, which I understand has already taken place, may we have a debate on the subject—preferably in Government time—given that it affects constituencies across the country?

Sir Alan Campbell: I encourage the hon. Gentleman to apply for an Adjournment debate, or perhaps a Backbench Business debate, because these are indeed matters of concern. The Government are doing all we can, but should there be some use in further meetings, I will help him to arrange them.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): In a week when Ukraine has come under intense and deadly attacks from Russia, it is especially disappointing that one of the first acts of the new Reform-led Norfolk county council has been to remove from our county hall Ukraine's flag, which was proudly flown alongside our Union flag. Will the Leader of the House join me in condemning this action?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in condemning the action. I reiterate our continued and unwavering support for Ukraine during Putin's illegal invasion. He is right to raise the Reform party's exceptionally poor record on these matters; its candidate in Makerfield said that the Russians were "within their rights" to invade Crimea. Lowering the flag of Ukraine appears to be part of a pattern.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): First, I add my voice to the tributes to Sir Alex Younger, who died so young and is such a great loss to the nation.

What consideration are the Government giving to re-establishing a European Scrutiny Committee? The dynamic alignment that the Government are proposing is bound to give rise to a large number of regulations coming into force in the UK. As they will have direct applicability and direct effect, they should at least be scrutinised properly. I draw the Leader of the House's attention to the report published today by the Select Committee on Statutory Instruments, which I Chair. It gives an example—the Customs (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) (Amendment) Regulations 2026—of how badly the Government can handle such legislation. The regulations were laid very late, and they are being changed while they are being renegotiated with the European Union. Is this a portent of things to come, and does it not underline the need for a European Scrutiny Committee, which could look much further ahead than the Standing Orders governing my Committee allow?

Sir Alan Campbell: It is a portent of things to come. The hon. Gentleman knows the Government are to introduce the EU reset Bill, and central to the discussion of that realignment will be how best to scrutinise it. As he knows, I am giving thought to how best to achieve that scrutiny. We do not need to go back to how things were, but we do need an appropriate arrangement to deal with the challenges that clearly will arise in the future, and to hold decision makers to account.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Blackpool Pride celebrates its 20th anniversary this weekend, and I am proud to be joining Saturday's parade alongside my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour the Member

for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers), local councillors and thousands of residents. I pay special tribute to Councillor Matthew Thomas, our equalities champion, whose leadership and advocacy has ensured that the LGBTQ+ voices are heard, represented and valued across the town. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating everyone involved in the efforts of the past 20 years and all those who have helped to make Blackpool a more inclusive and welcoming place for all?

Sir Alan Campbell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating all those who have worked so hard to ensure that Blackpool Pride is a great success this year and in years past, including Councillor Matthew Thomas. I encourage my hon. Friend to participate in the general debate later today, and take this opportunity to wish everyone a happy Pride Month this June.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I found a really rare thing in Shropshire last week: a new entrant to the dairy sector. However, like lots of small dairy farmers, it is under immense pressure from much bigger companies, whether that is Bute Energy, which is trying to destroy a big chunk of its grassland by planting pylons and an access road through it, or the big supermarkets buying its products at a loss. Can we have a debate in Government time on support for the dairy sector in the light of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee report's recommendation that the Groceries Code Adjudicator and the supply code of practice be strengthened?

Sir Alan Campbell: Should the Committee wish it, I am sure there will be an opportunity for that report to be debated in the House. We have just had DEFRA questions, but I am sure the hon. Lady will raise at the next DEFRA questions the points she has raised today.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): Last week during the hot weather, George Cuckoo, a young man in my constituency who was much loved and admired by family and friends, tragically lost his life in a small lake. He was one of about 15 people, many of them young, across the country who lost their lives in water-related incidents. I am sure that the thoughts of us all remain with his family and friends and others across the country who lost loved ones. Will the Leader of the House join me in sending condolences on their loss to George's family, and will he, as our hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) asked earlier, consider making time for a debate on how we can prevent the tragic loss of young lives in this way through measures to raise water safety awareness and to improve swimming capacity for young people at primary school and beyond?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sure the whole House joins my hon. Friend in sending our condolences to George's family. Schools are required to provide mandatory swimming instruction. If that is not happening I will take it up with the relevant Secretary of State to determine why it is not happening and what further action can be taken. I encourage him and others to attend next Tuesday's Westminster Hall debate on water safety.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): May we have a statement next week from the Lord Chancellor so that he can reassure the House that in cases where a

not guilty plea is entered but a guilty verdict is delivered, the sentence will reflect the fact that the offender put the victim through the ordeal of a trial, particularly in cases of rape?

Sir Alan Campbell: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Lord Chancellor is thinking very carefully indeed about how better the courts can work for victims, not least victims of sexual offences. I will raise the points he makes with my right hon. Friend and get an update.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): Last week, I met Chris Hudson, who has just completed three marathons to raise money for Forget Me Not, a children's hospice that serves my constituents. It provides high-quality care for children with life-shortening conditions and vital services for families living with loss, including Chris and his family, who received compassionate and individualised support as they coped with the grief of losing their child. Hospices such as Forget Me Not face significant financial pressures, so please can we have a Government statement on further help for the sector?

Sir Alan Campbell: Forget Me Not and other hospices do an incredible job in supporting seriously ill children and their families when they need it most. The Government recognise the financial pressures they are facing, and we are providing £80 million for children and young people's hospices over the next three years, but my hon. Friend may wish to raise this matter and keep the pressure on Ministers at Health questions next week.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Thames Water is drowning under £20 billion of debt and surviving only through emergency creditor funding. My constituents are deeply concerned by reports that Ofwat may allow Thames Water to avoid paying fines until 2030 as part of a rescue package. Will the Leader of the House make time for DEFRA Ministers to update the House on the Thames Water and Ofwat deal and the company's future?

Sir Alan Campbell: We are closely watching the situation with Thames Water, and we stand ready for all eventualities. We moved to block bonuses for Thames Water bosses last June, but should the situation change—particularly for the worse—I am sure the relevant Minister will want to update the House.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): Altrincham minor injuries unit closed under the previous Government due to a shortage of specialist staff in our national health service, and last year our integrated care board confirmed that it could not be reopened. That was a disappointing decision which I opposed, but I have been campaigning hard for new services at Altrincham hospital ever since. We have a new skin cancer clinic, but I want us to go further and establish a permanent diagnostic centre for my community to relieve pressure on Wythenshawe A&E. Will the Leader of the House and the Government support me in my campaign?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend has been an assiduous campaigner for his local hospital; I know that he has raised his concerns in the House many times, and I pay tribute to him for that. We are committed to

[*Sir Alan Campbell*]

community diagnostic services, with a £2.3 billion investment, providing the NHS with the tools it needs to deliver 9.5 million additional tests by 2029, but I will ensure that he gets a meeting with the relevant Minister to bring his concerns forward.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): In such troubled political times, it is reassuring that the House can unite in appreciation of the fine public service of Alex Younger and Meta Ramsay at the Secret Intelligence Service, and Alan Haselhurst, Jeremy Hanley and Gladys Dickson in the service of Parliament. In that spirit, may I appeal to the Leader of the House to use his considerable common sense and influence to get the Government to revisit something that was not in their manifesto—namely, local government reorganisation—and to come forward with a statement that recognises the huge opposition, with nearly 23,000 signatures online so far, to the tearing apart of the New Forest at the behest of party politicians in Southampton city? I would love to be able to go to the New Forest Association of Local Councils AGM tonight and tell them that the Government are going to reconsider this partisan matter for which they had no mandate at the general election.

Sir Alan Campbell: I cannot give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance to take back this evening, but I can assure him that if he wishes to raise that directly with Ministers, to put right a wrong, as he describes it, I will arrange a meeting.

I should have said this earlier; it was remiss of me not to do so: the shadow Leader of the House and I read out a long list of people who unfortunately have passed, and the common thread that runs through that list is public service. It is a remarkable list of people, and it is sad that sometimes it is only when we are reading out a list of people whose lives have ended that we recognise the importance of public service. There are lots of very, very good public servants out there doing a good job day in, day out, and I pay tribute to every one of them.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): As we look forward to the Railways Bill, it is worth reminding the House that Rossendale remains the only local authority area in the north without any sort of commuter rail link, despite being only 15 miles from central Manchester. The line exists; it just needs reinstating as a commuter line. That would be a game changer for Rossendale and east Lancashire, and it is exactly the sort of project that would maximise the economic impact of Northern Powerhouse Rail, yet when Lancashire combined county authority published its transport implementation plan last month, the project was missing from the list. I find it incomprehensible. No explanation was offered. It feels like, once again, the leadership in Preston have forgotten us in Rossendale. Will the Leader of the House join me in calling on Lancashire combined county authority to think again, and agree to a debate on this specific topic?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sure that those in Lancashire combined county authority will have heard my hon. Friend's contribution. The Government are committed to delivering simpler, more reliable and better joined-up journeys for people across England, including in his area,

and we have recently published our “Better Connected” strategy. I encourage him to keep up the pressure, and there are Transport questions next week.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for his responses to all our questions, which are always chased up. This week, will he ask the Foreign Secretary to make a statement on the situation for Shi'as, Ismailis, Sikhs, Hindus, Christians and other religious minority communities in Afghanistan and on what steps the Government are taking to raise freedom of religion or belief in international engagement on Afghanistan?

Sir Alan Campbell: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are committed to defending freedom of religion or belief for all, and we are major aid donors to Afghanistan, with up to £154 million allocated in the last financial year. As the Foreign Secretary said in February,

“The rights of all Afghans must be protected.”

FCDO officials engage with the Taliban Government in Afghanistan and urge them to reverse their oppressive decrees on human rights, but I will make sure the hon. Gentleman gets a response from the relevant Minister to set out all the actions we are taking.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope you and the Leader of the House will join me in congratulating Bolton Wanderers on their promotion to the championship after beating Stockport recently 4-1 at Wembley. Bolton's promotion has been a huge effort by the players, the staff and the fans, and the Wanderers' turnaround has been made possible by the fantastic stewardship of Sharon Brittan, after the previous owners nearly drove the club into the ground. That is why I am proud that this Government have established the Independent Football Regulator, to make sure that what happened to Wanderers can never happen again. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising the vital contribution that clubs such as Bolton make to our social fabric?

Sir Alan Campbell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in celebrating the return of the Wanderers to the championship and in paying tribute to Sharon Brittan for the role she has played. The Government are taking action to promote a more sustainable game and ensure the success of English football in the long term, because, as he rightly points out, our local football clubs are absolutely vital to the communities that support them.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Our Foreign Secretary is in India today for talks with her Indian counterpart, Mr Jaishankar. My West Dunbartonshire constituent Jagtar Singh Johal has spent more than eight and a half years in arbitrary detention in an Indian prison. On 22 April this year, UN experts concluded that his prolonged detention amounts to torture. International law is unequivocal on the use of torture, and the UN has called for his immediate release. Will the Leader of the House ensure that the Foreign Secretary provides this House with an update or a statement on her return, confirming that not only was my constituent's case raised today but that she insisted on his immediate release? Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there can be no higher priority

for her trip than securing the freedom of a young man from Dumbarton unjustifiably imprisoned for almost nine years?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend has consistently raised his concerns about that case with myself and Foreign Office Ministers, and I pay tribute to him for that. We do continue to raise concerns about Mr Johal's prolonged detention with the Indian Government and continue to provide consular support to him and his family. I am confident that the Foreign Secretary will want to update the House once she returns from her visit.

If you will allow me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to mention one thing before we conclude. The shadow Leader of the House raised in his remarks about the R&R programme the fact that minutes of a meeting had not been published. I can confirm that they have been.

Children's Social Care: Enduring Relationships Strategy

12.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): With permission, I shall make a statement on the Government's progress to reform children's social care.

Transforming support for families and protection for children is central to our mission to break down the barriers to opportunity. That is why we introduced the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, which received Royal Assent in April. It has enabled the most significant overhaul of children's social care in a generation. The whole-system reset that is needed to shift money, staff and attention to earlier intensive help for families, rather than late-stage crisis management, is under way, supported by over £3 billion in funding. I want to use this statement to focus on the care and leaving care systems that form an essential part of children's social care. I am publishing the enduring relationships strategy that sets out how we will deliver that change.

In 2022, I published the independent review of children's social care, a review that was informed by listening directly to thousands of people with experience of the care system. What I heard then, and have heard since, is that our care and leaving care systems are too often breaking rather than building lifelong loving relationships. Care can leave young people isolated, lonely and lacking belonging. This heightens vulnerability to poor mental health, unstable housing and unemployment. In that review, I called for a system where every young person would leave care with someone who loves them—a simple goal, but one that is not the central focus of our current system.

At present, care often prioritises the management of professional anxiety over the nurturing of lasting, enduring relationships that care-experienced people need in order to feel loved and safe. We see this in children being sent to grow up in homes far away from their community, thereby rupturing their school career, their friendships and their family relationships. We see this in the rules that mean foster carers are not trusted to make day-to-day decisions about whether the child they have in their care can have an overnight stay with a friend or have a haircut without seeking permission from a social worker. We see it when the young person turning 18 is pushed towards living independently, when what they really need is a housing and social support model that helps them build community.

The strategy I have published today sets out how we will make creating a loving tribe around every care-experienced young person the central obsession of the care system. To enable this, our reforms cover four key areas. First, all of children's social care—not just the care system—must prioritise relationships. That means working to bring about change in families for children by strengthening the bonds found in existing family networks. This is at the heart of the Families First Partnership programme, where family group decision making and family network support packages are bringing children's families and their wider networks into their care decisions at an earlier stage.

It also means unlocking the potential of kinship care. Every local authority will be required to publish a local kinship offer, giving families the clarity and support

[Josh MacAlister]

they need. We have also committed £126 million to seven kinship zones, which are now up and running, that will test the impact of a non-means-tested allowance, equivalent to the fostering allowance, for kinship families with a legal order.

Secondly, we must create more stable and loving homes for children in care that support long-term relationships. A shortage of foster homes is leading to too many children being moved far away from their communities and the people they know. It is putting pressure on existing foster carers to be matched with children where their needs and their relationships with brothers and sisters often cannot be met. It is leading to children being placed in residential care inappropriately, at great cost in terms of both money and poorer outcomes.

We are therefore on the cusp of dramatically expanding a new approach to running our care system. This is made up of new end-to-end fostering hubs, where we will pull together individual local authority fostering teams into larger and more specialised fostering services, with more resource and higher expectations on recruitment and support for carers. This is the main action that will deliver the 10,000 additional places in foster care that we need by the end of this Parliament. It is backed with £88 million and includes funding for new innovation, grants to build extensions and home improvements for existing carers, and modernisation of the foster carer recruitment process.

This new system also depends on expanding regional care co-operatives so that the majority of England will be covered by an RCC by the end of this year. RCCs will give areas the scale to create the types of homes that children in care need and the leverage to drive out profiteering and poor quality practice. My Department will use RCCs as the vehicle to roll out a new approach to wrap around children who are on or at risk of a deprivation of liberty order. This programme, called Home Again, will de-escalate crises and be delivered in partnership with health services. I will share more information about this in the coming weeks.

I have also been concerned about the lack of support and attention that has been given to those working in residential care. That is why we have launched an expert-led review to assess the professional development offer to staff at children's homes and set out instructions for change that we will action this autumn.

Thirdly, we must support care-experienced children who are transitioning into adulthood by ensuring that we nurture and expand their long-term relationships. This is not to be confused with supporting their relationships with professionals, although that is important, but instead is about the relationships with people who can form a lasting family and tribe around care-experienced people. That starts with what the system measures and how it is inspected. Later this year, a new metric to track the quality of enduring relationships at an individual level will be rolled out in the care and leaving care systems because, whether we like it or not, what gets measured is often the thing that gets done. If we are serious about putting enduring relationships at the heart of the system, the performance of the system itself needs to be judged on whether the relationships around those in and leaving care are getting stronger or weaker. This will, of course, have implications for Ofsted's inspection regime.

With a new measure of relationships sitting at the heart of the system, we also need to support practitioners to change what they do so that enduring relationships are strengthened. That is why today I am launching a national sprint to roll out family finding services across England by the end of the next two years. We know the impact that "Who Do You Think You Are?"-style services can have on building stronger tribes around young people, and we have already seen the impact of programmes like Lifelong Links. These services need to become the mainstream offer, rather than pilots on the fringe of the system.

In the coming months, I will launch the new Staying Close programme, which will shift the system away from its current focus on preparing young people for independence and instead focus on providing homes for care leavers that build interdependence and connection. This will mean fewer teenagers dropping off the care cliff at 18 and being forced to live in a flat, lonely and isolated.

Finally, I am particularly proud that we will work with faith and belief organisations to design a new lifelong relationships ceremony to recognise the important bonds between care-experienced adults and those who love them. Just as we have Christenings and naming ceremonies, Britain is generous enough to also mark these wonderful and unique relationships that give hope and meaning. I want these to start being offered this year.

The most important thing for us in life is our relationships. The state often finds it hard to put itself at the service of building these loving relationships. In fact, too often it blocks or weakens them. That changes today by making one thing very clear: the purpose of our care system, above all else, is to build enduring loving relationships. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.38 pm

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement. It is an honour to respond on behalf of His Britannic Majesty's most loyal Opposition, particularly as we welcome much in the direction that the Minister has outlined in his statement on behalf of the Government today.

Too often, children's social care is discussed only when tragedy strikes, yet for thousands of children, foster carers, kinship carers and care-experienced adults, these issues are daily realities. They deserve serious and sustained attention from those in all parts of the House. As Conservatives, we believe that strong families, strong communities and strong relationships are the foundation of a flourishing society. The Government have a duty to protect vulnerable children, but we must recognise a simple truth: the state can never replace the love, commitment and sense of belonging that family provides.

One of the most powerful conclusions of the independent review of children's social care was that every young person should leave care with at least one loving, enduring relationship in their life. That is not a party political aspiration; it is a profoundly human one. It should concern us all that so many care-experienced adults report having felt lonely and isolated during their childhood.

Many of the themes in today's statement build on reforms that have enjoyed cross-party support for some time, such as greater recognition of kinship care, stronger family networks, increased placement stability and better outcomes for care leavers. Those are objectives that Members across the House can unite behind. I particularly welcome the focus on kinship care. Having recently met kinship carers in my constituency, I have seen at first hand the remarkable role that they play. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings and family friends step forward in difficult circumstances to provide not only a home, but continuity, identity and belonging.

I am proud that the last Conservative Government launched England's first kinship care strategy. Kinship carers make extraordinary sacrifices to ensure that children receive the love and support they need, and they deserve recognition for that contribution. May I ask the Minister about the adoption and special guardianship support fund? Families rely on it and worry about its future. Will we see the results of that consultation? How will it interact with today's announcements?

We also welcome the focus on foster care. For too long, we have relied on the dedication of foster carers while asking them to navigate systems that can be fragmented and bureaucratic. If fostering hubs can improve recruitment, strengthen support and increase placement stability, they deserve serious consideration. Perhaps the Minister could comment on how those hubs will be distributed across the country.

Likewise, the ambition to reduce the number of children placed far from communities is one that we strongly support. Every unnecessary move risks disrupting education, friendships and family connections. Stability matters. Almost half of foster carers say that they have had an unfilled space for a child in care in the past two years, often because they are waiting for a suitable match. What will today's strategy do to improve matching and make the system easier to navigate for carers who are ready to provide a home?

Conservatives have long understood the importance of society's little platoons—the families, communities, faith groups and voluntary organisations that sit between individuals and the state. Many charities and community groups already provide extraordinary support to vulnerable children and care leavers, and their contribution should never be underestimated.

We on the Conservative Benches also welcome the Minister's determination to improve outcomes for care leavers. Too many still face a cliff edge when they leave care, with disproportionately poor outcomes in housing, employment and mental health. I would welcome further detail on the new metric to track the quality of the enduring relationships built by children in care. How will the Government measure such relationships? How will that be reflected in Ofsted inspections?

Ultimately, the success of these reforms will be judged not by strategies or structures, but by outcomes. Will more children experience stable placements? Will fewer children be moved repeatedly? Will more young people leave care with secure housing, employment opportunities and strong relationships? Will local authorities have the workforce capacity to deliver these aspirations?

Children who enter care have often experienced circumstances that most of us would struggle to imagine. They deserve not just safety, but hope; not just protection,

but belonging. Where the Government act to strengthen families, support kinship carers, improve foster care and build lasting relationships, they will find us to be willing partners.

Josh MacAlister: I thank the hon. Member for the spirit in which he shared his remarks and the questions that he put to me. He is right to say that this issue requires serious and sustained attention from the House and from parties across every corner of the Chamber.

It is worth highlighting to people the disparity between what care-experienced people tell us about their experience and the experiences of the general population. Some 22% of care leavers are always or often lonely, and 15% of care leavers do not have a really good friend. Compared with the general population, those numbers are so much higher, which illustrates why this issue is so important.

Let me turn to the questions asked by the hon. Member. The adoption and special guardianship support fund is hugely important, which is why we have increased the fund by 10% this year to ensure that we can reach more families and young people with that support. The consultation response will come later this year. At the moment, the Department is focused on implementing the changes and improvements that we set out in the consultation a few months ago.

The fostering hubs will be allocated in the next few weeks, and I hope to make an announcement next month on the fostering hubs and RCCs that will be rolled out and extended further. In terms of improving matching, regional care co-operatives will play an important role in the future system in enabling us to get a much better sense, looking ahead at the years to come, of the actual sufficiency required for children in their areas.

Finally, let me turn to the new metric. The Department has worked with foundations to set out a shortlist of options of standardised measures that are valid and can be used at a practitioner and young person level but do not create undue bureaucracy or distract from the important relationships that are needed in those conversations. I am confident that we can find and roll out a measure this year that will achieve that goal.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Education Committee.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Minister on his commitment to making a difference for children in the care system and for care leavers. It is a shocking reality that our care system has, over a long period of time, become so far removed from putting the essential needs of children and young people for secure, loving relationships at the heart of everything it does.

May I acknowledge the magnitude of the shift that the Minister has announced today? We do not often have moments like this in the House—we should have them more often. Having spoken to many, many care leavers over a long period of time, I know the difference that what the Minister has announced today has the potential to make for them. I welcome the fact that many of his commitments are consistent with recommendations from the Education Committee in our report.

[Helen Hayes]

May I ask the Minister for further detail on two areas? First, can he give an assurance that, as he works to deliver this transformation of the care system and support for care-experienced people, he will retain a focus on restoring the early intervention and family support that prevents children from entering the care system in the first place? Secondly, with the focus on regional care co-operatives, may I press him on their geography? They cover quite large geographies, and it is possible for a child to be placed in a regional care co-operative and still be placed a long way from home. In delivering on the detail of regional care co-operatives, will he give his attention to that issue and pay attention to the distance that children will need to travel within them?

Josh MacAlister: I thank my hon. Friend, the Chair of the Education Committee, not just for those remarks, but for the Committee's work over the last few years in keeping a focus on these issues. I also thank her for her support for the Government always going further and taking more actions to improve outcomes for children and their families.

In answer to my hon. Friend's first point, the fundamental shift required in this Parliament is that we start to see funding across the children's social care system being rebalanced away from late-stage crisis spending towards earlier, intensive support for families. We are not leaving that to an annual check-in. Every quarter, my officials and I are monitoring the pounds being spent by children's social care across the country, and we will be prepared to support and, if necessary, to intervene if the system reset that we expect is not being seen on the ground in how spending is done.

The geography of RCCs will be large. In some areas, they will have the footprint of a mayoral combined authority or multiple mayoral combined authorities, but there will be a specific target for creating homes that keep children in close proximity to their existing communities.

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

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I have no doubt that it is a moment of immense pride for the Minister to be able to announce as Government policy many things that he recommended in his own independent review, and we welcome them.

Every child deserves to have deep, trusting, lifelong relationships, yet, as we have heard, too many children in care are torn away from those whom they are able to trust, unable to keep in touch with them for the stability they need to enter adulthood. We know from the Milburn report, published last week, that care-experienced children are five times more likely not to be in education, employment or training at the age of 17 than the general population. As Milburn says, the care system produces an intense concentration of changes

“at precisely the ages when continuity matters most.”

The Liberal Democrats therefore welcome today's announcement—the strategy, the accompanying investment, and the marked shift away from harmful short-term thinking and a transactional system towards a holistic

approach that puts the child front and centre of decision making, alongside long-term relationships. The Minister will know that my noble Friend in the other place, Baroness Tyler, campaigned hard to close the loophole that prevented children in care from being able to contact siblings not in care, and we hope that today's announcement will build on her brilliant campaigning.

As the Minister alluded to, the number of children in care living more than 20 miles away from home has increased by 41% over the past decade, and that has a damaging long-term impact on those children's relationships. When will we see a reduction in the number of children in care living far from their families and friends? What are the current accountability measures when children are moved to the other side of the country although that is not in their best interests, and how can that accountability be improved through the regional care co-operatives?

The Minister also referenced the new financial allowance pilot for kinship carers. He knows that my party and I have long campaigned on that issue, and I very much hope that he will move at pace, working with the Treasury, to scale those pilots up quickly nationwide. He knows how beneficial it is to put kinship carers' allowances on a par with foster carers' allowances. I also urge him to work with Ministers in the Department for Business and Trade to ensure that statutory leave for kinship carers is part of the parental leave review.

Finally, the adoption and special guardianship support fund has been mentioned. I note that the Minister has increased the fund overall, but the cuts to the individual grants persist. He knows that those cuts are damaging to the families affected, so will he please consider reinstating those grants?

Josh MacAlister: I thank the hon. Member for her questions and, again, for the spirit in which she has made her contribution. I also thank her for her leadership on this issue—she has spent a lot of time in this place raising many of these points time and again. She is right to highlight the work of the noble Baroness Tyler in the other place, and I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields (Emma Lewell) in this place; both of them, working cross party, have long highlighted the importance of brothers and sisters in the care system. The most important relationships can often be relationships with siblings.

I want the number of distant placements to start to come down in this Parliament. The leading indicator of that would be an expansion of fostering, and we are monitoring that at the moment. We need to start seeing those numbers go up in a big way so that the homes are created close to where children already live, and there is not a need for distant placements.

Turning to accountability, we definitely need greater visibility on those numbers in the system; if the metric I talked about in the statement is embedded across the system as well, we will start to see the strength of those relationships. We speak to young people who have been moved two hours away from their home community; earlier this week, I spoke to a young woman who that had happened to. It was impossible for her to keep the quality of relationship that she wanted to with her father, which was safe. We need to measure that. That needs to be the central focus, and then everything else will flow from it, including the location of placements.

Finally, on kinship allowance, the take-up has been impressive already; it is only a few weeks into the roll-out, and I have looked at the data. I look forward to going to Grimsby soon, hopefully, with my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) to see one of the areas that, at the moment, is more successful than the others—there is a competition under way—and see the success of that programme.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): There are wonderful kinship carers down in Sussex Weald, and the Minister is more than welcome to visit.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Minister's statement today and pay tribute to him for his enduring commitment to this issue, which started long before he came to this place. Improving the lives of children in care and care leavers must be our highest priority, and Hartlepool's previous Labour council stood four-square behind the Minister's intent to rebalance the system. As he knows, though, I am really concerned about the legacy of this broken system—the firefighting that councils are having to do, the financial pain it has caused them, and their inability to make that rebalancing happen. Can the Minister give me a little more information about how he is working with his colleagues at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to support those councils, which are under such huge financial pressure?

Josh MacAlister: The Government have prioritised this issue, with £2.4 billion of funding for the Families First programme over the next three years to get some up-front spending into the system and achieve the rebalancing that is needed. For a smaller number of local authorities, the scale of the care population and the legacy of the erosion of services makes that a challenging transition. I am committed, alongside MHCLG Ministers, to taking representations from local areas and—where we can—to going further in resourcing the changes that are required.

However, this applies to every local authority across the country, so I will say that although that transition is not an easy one, it is one that many areas have undertaken. Over the past few years, there have been councils across England that have been very successful—in some cases without any Government support—in bearing down on the need for late-stage crisis costs, holding their nerve as both elected members and directors of children's services, and have seen that shift towards keeping more families safely together. This is a resource question, but it is also a question of leadership and culture.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Madam Deputy Speaker, you will know that, apart from the time when I was sitting on it, I have been unsparing in my criticism of the occupants of the Treasury Bench, irrespective of their party. Every now and again, however, there is a Minister who has a record of expertise and commitment to their brief. That was on display today, as it was when the Minister came before the Joint Committee on Human Rights yesterday.

Josh MacAlister: I am blushing, Madam Deputy Speaker—the right hon. Member is very generous. There are politicians on all sides of this House who come to this place with a good cause and dedicate huge amounts

of time, often behind the camera and unseen, to making real and lasting change happen. There are more of us doing that on all sides of the House than we are sometimes given credit for.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement on enduring relationships for children in social care, and for his emphasis on the need for both elected politicians and officers in local authorities to be resilient in pushing this through. Will he join me in congratulating Luton council's children's services on improving from inadequate six years ago to good at the last inspection, just a couple of months ago? I particularly thank deputy leader Councillor Umme Ali for all her hard work and leadership. She has worked with officers to drive forward that improvement in provision and support for some of our most vulnerable—but also some of our most resilient—children and young people in Luton.

Josh MacAlister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, and I am delighted to extend my congratulations to Councillor Ali and the whole team at Luton, which is one of the pathfinder local authorities for the Families First programme and the changes we are trying to make. As a result of that programme, local authorities are focusing more on earlier and intensive support for families, which is keeping more families safely together. It also means that we are able to act more sharply and decisively when there are child protection concerns—those two things need to go together.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I thank the Minister for the work he has done. It was a pleasure to work with him when I was at the Department for Education, and it is great to see the development of his findings and the effort that has been put into them.

The Minister raised the important issue of kinship care and the extra support going to local authorities. My one slight concern is that we might start to see a real divergence in the level of support offered to kinship carers in different local authority areas. Could the Minister expand a little bit on how he will take action to ensure there is not too great a divergence?

Josh MacAlister: I thank the right hon. Member for his question, and for giving me the job of doing the independent review of children's social care in the first place; I would like to think he made a good decision, but time will tell.

The problem is that at the moment, the provision of support with kinship care is very uneven across the country, and it is quite hard to tell the variation in the rates of support that are offered from place to place. The same is true for allowances and fees for foster carers, so there is something to be done about transparency in the existing system. However, the kinship zones programme, which includes the allowance pilot—it has been supported by colleagues in the Treasury to ensure that it does not impact on universal credit, and it is genuinely non-means-tested—means that we will have a good-quality impact evaluation to assess in seven different areas what impact that has overall on the flow of families. Sometimes that flow is rightly away from the fostering system—which puts children into care even though they are living with

[Josh MacAlister]

relatives—and keeps them in the right place, which is with the people who already love them, supported through an SGO or a kinship child arrangement order. I am hopeful of the findings from that evaluation. If they are positive, I will be doing everything I can to ensure that it gets support across Government.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I warmly welcome today's announcement, as many colleagues have done, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on his commitment to ensuring that children in care and care leavers have the same opportunities for love, support and belonging as every other young person. I know that it has been a personal endeavour of his for many years. As he will know, Blackpool has a significant number of children in care, and we know that strong, enduring relationships can be life-changing. Will he say a little more about how this programme will help local authorities, such as Blackpool, identify and reconnect young people with trusted adults in their lives and ensure that those relationships can continue to support them as they move into adulthood?

Josh MacAlister: Blackpool faces some real challenges, and I thank all the practitioners on the ground and the council for contending a situation where they have some of the highest rates of children in care. Blackpool is also a destination for distance placements, because of property prices. It means that many children who are in care are sent to Blackpool, which adds additional pressures. I was lucky enough earlier this week to meet Poppie, Hannah, Mackenzie and Tia. Those young people have benefited from one of the Family Finding programmes that this Government have funded called Lifelong Links. It demonstrates what should be the core purpose of the system, rather than a pilot programme or an innovation sitting on the edge of the system. I point to the type of practice done by Lifelong Links, supported by the Family Rights Group, and others, as the core work that we should see the care and leaving care systems doing. It would mean, for want of a better phrase, a "Who Do You Think You Are?"-style process, as seen on TV. This process looks back through the whole history of that child's experience with important adults, and then gets those people back into the young person's life.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): The Centre for Social Justice found that up to 57% of care leavers struggle to stay out of debt and struggle to manage their money. That is why I have got my two local authorities, Surrey county council and Woking borough council, to take young care leavers out of the council tax system altogether to help ensure that they can successfully transition to independent adulthood. Will the Minister agree to work with his colleagues in the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that local authorities have the funding and guidance to extend that support across the country?

Josh MacAlister: I welcome it when councils create local offers, which includes the example that my hon. Friend mentions of council tax exemptions or discounts. It can also include support with public transport and making bus travel free. I welcome all of that. What we are saying with this new strategy is that although all of

that is important, it is second order to the bigger issue that drives a lot of that vulnerability of debt, homelessness, tragically early deaths and completed suicides from young care-experienced adults, which is that sense that they do not have people in their life who love them. I am convinced that if we can get that bit right and make that the focus above all else, everything else will become easier, and the outcomes for this important community will get better.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement today, and I also welcome the remarks of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin). I agree that all too often when we debate these topics, it is in the context of a tragedy, and it is refreshing that we are here today celebrating some fantastic news for young people in care. The remarks from both Front Benchers stand in contrast to the disgusting remarks from a Reform councillor last year, who described young people in care as "evil". I think we can all be unified in condemning that view.

The Minister will know, because we share the same local authority, that Cumberland has made great strides in recent years in achieving exactly what we want to achieve, by ensuring that young people have those stable relationships. I commend the work of the Family Rights Group in this area—I should declare that I did some work with it prior to entering this place. Can the Minister share with the House his ambition for how other councils, such as Cumberland under the leadership of Councillor Emma Williamson, can do what Cumberland has done in a few years during this Parliament?

Josh MacAlister: My hon. Friend and neighbour is right to highlight the leadership of Councillor Emma Williamson, who is herself care-experienced. She has brought that experience to political office in a way that is making real change happen across Cumberland. One of the things I was proudest to attend as a Member of Parliament, and as the Minister for Children and Families, was the launch of the enrichment event in my constituency last year. It is what Emma refers to as the bank of mam and dad. It is a fund that Emma and the team at Cumberland have set up to create an account with money that can go to young people who have something happening in their life. It could be to buy them a vehicle or to put down a deposit on a house. It is about having that flexibility through family finances that many of us benefit from but take for granted. Those who are care leavers often do not have it.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister so much for his positive statement—I do so not in the salubrious way that the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) did, but with the same sincerity. I also thank the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) for all that she has done in this House for children. It is perhaps not always recognised, but it should be, because her contribution has been significant.

This is a massive issue back home in Strangford and across Northern Ireland. The Minister will know that Northern Ireland heavily outpaces England in keeping children within their wider family circle, with kinship and friends care at more than 50%. It is clear that children are happier if kept with siblings and in familiar

circumstances, so how will the Minister and the Government further support those who would consider kinship care but are hampered in their ability to access appropriate housing for family care and need bigger houses? How can the Minister ensure that larger family homes are available UK-wide for those truly in need?

Josh MacAlister: That is a great question, because it gets to the heart of how the system behaves when it finds a parent who is perhaps struggling with a substance misuse problem, or is in a violent relationship, or has mental health needs and cannot continue to look after the child by themselves, but could be an important part of that child's life for the foreseeable future, and when there are relatives saying, "We can help. We can be part of the solution. We do not need this child to go into the care system." There needs to be a mechanism to fund those solutions, and that is what family network support packages do. The £2.4 billion that I referred to is available to fund those family network support packages. In the kinship zones, we are expecting much higher use of those FNSPs so that we can properly evaluate things. When I looked at the differences in the care population around the UK in the review, it was striking that the strength of civil society in Northern Ireland was one of the reasons, perhaps—this is just an idea—why communities were better able to come together around those children who might be at risk of going into care.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on managing to unite the whole House around this issue—a rare moment. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on kinship care, for which the Family Rights Group acts as the secretariat. I also reference the Lifelong Links programme, as the Minister has done. It has been a game changer, and it is a proof of concept for the ambitions that he has set out today. This approach can make significant changes for young people as they go through their lives. One of my questions is about the Family Finding approaches that the Minister mentioned. There is £8.4 million to roll that out. Does he have any more information on the timescales for that?

The Minister mentioned DoLs—deprivation of liberty orders—in his statement. On Tuesday, there was a Supreme Court judgment on deprivation of liberty and the changes to the acid test set in the Cheshire West judgment. Is that going to have any bearing on the roll-out of the strategy? Will any further guidance come out between now and the review that is expected to take place at the beginning of next year? And will he join me in congratulating North East Lincolnshire council's fostering team, who have made enormous efforts to support foster-friendly employer schemes? All across the borough are orange stickers declaring that people are foster-friendly employers. That has raised awareness and done a huge amount to boost fostering in north-east Lincolnshire. Of course, he is welcome to come to my constituency any time.

Josh MacAlister: I thank my hon. Friend for her questions. We are announcing today that the Family Finding programme will be extended and taken further,

and the aim is to have it rolled out across the whole of England within the next two years. The procurement for that starts today, and it will be swift. We are looking to find an organisation that will not just support us to deliver a pilot or programme that sits alongside, or on top of, existing services—as has been done over the last few years—but work with local areas to embed in the core of how social workers and PAs are currently operating the features of those sorts of models, so that this becomes completely mainstream within the next two years. That is a bold goal, but we absolutely need to help shift the time and practice of social workers and PAs. We will need to make changes to some of the statutory guidance and regulation in order to free up social workers and PAs to be able to do that, but that is absolutely the right decision.

On deprivation of liberty orders, we will look really closely at the Supreme Court judgment earlier this week, but we do not expect that it will have any material impact on the Home Again programme that we are looking to roll out this summer. Finally, I would be delighted to congratulate the fostering team in my hon. Friend's local authority. I was inspired when I saw their videos.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I think the Minister will achieve great things in his role, and he has already achieved great things, but this could be the most significant. The difference that the strategy is going to make—not only to young people leaving care, but to kinship carers—is absolutely massive. His dedication is borne out not just by the actions that he is taking, but by the short timescale in which he wants to achieve these things, and I give credit to him. He is someone who knows the difference between a care leaver and a young carer—the number of people who do not is shocking. I talk to a lot of young people leaving care in my constituency of Harlow, and it strikes me that they are running the race of life but starting at least 10 metres behind everybody else. As this is the final question, can the Minister do a pitch to care leavers in Harlow about the difference that the strategy will make to their lives?

Josh MacAlister: I thank my hon. Friend for getting Harlow into his question. It is a really good question to end on, because I want young people in care, care leavers and care-experienced people in this country to know that we are now working towards a common goal that is supported across the House. We will ensure that they get people in their lives who love them—not lanyard-wearing professionals, who are important, but their own tribe. We need to get that right as a country, and I absolutely believe we can, because all the examples I have shared, and all the things in the strategy, are already happening across England. It is a case of spreading and mainstreaming them. If we can do that, it will completely transform outcomes—for example, for young people not in education, employment or training. It will improve mental health and bring down the number of young care-experienced people who complete suicide, and it will mean that we are lucky enough as a country to have these brilliant young people celebrated and achieving.

Point of Order: Rectification Procedure

1.15 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Nick Timothy on a point of order in connection with the code of conduct to rectify a failure to declare.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am an honorary member of the Jockey Club Rooms, which provides accommodation and function rooms in Newmarket. It is an offshoot of the Jockey Club, and I accepted the membership to support a valued local institution. I declared this in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, but did not repeat the declaration when I tabled four written parliamentary questions regarding the taxation of training yards and racecourses. The Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards accepted that I tabled the questions because of their relevance to the local economy, and understands that my error was inadvertent. None the less, I accept his advice that I should have declared this interest a second time when I tabled the questions, and I apologise to the House.

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

Pride Month

1.16 pm

The Minister for Equalities (Olivia Bailey): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Pride Month.

It is a privilege to open this debate on behalf of the Government as we mark Pride Month, and it is a real honour to do so this year as the Minister for Equalities. I have spoken before at the Dispatch Box about growing up in the shadow of section 28, and what my teenage self would think about my standing here today. The life I have today as a proud lesbian, a Member of Parliament, a wife and a mother simply would not have been possible without the progress that was fought for, won and secured in this House.

In this House, it was often a Labour Government who paved the way. A Labour Government repealed section 28, a Labour Government ended the disgraceful ban on LGBT people serving in our armed forces, a Labour Government introduced civil partnerships, adoption rights and gender recognition, and a Labour Government delivered the landmark Equality Act 2010. This Labour Government are building on that proud legacy. We have acted to right the historical wrongs committed against LGBT+ veterans; we have equalised strands of hate crime legislation; we are funding LGBT+ focused domestic abuse services; we have committed to ending new HIV transmissions in England by 2030; and we are investing millions of pounds in promoting and protecting LGBT+ rights globally.

Who could forget that we now have the gayest Parliament in history? It is filled with colleagues who continue to break barriers, many of whom are here today, and I will mention just a few. The tireless work of my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) to tackle hate crime will leave a lasting legacy. My hon. Friend the Member for Jarrow and Gateshead East (Kate Osborne) has worked with the Council of Europe on banning conversion practices, and her work is an inspiration to me. My hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle) was my first boss in this place, and I hope she will forgive me for observing that she was championing LGBT+ equality in this House before some hon. Members were even born. I do not have time to mention many others from across the House, many of whom are in the Chamber, but I am proud to serve alongside them all.

I remember my first London Pride with LGBT Labour like it was yesterday. Walking through our capital alongside thousands of LGBT+ people genuinely made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. There was something profoundly joyous and moving about marching openly through the streets, when for generations, LGBT+ people had been forced to hide who they were. For so many years, people had lived with fear, shame and isolation, yet there we were, together, visible and unapologetic. Finally, I was not alone. Despite growing up feeling that I should be ashamed of who I was, I had found my voice and my community. It certainly was a party—I will spare the House the stories—but Pride is more than just a celebration; it is a protest. Marching as a proud lesbian was a radical act of protest, and it still is.

Yes, Pride is about celebrating the progress that we have made, but it is also about acknowledging the work that we still need to do—and I fear that we do have

much more work to do. Progress, once achieved, is never permanently secured. Even today—especially today—it must be defended, renewed and extended. Too many people still experience discrimination, abuse and exclusion because of who they are or who they love. Trans people, in particular, continue to face levels of hostility that should have no place in modern Britain. Many hon. Members will speak about LGBT+ constituents, particularly their trans constituents, who are anxious about the direction of public debate, and I thank them for their constructive engagement and advocacy.

I want to take the time to acknowledge that the Government have laid the Equality and Human Rights Commission's updated draft code of practice before Parliament. As hon. Members will know, the updated draft code reflects the Supreme Court's judgment that, in the Equality Act 2010, "sex" means biological sex, and that there remain protections for trans people against discrimination, harassment or victimisation on the basis of gender reassignment. The judgment does not remove those legal protections for trans people, nor does it remove the legal framework, outside the Equality Act, that allows them to be recognised as being of their acquired gender. We firmly believe that it is possible to lawfully protect single-sex spaces, while also ensuring that trans people can access the services that they need and retain protections against discrimination and harassment. I understand the stress and anxiety that this process has caused for many, and my priority is for us to move forward together, with compassion for all who continue to be impacted. The fundamental principle is that everyone, including trans people, deserves to live their life with dignity, safety and respect.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very powerful speech. While I understand the intent behind the guidance, many of my constituents are concerned about its practical effect. It is one thing to write guidance for a world in which everyone behaves reasonably and respectfully, but it is another to ensure that vulnerable people are protected in the world as it actually is. Can the Minister provide additional reassurance to the House that the Government and the EHRC will keep the guidance under review, and will act swiftly, should its implementation lead to unintended consequences for trans and gender-nonconforming people?

Olivia Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for the very important points he makes. I would just like to restate that, as the Supreme Court said, trans people have rights enshrined in law, and we are all duty-bound to uphold and defend those rights.

Unfortunately, the lives of trans people are all too often used as a political football. We have been living in a political climate made infinitely more toxic by the actions of a few. Those unfortunately include some Members of this House, such as representatives of the Reform party who believe that families like mine are not stable. That party appears to be defunding Pride events and tearing down Pride flags across the country. It is also supporting a candidate who reportedly called LGBT+ people fighting for equality "attention seeking", and said they were

"making a big song and dance about it".

I am not much of a singer or a dancer, but I am certainly proud to stand with the LGBT+ community,

and I refuse to stop working towards equality for every single one of my constituents just because it makes the Reform party uncomfortable.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister is giving an incredibly powerful speech, and I am already welling up—even before my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) has started to speak. I just want to say to the Minister that if we did not have the changes in the law that allowed people like her to be in this place, doing what she is doing, this place would be far worse for it, so I welcome her speech.

Olivia Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for that lovely intervention, and for all he does for this House and for his constituents.

Hon. Members: In Harlow!

Olivia Bailey: Sorry—in Harlow. I missed my chance there.

I want to say very clearly from this Dispatch Box that I recognise the community's fear and anxiety. When public debate becomes toxic, that has consequences in people's everyday lives—in schools, in workplaces and online. It has consequences for accessing services, and for whether people feel safe simply being themselves—and those consequences all too often manifest in violence and hate.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The Minister is making a really important point. The fact that the first action of many Reform councils has been to tear down Pride flags and to ban or defund Pride events really speaks to who they are and their values, and I do not think that they are the values of the vast majority of British people.

The Minister is talking about the importance of supporting the LGBTQ+ community in our workplaces. She will know that the Government have today accepted all the recommendations of my noble Friend Lord Mann's report on antisemitism in the NHS, and I really welcome that. My only question is about political symbols in the NHS. My view is that the Pride flag is not a political symbol, but a symbol of inclusion. Will the Minister work with the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that when we bring forward the guidance, we do not fall into the trap of labelling Pride flags or Pride symbols as political symbols, but instead continue to allow our NHS to demonstrate that it is an inclusive organisation for the LGBT+ community?

Olivia Bailey: First, I associate myself with my hon. Friend's remarks about the early acts of Reform councils. I also say to him that the NHS is absolutely for all of us, including the LGBT+ community, and I will make sure that Health Ministers have heard his comments.

Hate crime against the LGBT+ community is still far too prevalent. I spoke with those at the LGBT+ domestic violence charity Galop this week, and they have had a 27% increase in hate crime calls in the past year. They told me that hate is becoming more normalised, and perpetrators are becoming more emboldened to target LGBT+ people, whether we are talking about stranger abuse on the streets or physical violence. I am proud that this Government have strengthened protections for

[*Olivia Bailey*]

LGBT+ people through the Crime and Policing Act 2026, ensuring that our community is properly protected from targeted abuse and violence. We have equalised the law, so that hate crime committed on the basis of sexuality or gender identity is treated the same as racially or religiously motivated hostility. The principle is straightforward: nobody should live with the fear that their identity makes them a target. This was a commitment in the manifesto on which I was proud to stand for election, and I am delighted that we have delivered it.

I will also be proud to deliver on another manifesto commitment, which is a full trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices. Let us be clear about what conversion practices are. They are a very specific, insidious form of abuse that attempts to change who somebody is. LGBT people are told that who they are is wrong, that it is shameful, and that it can and should be changed. This is not about banning legitimate therapy, explorative conversations or prayer. All people in this country deserve to have access to open conversations about their identity, and this Government are not seeking to change that. What we are seeking to ban is abuse, plain and simple. These abhorrent practices are coercive, degrading and harmful, and they have caused profound trauma to LGBT+ people for decades. I hope Members across the House agree with me that these practices have no place in modern Britain, and will support our work to ban them once and for all.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I appreciate the point the Minister is making, but the Government have long spoken about a Bill to ban conversion therapy. In fact, they have been talking about bringing forward draft legislation for nearly two years. Can the Minister give us a concrete timeline? Will we see the draft legislation in 2026, or in the next year, or the year after that?

Olivia Bailey: I hope the hon. Member has gathered from my remarks that I am absolutely focusing on this very important ban with speed and determination.

Before I conclude, I want to recognise that while the Government have an important role to play in protecting LGBT+ rights, lasting change is delivered every day by people and organisations working in communities across our country, and I am sure that we will hear lots of examples of that in the debate. I have had the privilege of meeting remarkable organisations, including Stonewall, Galop, the LGBT Foundation, the LGBT Consortium and the Terrence Higgins Trust, among many others. These organisations help people through some of the most difficult moments in their lives, challenge injustice and build stronger communities. We owe them our gratitude and we have a responsibility to support their work.

That is why this Government are taking Pride Month so seriously, being loud and proud about our commitment to the LGBT community. Throughout this month, Departments across Government will be hosting events and activities that celebrate LGBT+ communities and highlighting the issues they face. From the Ministry of Justice engaging with LGBT legal professionals to the work of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs exploring the experiences of LGBT+ people in rural communities, colleagues across Government are playing their part.

Our commitment to Pride is not confined to a single month. We will stand with the LGBT+ community year-round, because that is what this Labour Government stand for: hope and unity over division and hate. It is a simple principle that I hope Members across this House can agree on: every person in this country should be able to live freely, safely and with dignity, regardless of who they are or who they love. That is the principle we reaffirm today and that is the commitment this Government will continue to defend.

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

1.31 pm

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): May I begin by apologising to Members? I have sought permission from Mr Speaker to leave early today, because I have a long-standing event in my constituency that I have to attend. I apologise that I will not be here—[*Interruption.*] It is not to do with Pride, I am afraid. I am very happy to be leaving the rest of this very important debate in the capable hands of my hon. Friend the Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies).

What a pleasure it is to follow the Minister for Equalities, the hon. Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey). She made a really great and very personal speech. I am equally grateful, on behalf of His Majesty's Opposition, to have the opportunity to open this important debate, because Pride Month is a celebration. It is a celebration of the progress that has been made, of the lives lived openly, of families formed, of communities built and of people who no longer have to hide who they are, but it is also a reminder of why that progress was necessary in the first place and why it can never be taken for granted.

For me, this debate is deeply personal. I have seen changes in my lifetime that I could never have imagined when I was growing up as a young gay man on the isle of Anglesey. Back then, community was not always easy to find. I have joked before many times in this House that it often felt like I was literally the only gay in the village. But behind the humour is a serious point: for many people, particularly in small towns, in families, workplaces or faith communities, being LGBT can still feel a very lonely place indeed. That is one of the reasons why Pride still matters.

I am very proud of my good friend and former Member of this House Eric Ollerenshaw, who was one of the first five people on the very first Pride march back in the early 1970s. He describes how, at the time, even the police were spitting at them—just unbelievable when we think about that today. Pride is not only about big parades, flags and public celebrations. It is about the teenager who feels completely alone; it is about the person who is quietly calculating every single word they say. I have spoken before about being attacked and hospitalised when I was younger just because of who I am. Walking down that road, being followed by three men, being called a queer and knowing what was coming next was terrifying. I am so glad that we now live in a country that has changed enormously since then.

Chris Vince: In the spirit of this debate, I would like to say to the right hon. Gentleman that, although we might not agree on everything politically, this place is better because he is here and we should recognise that.

Stuart Andrew: Do you know, I am going to cry in a minute! I thank the hon. Gentleman, although that is the second opportunity he has missed to mention Harlow—I am getting worried about him! [*Laughter.*]

As I was saying, that experience has stayed with me; it reminds me why progress matters and can never be taken for granted. Prejudice may look different today, but it has not vanished. There are still people around the world, and some people in this country, who cannot come out or live the life they want to live. That is why Pride is not just a month in the calendar; it is a statement that those people are not forgotten. It is also why what happens in this House matters. The law can change lives. It can tell people whether they are recognised, protected and valued. That is why the passage of the equal marriage Act in 2013—the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act—remains one of the proudest moments of my time in Parliament.

No party has a monopoly on progress. People from all parties and none have fought for the rights and dignity of LGBT people. I am proud that Conservatives played a part in delivering equal marriage and I am proud of the progress that Conservative Governments made on HIV prevention, testing and treatment, including HIV Testing Week and the legalisation of HIV self-testing kits.

I also want to pay tribute to the Terrence Higgins Trust and its CEO Richard Angell, and all those who have been campaigning to end new HIV transmissions by 2030. As the shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, I absolutely back the Government in their ambition to see that happen. When I was growing up, I never thought that we would see the end of it. It was so terrifying at the time and the fact that we now have that goal in sight is truly remarkable and wonderful.

I also want to say clearly as the shadow Secretary of State for Health that LGBT health matters. That means keeping a strong focus on HIV prevention, testing and treatment, making sure that stigma continues to be broken down, recognising the particular mental health pressures some LGBT people face, and ensuring that everyone can use the NHS without fear, shame or discrimination. It also means remembering older LGBT people, including those who lived through the AIDS crisis, who should never feel forced back into the closet when they need social care or support later on in life, or if they end up in residential or nursing homes. I know that that has been happening and it is something we need to address. I hope the Minister, when winding up, might be able to update the House—she mentioned some of the continuing work on HIV prevention—on how that progress will be maintained, because the clock is ticking and I am conscious that there is still quite a bit to do, and update us on what work the Government are planning to do on older LGBT people as we think about their care needs in the future.

I, too, want to address the Equality Act code of practice and the Supreme Court ruling, because they have been very prominent in recent days. The law is now clear that for the purposes of the Equality Act, sex means biological sex. Single-sex spaces must be protected where they are needed, particularly where privacy, dignity and safeguarding are at stake. That clarity matters for women, service providers, staff who need to know what the law requires of them, and the NHS. Decisions about

female wards, intimate care, changing rooms and women-only services cannot be left to confusion or inconsistent local interpretation.

We should also be able to and capable of saying two things at once. We can say that sex means biological sex and that single-sex spaces must be protected, and we can also say that trans people must be treated with dignity, respect, compassion and love. Those positions are not mutually exclusive. They are both part of a serious, humane and lawful approach. I hope the Minister can set out what the code of practice means in practice for the NHS, including for female wards and the other issues I have mentioned. NHS staff, patients and trusts need clarity on how the law should be applied.

This House should be able to approach these issues without pretending they are simple, and also without pretending that clarity is unkind. That is why I think it is a mistake when Pride events suggest that political parties should have no place in them. The banning of political parties from some Pride events is disappointing, because Pride does not belong to one political tribe. The people elected to this House, and the LGBT organisations in all our parties, have helped to deliver real change. I pay tribute to them all and thank them for what they have done. LGBT people are Conservatives, Labour members, Liberal Democrats, Greens, nationalists, independents, and people of no political party at all. They should not be made to feel unwelcome. In fact, I want to see more gay and lesbian people in politics. Banning political parties from Pride flies in the face of its meaning, in my view.

I want to mention lesbians specifically, because too often their voices are treated as an afterthought in debates about LGBT rights. Lesbian women have been central to the history of Pride, activism and community life. Their experiences matter in debates about healthcare, safety, dignity and sex-based rights. Pride Month should never allow the L in LGBT to become silent.

No one should have to hide who they are in order to feel safe. That means taking anti-LGBT hate crime seriously. Too many incidents still go unreported because people think they are too minor or worry they will not be taken seriously. They should be taken very seriously indeed, and that is true in sport, schools, workplaces, healthcare, families and public life.

Pride is a celebration of how far we have come, but it is also a promise that we will remember those who came before us, stand with those who still feel alone, and help the next generation live more freely, safely and honestly than the last. That is what Pride Month means to me, and that is why this debate matters.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee.

1.41 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is a real honour to follow the speeches made by the Minister and shadow Minister. The commitment of both to furthering LGBTQ+ rights, in this place and outside it, should be honoured. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince)—I got Harlow in—that they are both an inspiration to everyone in this House now and to future generations. I hope that we see more diversity in this place—because, boy, don't we benefit from it.

[Sarah Owen]

This is another equalities debate that has been pushed to a Thursday, when many MPs have returned to their constituencies and the press are focusing on the Sunday news stories. It is disappointing to know that there are so many people who wanted to be here but cannot be. It is pretty embarrassing that there is not a single Back Bencher from the Conservatives, and that there is only one representative from the Lib Dems, Greens and the SNP, when I know there are more voices that would be willing to be here if Parliament gave the time to equalities debates that it should give. I have written to the Procedure Committee, because these debates should be a priority across all Departments and all the work that we carry out in this place. They are not an add-on at the end. If we are only working for some of society, we are not working for all.

I am usually excited about Pride Month. I usually love a good party, and, unlike the Minister, I like a bit of dancing—I am rubbish at singing, but I will do it. Pride is a chance to celebrate and come together—absolutely—but it is also a chance to understand, grow and learn. Sadly, Pride is more of a protest this year than a party. I always say that progress is not inevitable, but I hoped that it would never regress as quickly as I have seen. It is a disgraceful environment where people's genitalia are up for debate, UK politicians proudly question the ability of same-sex couples to provide loving and safe homes for children, and a tiny vulnerable part of our society is blatantly demonised under the guise of protecting women and girls.

I have said it before in this House and I will say it again that my safety, both physical and emotional, has only been threatened by men: men who were born men; men with power; men unaccountable for their actions; men who have never faced justice; men who would never be stopped by a sign on a toilet door. Those are the people who threaten our safety and society, and until they are the focus of the debate about women and girls' safety, no amount of single-sex spaces is going to save any of us. Scapegoating the trans community will not work; it will not make any of us safer.

The inconsistencies in the latest iteration of the EHRC code of practice make it unworkable and unjust. "Challenge someone, but do not cause harm or embarrassment by challenging them"—how is that possible? How does someone prove or disprove that? "Ask trans people to use a third space but somehow keep their right to a private life." The Women and Equalities Committee will be questioning the EHRC chair next week, so I am minded of the remarks of the Minister for Equalities earlier this week that we must ask the chair about those details.

The Government, as well as the EHRC, have to provide answers to the trans community, businesses, organisations and the general public on how this sorry saga ends without things being further inflamed. All I see is more litigation, pain, uncertainty, time and money being spent solving a problem that most people did not prioritise above the actual problems that this country should be dealing with, such as the 97% of reported rapes that go unpunished.

Cis-male perpetrators do not have to disguise themselves as anyone or anything to get away with the most hideous of crimes in this country, because they are already

committing them and, on the whole, getting away with it, unfortunately. The distortion of the arguments about women's safety has had a devastating impact on trans people, with the focus on trans women, but with trans men completely forgotten from the conversation—not to mention non-binary and intersex people.

Let us look at the real-life impact that this is having on the people we represent. I want to share a conversation that I had yesterday. It was with my constituent and friend, Teraina Hird, an 83-year-old trans woman. We chatted yesterday; I did not know this at the time, but she had discharged herself from hospital so that she could speak with me. Teraina told me that that was how much it meant to her to get her experience and questions across to me and fellow parliamentarians. I did have a go at her—I told her that I would rather she had stayed in hospital and that her health was more important. She disagreed, and said, "I'm 83. I have lived my life. This is about the future generations and the others who come next." This debate was more important to her than her own health.

Teraina put her health at risk to speak with me—that is how existential it feels right now for the trans community. She has always fought hard against bigotry. She is one of the most talented people with her hands that I have seen. She is a woodturner, and she makes beautiful pens. She does so many fantastic things with pieces of wood—things I could never have imagined people could do without heavy machinery. She was a mechanical engineer and owned her own business in Luton.

When Teraina transitioned, the local media covered it in a matter-of-fact way. But *The Sun* phoned up and said, "We'd love to cover it. Don't worry, we're not going to send a reporter. We've got everything that we need from the local news. We'll just send a photographer." They took a photo of her, and plastered on the headline, "Mechanic loses nuts...and customers bolt". That is disgusting, but to be honest, it seems almost mild when compared with the vilification of the LGBTQ+ community in some parts of the media nowadays.

Teraina asks these questions of the Minister and everyone in this place. How can the safety of trans men and trans women be protected when using the toilets of the opposite gender? How is it going to be policed? Are there even enough cubicles and toilets to deal with the proposed change? Teraina discharged herself to share those questions with me, but she was also terrified of being put on a men's ward. Her last question is: where would she have been put to be treated? Which ward would she have been put on? She would never have felt comfortable on a men's ward. Would it have been dignified for her to receive treatment on a men's ward?

These are Teraina's words:

"I was born a male but I have never been a man. I tried but I failed. I always have felt female. Even at school as a boy, I was bullied for being"—

in her words—

"a 'sissy' so I left."

This has had a lifelong impact on Teraina.

Another Luton constituent is now having to walk considerable distances to use a toilet outside of her place of work, which is causing not just an emotional impact, but a physical one—and potentially a financial impact, too, if she cannot remain in her place of work without being outed against her will. Where is her right

to privacy? The Minister spoke about the Supreme Court being very clear that the ruling should not impact a trans person's right to privacy, but is my constituent's right to privacy being protected? Currently it is not.

I have always believed that unless we are all enjoying progress, none of us truly is. If we care about human rights, we do not get to pick which human rights we care about and which we do not.

LGBT rights and women's rights should be able to go hand in hand. The Select Committee heard from the Spanish Ministry of Equality about how Spain is leading the way in LGBT+ rights, ranking No. 1 on ILGA-Europe's rainbow map. I am not just jealous of Spanish weather; I am jealous of Spanish equality. Spain has set up a helpline to provide support to LGBT people in instances of abuse and is providing world-leading fertility treatment, which is benefiting the LGBT+ communities. It also recently appointed its first global LGBTQ+ rights envoy to advocate for the decriminalisation of same-sex relations internationally. We can look to Spain as a leader not just in Europe, but across the world.

Add to that the fact that Spain is highly progressive in its approach to women's rights. It is not one or the other; it is both. It has developed an advanced monitoring system that police use to risk assess and track cases of gender-based violence and provide tailored protection to victims. Since the introduction of the VioGén system, the rate of femicide by a partner or ex-partner has decreased year on year in Spain.

These international examples make it abundantly clear that despite what some of the loudest voices inside this place and outside will say, it is not a case of women's rights versus trans rights or women's safety versus LGBT freedom. No, we can and should all live alongside each other—not just with dignity, but with joy, proper celebration, proper understanding and proper love. When we take male violence against women seriously, we are protecting all women and girls, and we are acknowledging the real villain behind this crisis rather than scapegoating the trans community.

It is hard sometimes to find reasons to be cheerful, but the world of sport may offer some—it is full of LGBT+ legends after all, just like our Parliament. Women's football and rugby continue to provide incredible role models for young women—actually, women of any age—who are grappling with their sexuality. Across the Women's super league, the Lionesses, the Red Roses and English cricket, there are women living their truth in loving relationships with each other—married, raising children and being themselves publicly and proudly. They are absolutely knocking it out of the park.

For the majority of male footballers, displaying their girlfriends and wives online alongside their family seems completely normal—they take it for granted that society accepts and celebrates their personal lives. But for our lesbian and bisexual athletes in same-sex relationships, each time they do an anniversary post or kiss their partner in the stands, they are unwittingly making a statement and risking abuse. I want to thank them for their everyday bravery. I also hope that it will not be a brave act for very much longer, and that it will just be normal.

We need to acknowledge once again that there are still no out male premier league footballers. To be honest, who can blame them? Homophobia, alongside

racism and misogyny, continues to be a rampant disease among both match-going fans and trolls online. Hatred does not stay in one lane; it never does. If hon. Members want to see an example of that, look at what Reform councils are doing with Pride flags. They are not stopping with Pride flags; they are going after Ukrainian flags, too. There will always be somebody—when people do not have the answers to the problems facing them, it is easier to blame somebody else than to really look inwards, at themselves, and at how we can further our country together. This week, Millwall FC released a Pride playbook to advise on connecting with LGBT+ teams. I hope that this is the beginning of a new era of inclusivity in men's football, but I know that we have so much further to go.

There are seeds of hope for LGBT people across our culture and society, and I want to end with some of them. February saw HBO drama "Heated Rivalry" break viewing records across the world—I am sure that a lot of us enjoyed watching it. It celebrates a particularly fiery LGBT love story while also channelling new fans into winter sports. I love ice hockey. I am so up for all full-contact sports, but roll in a good love story too? Happy days.

Durham Pride has raised enough money to throw the biggest Pride in its history, with support from the local trade union movement. If there is an example of love winning, this is it. Especially in the face of hatred, love will always win. It is an example of what we must all fight against in the future.

Last October, King Charles unveiled the first mural dedicated to LGBTQ+ members of the British armed forces. Named "An Opened Letter", it honours servicemen and women who experienced homophobic abuse.

Rates of adoption among LGBT people have quadrupled over the past decade, with at least 20% of all adopted children now finding a loving home with a same-sex couple. How dare any politician—how dare anybody—say that that is not the best place for a child? The best place for a child is always in a loving home.

And, as we have heard today, our Labour Government are set to finally bring in an end to the painful, arcane practice of conversion therapy with the trans-inclusive draft conversion practices Bill included in the King's Speech. I cannot wait to support it when it is introduced.

While the light behind the clouds may be hard to find, and the rainbows may be really far in the distance from all the rain, it is important that we do find that glimmer of light and those rainbows this Pride month. I want to end with the words that Teraina said to me yesterday. It is what her grandmother and family had always said. It is also something my grandma always said to me:

"Treat other people the way you would like to be treated."

It is not that hard.

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

1.57 pm

Zoe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): I start by saying that I am honoured to be the spokesperson for this debate and to speak after some incredibly powerful speeches. In particular, I acknowledge the work of the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) and her words

[Zöe Franklin]

today. I thank her for all she does on human rights, and particularly for her advocacy for the trans community. I am not sure how I will follow what she has shared. I know that there will be more to come in the Chamber, and that there will probably be more tears.

Pride Month is a celebration of visibility, dignity and progress, but it should also be a moment of honesty. Despite the hard-fought progress we have made as a nation, we are slipping backwards on LGBT rights in this country. In 2025, the UK fell six places to 22nd in ILGA-Europe's LGBT rights ranking; to put that into context, we were ranked No. 1 in Europe in 2015. When it comes to gender recognition rights, the UK now ranks in the bottom six of 49 European countries. That should concern every Member of this House who believes in the fundamental rights of equality, freedom and human dignity.

Pride Month matters because standing up for the LGBT community is ultimately about standing up for everyone's right to live openly, safely and authentically. It says that no matter who you are, who you love or how you present, you are equally valued and equally respected. This House should remember that progress in LGBT equality has never been inevitable. Every single right was fought for by campaigners, activists and political allies who refused to accept the discrimination that was the status quo. Our thanks should and do go to every single one of them.

The Liberal Democrats are proud to have stood alongside that movement for decades. We fought to repeal section 28—the legislation that silenced LGBT people in schools and communities, and that told an entire generation that who they were was something shameful. I have two sons, and through them I have seen how different education is now from when I was at school. I am incredibly grateful to be able to see how education has changed. I can see that young people living as their authentic selves has become supported by schools. Most inspiring, I have watched so many young people come through my door who are living and exploring who they are. I think that we should all take inspiration from so many of the next generation, who are simply letting each other love who they want to love and be who they want to be.

As a party, the Liberal Democrats were instrumental in delivering equal marriage. Our former Equalities Minister, Lynne Featherstone—now Baroness Featherstone in the other place—led the fight inside Government to make marriage equality a reality in this country. I am deeply proud that we led that fight, and I have been deeply moved by the couples who have generously shared with me their stories about what that change meant for them as a couple and for their families.

In spite of all that progress, this year has been a particularly upsetting year for much of the LGBT community, especially trans, non-binary and intersex people, following the Supreme Court ruling on the definition of sex in the Equality Act. Like many Members across this House, I have received deeply distressing accounts from constituents who are fearful that they will not be able to participate fully in public life going forward.

Let me be clear: trans rights and human rights are not in conflict. After the Supreme Court ruling, the Government's responsibility was to provide clear and

workable guidance, but the EHRC's code of practice, laid before Parliament just two weeks ago, is, in its current form, exclusionary, unworkable and deeply concerning. Even the Government's own equality impact assessment acknowledges disproportionate harm to those with protected characteristics. It warns that women who do not conform to cultural expectations of what a woman should look like could face challenges simply in accessing a women-only space. It acknowledges the negative impact on disabled people, with Disability Rights UK warning against forcing trans and non-binary people into separate, third spaces. Most alarmingly, it explicitly states that some trans people could effectively be barred from both spaces aligned with their gender identity and spaces aligned with their birth sex, leaving them with no space in services at all. That is not dignity; it is exclusion.

I am personally worried for the whole trans community, particularly the next generation of trans men and women. With all the changes in the way that the LGBT community are being spoken about here in the UK, and with the stories that have been shared by Members already about certain political parties and individuals, what is that saying to the next generation? What world are we leaving as a legacy? We have to act now before it is too late. That is why my right hon. Friend Ed Davey and our women and equalities spokesperson—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Lady has been here nearly two years. We must stop referring to Members by their names—it has been rife today. Members must be referred to by their constituencies, please.

Zöe Franklin: I do apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker.

That is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) and my hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) have called upon the Government to withdraw the code and ensure that this issue is properly scrutinised by Parliament.

Guidance of this significance should not simply be pushed through as a statutory instrument subject to the negative procedure, without proper democratic debate or a vote in this House. Alongside parliamentary scrutiny of the code, there are urgent actions that the Government could take now. One meaningful and long-overdue step would be finally to implement a fully trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices. That was proposed back in 2018 by Theresa May's Government, but it still has not happened. I have attended many Pride events and talked to people about a ban, and they are not aware that a ban is not already in place, and they are frankly shocked.

The Government promised in the last King's Speech to publish a draft Bill, but they did not. They promised again to do so in this King's Speech, and although I thank the Minister for her comments on this issue, I join the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) in pressing the Minister for clarity on a timeline. The LGBT community cannot wait until the end of this Session, only to see the same promise broken yet again. Conversion practices are barbaric. They are based on the offensive idea that LGBT people are somehow broken and in need of fixing. The practices cause profound psychological harm and have absolutely no place in a modern society.

This Pride month, let us celebrate the progress that generations before us fought so hard to achieve. Let us also recognise that equality is never guaranteed and that we are in an incredibly fragile place. At a time when LGBT people, particularly trans people, are increasingly being used as a political football in divisive culture wars, this House has a responsibility to stand firmly on the side of dignity, compassion and human rights. Pride must always be more than a celebration; it must be a year-round promise that we will keep fighting until everyone is truly free to live openly and equally without fear.

2.5 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): It is a privilege to follow such excellent contributions to this debate, particularly those from the hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) and my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), who I thought gave an absolutely cracking speech.

This afternoon I want to talk about the LGBTQ+ community—my community—in Macclesfield and across the country, and about the very real challenges that our community now faces, but I want to begin with something personal. I am proud to be the Member of Parliament for Macclesfield, and I am equally proud to be the first openly gay Member of Parliament that my constituency has ever sent to this House. I say that not to draw attention to myself, but because I know what it means. It means something to the young person in Macclesfield who wonders whether someone like them can ever hold a position like this. It means something to the person who grew up in our area, as I did, and was never sure that they belonged. Representation matters, visibility matters, and I and others are humbled to carry that responsibility, including the Minister, who started this debate so ably. When I speak about Pride, I am speaking not as an observer but as someone who knows what it is to need it.

Macclesfield has given me every reason to be proud, because the town and rural communities I represent today are warmer, more open and more welcoming than the ones I knew growing up. That transformation has happened not by chance but because of the courage of LGBT+ people who stayed visible and refused to disappear and because of local communities that chose to embrace them.

Nowhere is that spirit more alive than in MaccPride, our town's own Pride festival, which has grown from an idea in 2018 into a joyous, colourful celebration in the heart of our town centre. I want to take a moment to thank the extraordinary people who make it happen: Sophie Armitt and Olivia Clare, Andrew Angus-Whiteoak, Kyle Frost, Kerry McKeith, Jo Stratford, Paula Parkes—the incredibly important parade co-ordinator—Rachel Wisson, Serena Lavin, Jenni Duggan, the amazing Stella Wake-Bennett, whose wife Sarah Bennett-Wake was the first openly gay mayor of Macclesfield and is a friend, Charlie Higgins Bos, Pippa Dean, Mikki Tiamo, and Jynx Noctem. They are the reason that Macclesfield Pride happens. They give their time, energy, creativity and passion year after year—entirely voluntarily—to create something genuinely wonderful for our community. Parliament should know what they do, and I am proud to say their names in the Chamber today. I know that other colleagues will similarly have activists in their area who they are equally proud of.

That spirit is also on display at our regular Stride for Pride, which is organised by the wonderful Mika and Dan of the Yas Bean coffee shop. It is a community event that brings people together in solidarity as much as celebration. Solidarity is not incidental to the LGBT+ story; it is central to it. Our community has always known that we show up for each other—across differences, across generations—because sometimes there is nobody else. The need for that solidarity has never been more urgent than it is right now.

Before I turn to some of my concerns, let me say a little of the good. I am proud to have supported my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) in her campaign to make LGBT+ hate crimes aggravated offences that carry tougher sentences; I am proud that the Government are delivering financial compensation to LGBT+ veterans who have suffered abuse, prejudice and dismissal under the awful historical armed forces ban; and I am proud that the Government will bring in a ban on conversion practices. I eagerly look forward to voting for it. It hangs on a timeline and a history of fantastic progress by the Labour party. That is not exclusive to the Labour party, but fantastic progress has been made under Labour Governments, including the repeal of section 28, the introduction of civil partnerships and the adoption rights that we heard of earlier.

I will talk about things causing real concern, which colleagues have already raised ably this afternoon: the concerns that trans people have. Trans constituents have written to me with real worry since the draft code of practice was laid before this House in May. It is my duty to represent their concerns honestly and clearly, because they deserve that, and I know that the Government will want to hear them.

First, let me start with where we stand internationally. The hon. Member for Guildford pointed out that we have dropped significantly in the ILGA-Europe rainbow map. To think that in 2015 we were first—what an incredible thing to have been proud of—and then we fell 22 places in the space of a decade. The hon. Member also pointed out that on the issue of trans rights and legal gender recognition, we are now ranked 45th out of 49 European nations.

We have not gone backwards by accident. I have said before in this place that political will matters, as do legal frameworks and words laid before this House. Transphobic hate crimes have increased since 2016, according to Home Office data. Some of that is because of better reporting, but some is undoubtedly due to the toxic atmosphere being directed towards such a small minority. It is real fear, real isolation and real violence felt by people who are simply trying to live as themselves.

I want to be clear about where I stand: I support women's rights to single-sex spaces and services, as set out in the Equality Act. Those rights are real, they matter and I defend them. However, I disagree with attempts to make them mutually exclusive with the dignity and safety of trans people; both can and must be protected. I give credit to the Secretary of State, with regards to the guidance, for the engagement that she has had with MPs on all sides of the House. I know that she faced an incredible amount of pressure from all sorts of directions. However, I have heard from constituents, trans constituents and parents with trans children who are genuinely frightened that, without clearer

[Tim Roca]

protections, they will face more exclusion and harassment, and we will all see more expensive and exhaustive legal battles.

As has already been referenced, the Government's equality impact assessment warns of a

"disproportionate risk of violence and sexual assault"

towards trans women if they are directed to use male services. That is not a campaigning document; it is the Government's own analysis, and it deserves an answer.

I am also worried, as the hon. Member for Luton North has pointed out, about the practical confusion on the ground for businesses in my constituency, including cafés, restaurants and leisure centres. The guidance states simultaneously that members of the public should not challenge one another on the basis of sex, while also suggesting that where someone is asked to confirm their sex, it should be done "sensitively". Most reasonable business owners will be bewildered.

As I understand it—I am not an expert—the suggestion from the briefing that some of us attended with the EHRC yesterday is that it would not be possible for a club or an association to decide to be open only to women, including trans women, and they would be challenged on that. Using the prevention of "discomfort or distress" of other service users as a legitimate aim of exclusion, combined with guidance suggesting that concern about a person's sex may be evidenced by their "appearance" or "behaviour", creates a subjective, appearance-based threshold that, frankly, is an open invitation to harass anyone, trans or cis, who does not conform to stereotypes. That is not clarity and I worry that it could lead to real harm.

Colleagues have tabled an early-day motion calling for the guidance to be disapproved. I have genuine sympathy with their intention. Many are formidable campaigners for LGBT rights, and I respect them greatly. I have to be honest, however; the Supreme Court judgment is clear, and statutory guidance has to reflect the law as it stands. My view and my assessment is that the genuine route forward for those of us who want clearer and stronger protections for trans people—I count myself firmly in that group—is either new or amended legislation from Parliament, or a future legal challenge that resets the framework. Indeed, we have to accept that the Supreme Court judgment is making the Gender Recognition Act 2004 and the certificates increasingly close to symbolic, with little practical force. That cannot have been Parliament's intention when it passed that legislation.

Let me finish on a point to which the debate on Pride should always return. I was attending the wedding of some very close gay friends in Argentina some years ago, and I came across the words of Carlos Jáuregui, a great Argentine LGBT activist:

"En una sociedad que nos educa para la vergüenza, el orgullo es una respuesta política".

In other words, in a society that educates us to be ashamed, pride is a political response. Pride began as a protest, an act of resistance by people who have been told by law and by society that they did not deserve dignity. That history lives in every parade, including the one that will set off through Macclesfield in a few weeks' time and wind its way down to the marketplace. It lives in Stride for Pride, in every rainbow flag on every

shop on Chestergate in Macclesfield; it lives in the fact that I as Macclesfield's MP am standing here today openly and proudly as myself—the first openly gay Macclesfield MP—because we all stand on the shoulders of activists like those who organised the protests and made this world possible.

In a society that still, in too many ways, educates people to be ashamed, pride is the political response, and it has never been clearer that the need for it is great. I am proud to represent Macclesfield, proud of our extraordinary LGBT community, and proud to say to every LGBT person watching or listening: we see you, we are with you, and we will keep fighting.

2.16 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am glad to have the chance to speak in the debate, although I echo the words of the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen): these things are always on a Thursday. As the sole woman in the SNP, and as the party's women and equalities spokesperson, I find myself here on Thursdays way more often than my colleagues. It would be nice if we moved these debates around a little, and had them on a Monday occasionally.

I cannot help but agree with every word that the hon. Member for Luton North said. I will try really hard not to be party political, and not to—this is the bit that I will find most difficult—look backwards. Instead, I will try to look forward. I will look for what we need to do. I will point out where things are today and how we can improve them, rather than looking at what was done in the past, but first, I recognise that although Pride is about celebration, it is also about being angry. We should be angry about the injustices. We can celebrate, party, dance, sing and use rainbow colours if we wish to, but we must remember that we are always fighting against those injustices, and trying to improve the world and our small part of it, so that everyone can live their truth and be who they are, including publicly.

There are a number of things that I would like to see happen, changes that need to be made and things that I would like the Government to consider. I asked the Minister a question about the conversion therapy ban. I appreciate, and I believe in, her commitment to that—I have no reason to doubt it. It just rankles a little that when we were talking about the Equality Act judgment, Ministers would say, at the Dispatch Box, "We do support trans people, because we are delivering a fully trans-inclusive conversion therapy ban." They have been saying that for two years. The trans community feels so hurt and alone as it is, so that rings hollow. Anything that the Minister can do to make sure that the ban happens soon, so that we can at least protect the trans community in one way, would be hugely appreciated.

I turn to the EHRC guidance, how it will work and the impact it will have on people's lives. An MP should be allowed to choose to tell people, from the Dispatch Box or elsewhere in this Chamber, that they are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer. They should be allowed not to choose to do that. The atmosphere and ethos should allow people to choose whether to do that or not. It should be their right to say that out loud or not. In the guidance, we are saying that trans people no longer have that right. We are saying that no trans person who is accessing a service will be allowed to remain quiet about their gender reassignment status; they will have to state

what their biological sex is, according to the Equality Act. If they are booked into the NHS—taken into hospital, or into a mental health setting and sectioned—they will have to say to the doctor and the medical staff, “I was assigned female at birth.” They will have to make that clear; their right to privacy is gone. If someone who went to hospital had to say, “I’m bisexual” or “I’m gay” before they were assigned to a ward, that would be completely unacceptable, but we think it is okay for trans people to have to say that, even if it is not medically relevant. We think it is okay for trans people to have to say that before they can go to a swimming pool and into the changing rooms. We are telling people that they must explain what their biological sex is before they can access services.

This is not proportionate guidance. It is not fair to take away that private-life right, which every one of us should have. We should be able to choose what we tell people about our gender identity, biological sex and sexuality. What we say about those should be up to us. For example, if somebody is living in a religious community that has only ever known them as a woman, they will now have to say, “I’m sorry—I can’t use those toilets. I’m not allowed to use them,” or else—I don’t know; I do not know what sanctions result from that. But the guidance does not work.

I appreciate the issue of clarity in the law, which people have talked about. The prayer against the statutory instrument is praying against the guidance. However unhappy some of us are with the judgment, the early-day motion states that the guidance does not work, and that the statutory instrument should not be approved; it is not about overturning the Supreme Court judgment, no matter how many people would like to do that, or about changing the Equality Act. It is specifically about the guidance being inappropriate. I have put my name to the motion because I do not think that the guidance works, or understand how it will work. Trans people living across these islands should have the right to privacy and should not have to disclose their status to anybody who asks.

I will talk about a few things that are probably less serious, but still important. Fertility issues in relation to gay and lesbian couples have been raised with me on many occasions. Will the Minister and the team look into the number of rounds of in vitro fertilisation treatment that are provided to people, and whether that involves discrimination on the basis of sexuality? Can any improvements be made to those systems to ensure that, no matter the sexuality of a couple or an individual, there is a level playing field and people are provided equal access to services? As was said, what children need is a loving family; it should not matter what gender the parents are when they are going for fertility treatment. Anything the Minister can do on that would be helpful.

Let me turn to the social media ban. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), spoke about the loneliness that there can be in being the only gay in the village, somebody whose voice is not heard, or somebody who cannot live their truth in their family. We need to be careful, in any decisions taken around social media bans, not to remove young people from communities they may have found, which might be the only places where they can live their truth, where they are supported and where they can see that there are other people like

them. We need to ensure that there are impact assessments, so that we are not committing these young people, who already feel on the outside of things and that they are not accepted, to further isolation. I am not saying that definitely will happen; I am saying that the Government need to assess and consider these things when they take any decisions around social media bans.

Let me also touch on neurodiversity, intersectionality and issues faced by people who fit into numerous categories of minority. It bothers me hugely that this is a prevalent thought for too many people: “You’re not really trans; you’re just autistic.” It is perfectly possible to be autistic and trans. It is perfectly possible to be one and not the other, or both. Too many people are told, or have suggested to them, “You’re just neurodiverse; don’t worry—you’re not really trans.” That is not listening to people and understanding their truth; it is not accepting them for who they are. People grow and change. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin), talked about young people being able to be themselves and accepted as themselves. Some of those young people will change as they go along their path and find the right fit for them. Some of them will be non-binary for a bit, and then realise that they are actually not non-binary at all. That is okay, and it should be okay. We all try things on. I dressed as a goth for a while as a kid; I do not recommend it—I am not nearly pale enough to dress as a goth, but I thought it was a good idea for a wee while. Until I found out who I was, what fitted and how I wanted to express myself, it was okay to try all sorts of things. We should accept young people as they do that, and support them on that journey, as they discover who they are.

I want to raise a concern about school guidance. If a young person at school discloses to their teacher that they are a lesbian or bisexual, there is no automatic feeling that “We had better go and tell their parents, because this is really dangerous and scary.” Some of the guidance for schools states that, if a young person discloses that they are trans, their parents must be told. Now, it is not always safe for their parents to be told. It is concerning if teachers feel that they have to treat trans children differently and have a conversation with parents about that. Children need to feel that they can live their truth and speak to trusted adults about that, without fear that it will be passed on. I do not understand how we can justify treating this issue differently, and how we can say this is somehow dangerous and scary. The more that we treat it differently, and suggest that it is dangerous and scary, the more hatred and lack of understanding there will be for an already marginalised minority group.

I want the Government, and all Governments, to think carefully when they are making decisions or putting out guidance about whether it stigmatises and minoritises an already attacked community—a community that is already finding things difficult. I appreciate the Government talking about DEFRA, for example, looking at the impact of growing up gay in rural communities—I cannot exactly remember the phrase. I appreciate that these things are being done much more throughout Government than they perhaps were. Women and Equalities Ministers are not the only people who ever think about the fact that gay people exist. I am glad that other Departments are doing that, but we need to do more of it, particularly when it comes to trans people and destigmatising and not minoritising individuals.

[Kirsty Blackman]

My last point on trans people relates to puberty blockers. There still needs to be more thought about the best way forward. We are minoritising and stigmatising a community and saying to people that their reality and truth are not the reality and truth, that they are not allowed to believe that and that they are not allowed to be trans until they are 18. People are allowed to be gay before they are 18, but they are allowed to be trans only once they are 18. That is not what somebody has said from the Dispatch Box, but that is what it feels like to so many members of the community, and I would love the Government to consider that.

Let me finish on a happier note. There is a charity in Aberdeen called Four Pillars. I remember more than 10 years ago sitting with DeeJay, one of the team who runs the charity, and DeeJay saying, "I have this dream of having a café, a drop-in place where people can go and be themselves and feel comfortable." That café has now been open for a number of years. At the time, both of us laughed because we thought, "That's never going to happen. We are never going to have that in the city centre of Aberdeen," but we now have that safe space where people can be themselves. The café does all sorts of cool, fun things, such as dungeons and dragons nights and craft nights. It is a place where people can be themselves and are accepted no matter what that looks like. We need more of that acceptance. We need to ensure that gender non-conformity, for example, is more accepted, that we are not giving people a licence to challenge women with short hair. Why should men not wear skirts? Why should boys not wear pink? That is stuff we have been fighting against for so long, and the guidance we have now risks dragging us backwards.

This is my very last point—I promise, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have heard about how lesbians are sometimes left out of this conversation and we have heard an awful lot about trans people, because of the risks and worries for the trans community, but there is a B in LGBT, too. It does not matter who someone is married to, it does not define their sexuality. If a woman is married to a man, that does not mean she is heterosexual. We can listen to people and accept that their truth may not be as stereotypical as it looks from the outside, and we should remember when we are talking about Pride and LGBT history that there is a B in LGBT, too.

2.32 pm

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): This time last year, in the debate on Pride Month in this House, I told the story of one of my constituents who had served in the military and had been dismissed because of his sexuality. He was treated at that time with a casual brutality. One positive thing about the debate was that a large number of Members wanted to speak, and with a desire to accommodate everyone—understandably—a time limit on contributions was introduced, so unfortunately I had to hurriedly reduce my seven or eight-minute speech to three minutes to fit the time limit. The next morning, having thought about this, I resolved to contact the constituent to apologise, because I felt that in the limited time available I had not done justice to his story. However, when I opened my emails to find his contact details, I saw there was an email from him. I opened it and the email was thanking me for telling his story. That

indicates why Pride is so important: it is about stories being told, voices heard, lives recognised. It is about our community of communities being seen and heard. It is about being recognised and celebrated for who we are, not just kindly tolerated.

Every year during Pride Month, we seem to get into the debate about whether Pride is a celebration or a protest. My contribution to those discussions has usually been along similar lines to those used by the Minister in her opening contribution: it is both a celebration and a protest. But now I think it is perhaps something else: Pride is indeed a place. Pride is a place where people can be their authentic selves without judgment or fear. Pride, above all else, should be a place free from shame—that shame we are so often taught from an early age, the shame felt at being who we are, that feeling that we are not quite who we should be. At best, it is the casual assumption by others that we are something we are not. At worst, it is name calling, mockery, rejection and hate. That shame is reinforced by social norms and assumptions.

Pride is that place where people do not have to justify who they are. Yes, Pride can be a public place, a place of declaration, but Pride can be a private place, too—a private place where people find calm in knowing who they are, shedding shame and being themselves. No one should be expected to have to declare repeatedly who they are on request. No one should be challenged on a regular basis to justify who they are. We need to find ways as a society to offer protection to all, but that do not infringe on the privacy of all. We need to find ways of ensuring that all feel safe and are treated with dignity. That may not be straightforward, but it should not be impossible.

I welcome what this Government have done to equalise the law so that hate crimes towards LGBT+ people attract the same severity of sentence as other forms of hate crime, and I commend the work of my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) in advocating so effectively with others for that change. I welcome the Government's commitment to a fully inclusive ban on conversion practices. No one should be allowed to be systematically abused because of their gender identity or their sexuality. I hope that across this House we can support legislation to bring that into force.

There are times when I have celebrated progress, times when I have been frustrated by the pace of progress and times when I have been worried by barriers to progress. The truth now is that I have all those feelings in this debate. I can see progress to be celebrated; I can feel some frustration that some things are taking longer than I had hoped for; and I can see opportunities for progress that I feel are being missed. That is why this Pride Month it is all the more important for me to be in that place we call Pride and to share that place with others.

I recognise that Pride does not mean that there will not be those who will mock and name call, threaten and abuse. There will be those who seek to roll back progress and to restrict rights. There will be those who seek to divide us. Our place of Pride is not some fabulous rainbow-glittered ghetto; our Pride is everywhere: on every train and every bus, in every pub and every café, in every factory and every office, in every supermarket and every petrol station, in every food bank and every restaurant, in every sports grounds and every cinema. This month we mark Pride Month, but every month,

every week and every day when we live without shame, it is Pride—in place of fear, peace; in place of hate, love; in place of shame; Pride.

2.38 pm

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Brighton is well known as the LGBT+ capital of the UK. It is a city with a famous reputation as a place where people can be who they are, love who they want to and feel safe. This is a great source of pride for me as a representative and for my constituents who make it such a fantastic place to live or visit.

In previous debates, I have spoken with joy about our amazing community, our huge Pride and trans Pride celebrations, and the LGBTQ+ history of our diverse city by the sea, but with deep regret—I know that my constituents will want me to focus on this—we mark this year's Pride Month at a time when many if not all our LGBT+ constituents feel unsafe. Our trans and non-binary constituents feel the sharpest edge of the current wave of demonisation and division, but I am sure that, like me, many hon. Members will have heard how it is also impacting our gay, lesbian, bisexual and gender non-conforming constituents. This dangerous and harmful environment has been created online, in our media and, sadly, in this place.

The new guidance produced by the Equality and Human Rights Commission is the most immediate example of how this is happening in legislation. The code of practice for services, public functions and associations is the culmination of years of well funded campaigns to drive a minority group out of British public life. It sets out nothing less than a system of segregation where trans people are excluded from services and spaces that reflect their gender—and in some cases also excluded from services and spaces that reflect their sex assigned at birth. Where unisex facilities exist, they are usually also disabled access, sometimes with restricted key entry, so trans people can be forced into asking for and using those toilets, outing themselves in the process. Where those facilities do not exist, trans people will be left with nowhere to go.

As hon. Members have pointed out, the Government's own equality impact assessment on the code admits that there will be a significant impact on those with the protected characteristic of gender reassignment as a result of trans people being forced to out themselves by using disabled toilets, and will put trans women at greater risk of sexual violence by making them use men's services.

I have met service providers in Brighton who want to be inclusive but fear putting themselves at very real legal risk now that the guidance is coming forward. What an impossible position to be put in as a Brighton business—to feel forced to implement oppressive and unworkable policies at the expense of trans and non-binary service users or customers who have never been a cause for concern. How is all that in the spirit of Pride Month?

The bare facts are that research by TransLucent has found that there was just one complaint to English unitary authorities in 2025 concerning trans women's use of single sex spaces, such as toilets and changing rooms. I firmly believe that it is Parliament's responsibility to fix that and honour the joy, inclusion and freedom that Pride is really about.

The code of practice is both cruel and confusing. I have written today to the Prime Minister and the Minister for Women and Equalities to make those points. I also urge colleagues to sign early-day motion 240, proposed by the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome) and which I sponsor, which is a cross-party call on Parliament to disapprove the code of practice as it stands. I hope that we will see much more cross-party work on this issue, as there often was when progress was made by previous Governments.

From my local point of view, it is clear that my city and my constituency want and need a renewed focus on rights and for the guidance to be challenged. I was so pleased and proud to read the recent official statement from the leader of Brighton and Hove city council. She is not from my party, but we are united on this issue for those we represent. She said that the EHRC guidance “creates a deeply confusing picture which sees trans people being told in the same breath that they may not be able to use facilities aligned with either their sex at birth or their gender. This creates...uncertainty and insecurity for affected individuals and it is deeply unfair.

Trans and non-binary residents of our city have told us that the chilling effect is already being felt with some trans people avoiding accessing services including hospitals and healthcare, to avoid challenge and discrimination...parliament must urgently act and legislate to clarify that trans people have the right to participate in everyday life in an inclusive way.”

The leader of the council and I agree that Parliament should reject this document. We also agree that we must instead legislate to create a legal framework with clear and equal rights for all, which protects trans people's rightful place in society.

We must also legislate to clear up the obvious misunderstandings of the current law and its intentions at Supreme Court level when the Equality Act and the Gender Recognition Act are looked at together. As the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) pointed out so powerfully, other countries have written laws that work for everyone's rights; so can we.

Trans people of all ages and backgrounds exist in communities across the country and always have done. They have every right to thrive, just as their cisgender friends, family members and colleagues do. I recognise the Minister's pride in previous achievements and her upcoming plans, but when Labour brought in the Gender Recognition Act over two decades ago, it promised trans people that it would help them live their daily lives in peace, privacy and dignity. This current Government will break that promise if we do not act together to make laws that work. This Pride Month, if the current environment for LGBTQ+ people teaches us one thing, it is that progress is precious and that rights for any of us, if not defended fully, can be rolled back. It is our job in this place to prevent that.

2.45 pm

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I am grateful to follow the hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry). I welcome the speeches made by the Minister and the shadow Minister, which were warm and deeply personal, and I recognise the really powerful speech made by the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen).

It is a privilege to speak in the debate to mark and celebrate Pride Month. It is the first time I have had an opportunity to do so since I was elected. It is a particular

[*Luke Murphy*]

privilege to do so not just as Basingstoke's first ever Labour MP but as its first openly bisexual and LGBT+ MP. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) for focusing on the B in LGBT.

As other hon. Members have said, in contributing to this debate, it feels like I am a world away from the scared and sometimes ashamed little boy that I was growing up. That shows the huge progress we have made as a society. As such, I look forward to taking part once again in the Basingstoke Pride parade in August. It is always wonderful to see everyone taking part in that parade, joyful, proud and defiant, and to have people from across the community in Basingstoke lining the streets in celebration and solidarity. I pay tribute to all the organisers and volunteers who make it possible.

As the Minister set out, it is important to recognise just how far we have come, and to celebrate this and previous Labour Governments' records in advancing LGBT+ rights. The last Labour Government did more for LGBT+ equality than any Government in history. We removed the shameful section 28, passed the legislation that allowed trans people legally to change their gender, introduced the Equality Act and civil partnerships, made progress on adoption, and much more. It is a legacy that made our country a far more open and tolerant place to live, but as many hon. Members have said, we all know that the battle is not won—in some respects, it is never won. That is especially the case as hateful and divisive rhetoric creeps back into our public discourse. Far too many follow that up with real-world actions of hatred.

Hate crime and abusive conversion practices are still happening, and much of the rhetoric directed at LGBT+ people today, in particular at trans people, echoes the hatred that was commonplace in the era of section 28. There has been a shocking rise in homophobic and transphobic hate crime in the past few years. That is why, as many speakers have mentioned, I was proud to stand with colleagues to support the amendment to the Crime and Policing Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) to make such hate crimes aggravated offences, ensuring that they are treated with the seriousness they have always deserved. It is also why this Labour Government must remain committed not just to defending the progress made by previous Governments, Labour or otherwise, but to building on our proud legacy in LGBT+ equality.

The Government are making progress by equalising the law so that LGBT+ hate crimes attract sentencing of the same severity as those motivated by race or religion; providing nearly half a million pounds of specialist funding for domestic abuse services; establishing a £21 million fund to support LGBT+ rights globally; improving the experience of our community's armed forces personnel and veterans and delivering financial recognition to LGBT veterans; working to tackle HIV transmissions and improve access to healthcare; and delivering—hopefully as soon as possible—a full, trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices. Nevertheless, I know from emails and conversations I have had locally that many LGBT+ people in Basingstoke remain incredibly worried about what the future holds for our community in this country.

Many trans people, their friends and families, and people in the wider community are profoundly concerned about the recent draft guidance on the Equality Act, its implementation and its practical effects, which my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North ably set out. I assure my constituents that, with colleagues in this House, I shall present their concerns to the Government and seek reassurance, and that as their MP I will continue to stand with them, not just in Pride Month but every day of the year. We will stand strong against those who would turn back the clock. Yes, we will celebrate progress made by this Government, but we will also push them to go further, because as the Minister said, progress and equality are not permanent; both must be safeguarded, nurtured and renewed. I want all our successors here in Parliament to stand in future Pride Month debates to celebrate the progress made under this and future Governments for the LGBT+ community.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech about not only the progress that has been made, but the need for us all to defend our rights because they are never guaranteed as other rights often are. He briefly mentioned this, but I wanted to talk about other nations pulling back from supporting LGBT rights and some, sadly including Ghana, bringing in severe anti-LGBT legislation. I join my hon. Friend in welcoming the £21 million dedicated by the Government to defending and promoting LGBT rights across the world. This is incredibly important in a range of areas, including health and community. Will he join me in commending the Kaleidoscope Trust and the Elton John AIDS Foundation for the work they do in partnership with this country and European countries to ensure we play our part in defending our rights here and in promoting and defending LGBT rights around the world?

Luke Murphy: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I pay tribute not only to those organisations but to him for the work I know he did with many colleagues to secure that money. Ghana and other countries rolling back on LGBT rights is a demonstration that the battle is never won. The action we take is about not just protecting our community here in this country, but sending a signal about advances that need to be made abroad.

Nobody should be made to feel scared, ashamed or excluded because of who they are or who they love. It is the duty of everyone in this House and outside it to ensure that that is the case, standing with pride as part of or with the LGBT+ community and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North said, ensuring that love always wins.

2.54 pm

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): May I start by saying what an honour it is to speak in this debate and in other similar diversity, equality and inclusion debates? I love the fact that across this House, so many Members come together to support the right cause. It is quite obvious that there is one party whose Members are never here for these debates, and it is the party that says it wants to be in government: the Reform UK party. They cannot be bothered to turn up to express their opinions on these vital debates, and I think that that is absolutely shocking.

It is a little bitter-sweet that I am here today, and I will explain what I mean if you will allow me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was not meant to be here today. Alongside a number of my colleagues, I was meant to be at the Royal Navy airbase in Yeovilton, but as we all know, a Merlin helicopter crashed yesterday and, sadly, three members of the Royal Navy were killed. For those of us, including my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), who have met these amazing people in recent months and seen their dedication, skill, commitment and teamwork and the camaraderie between them, this is devastating, and we know that they will be feeling absolutely awful and broken. On behalf of the Members of this House and the other place who should have been there today, I send our thoughts to the family, friends and colleagues of those who lost their lives in the line of duty for this country.

Let me turn to the debate today and the very important time that we stand in for the LGBTQ+ community. “What comes after Pride?” Those were the words on a flyer that was posted through my door when I was a councillor in Basildon, with the rainbow flag on the front of it. I thought, “That’s interesting—what’s this?” On the back, it told me that I should repent. I should not be who I was; I should repent. I should convert myself back to being somebody I was not. These flyers did not just come to my house; they went out right across Basildon, where I was a councillor. I got angry, as I am sure many in this House would on receiving such a direct attack on them and their community, especially after the years of discrimination that many of us who are maybe slightly older have gone through in our lives—

Chris Vince: No!

David Burton-Sampson: Well, I was born in the ’70s!

But I stopped getting angry. I thought, “Let’s turn this into something positive.” I brought together a group of people, and we formed Basildon Mini Pride. In two weeks, we arranged a march through the centre of Basildon town centre to the one local LGBTQ+ nightspot, where we had an afternoon of celebration, and we saw the support there was for us in that community. There is a lot more support than there is hatred. Off the back of that, Basildon Pride was born. I helped to build that into what I am proud to say is a brilliant organisation that operates throughout the year, supporting the LGBTQ+ community in Basildon today. While I might have moved on to Southend, I have remained chair of trustees of Basildon Pride, because it is my baby, and I want to make sure that it continues to thrive and that our amazing volunteers continue to be supported.

Why? Because, as we have heard today, Pride is more important than ever. We have all heard about ILGA-Europe’s rainbow map, showing us consistently sliding from the top place in 2015 down to 22nd place this year. I do not know how others across this place feel, but for me, that is devastating. I have worked hard on the rights of LGBTQ+ people, but I have only made a small contribution. There are many people across this country who, over many years, fought the discrimination we have faced as a community to get us to the great place where we could have civil partnerships, get married and adopt—rights that we did not have—and where hate against us was actually seen as a hate crime. We earned those rights. I stand on the shoulders of giants who fought for those rights before I came along, so it hurts me to see where we are today.

What also hurts me is the rhetoric that we hear across this country today—rhetoric that is driving wedges into our communities, and trying to drive wedges into the LGBTQ+ community. That is not acceptable. Much of that rhetoric comes from Reform UK. I am going to call that party out today, because some of its behaviour in our community is simply unacceptable.

Many buildings will fly the progress pride flag for Pride Month. Last year, Reform UK started threatening law suits against councils that were flying the progress flag. It said that legislation meant that only the rainbow flag, with the six colours, and not the progress pride flag, which includes the triangle that represents the whole LGBTQ+ community, could be flown. Many people have accepted that the progress flag is the flag that we now fly. That flag means so much to so many: when they see it in their community for one day, one week or one month during Pride, they see that we are behind them and we support them.

Reform UK was threatening law suits and councils were having to take that flag down because of a minor difference in the guidance that said that they could fly only the rainbow flag. A group of us are challenging that and working with Ministers at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to try to have the guidance changed. But for goodness’ sake, what does it matter to Reform UK? This is a flag flying that does not harm Reform but shows people in our society that they are included and part of that society. This rhetoric has to stop.

We have seen Reform UK going further in councils that it controls, as has already been mentioned, by taking the rainbow flag down and not allowing it to be flown during Pride Month or at any time. Reform-led councils are even taking the Ukrainian flags down, even though a majority of us in this House are behind supporting people in Ukraine and we show that symbolically by flying that flag across many of our buildings.

Peter Swallow: As my hon. Friend knows, local Reform members in Bracknell tried to block Bracknell Forest council flying the progress flag in recent years, and he knows that I share his view that we need a common-sense fix for this. Frankly, it is a waste of council time to be debating this issue and putting it though planning, when we all want a common-sense approach that allows our communities to show that they are inclusive of everyone within those communities. This is a common-sense change that we could make.

David Burton-Sampson: I thank my hon. Friend for his support and for working alongside me to get this matter resolved.

Steve Race: I have read in the media that apparently the Leader of the Opposition has instructed Conservative councils across the country not to fly the progress flag and instead to fly only the original flag from the 1970s. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is shame to see the official Opposition joining in with some of the divisive politics and rhetoric that Reform has been engaging in?

David Burton-Sampson: That is a real shame. I say to the Leader of the Opposition and anybody else who is concerned about this: do not be concerned, fly the flag

[David Burton-Sampson]

and be proud of everybody in the community. It is a real shame and the Conservatives need to consider whether they are doing the right thing by ordering councils not to fly that flag.

Now that Reform UK has taken over Essex county council, it has even sent out an order to Essex libraries not to allow LGBTQ+ and Pride events to take place in those libraries. What is next? Are we going to go back to section 28? I hope not. I remember section 28, because I was at school during that time, and what a horrendous time it was for me as a young gay man. I was not able to see a visible representation of somebody who I knew, deep down inside, was me. For many years, I therefore thought I was wrong. I thought that the way I felt—the fact that I fancied men, or boys at the time; I was only young—was wrong, and I really struggled with that. I and many young LGBT people during the '80s and '90s felt guilt because we could not see that representation, and we were being told that we were wrong. It took many, many years to overcome that.

I will never forget going to my first nightclub. Many of the nightclubs outside of London were either in boarded-up buildings or down in basements, so that people could not see what was happening inside and we were hidden away. Men dancing with men or women dancing with women—disgusting! That is how it was. For me, it felt like we were being hidden away, but we fought against that, and we are now out there and proud. We have fought hard for this, and I am not willing to go backwards.

We are at a turning point, especially with our trans community, who tell me that they feel unsafe, unwanted and like they do not belong. We are talking about 0.5% of our population here, but the way that the rhetoric is going at the moment, you would think they make up half of our population. Whatever our views on the code of practice, on the back of the Supreme Court ruling, we have a trans community who are scared. We have human beings who live in this country who are currently scared, and we cannot allow that to continue.

The last time that Labour was in government, we created a tolerant country, and as a Labour Government we aim to do the same thing this time. We cannot go backwards on much of the work that we did. I know that this Government are committed to doing the right thing for the LGBTQ+ community, and the Minister outlined some of that to us earlier, so I am pleased to see that the draft conversion practices Bill will come forward soon. I do believe that the Minister will bring it forward soon, and I look forward to seeing that happen.

On improvements to trans healthcare, we have heard about the work that my amazing friend the hon. Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor) brought forward alongside many of us to tackle hate crime and make such behaviour an aggravated offence, alongside other hate crimes, so work is going on.

Somebody reminded me a few days ago of a Martin Niemöller poem, and it really struck a chord with me. I want to share it with the House today:

“They came for the Socialists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a Socialist

Then they came for the trade unionists

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a trade unionist

Then they came for the Jews

And I did not speak out

Because I was not a Jew

Then they came for me

And there was no one left

To speak out for me”.

I am glad that we have people to speak for us, such as our wonderful ally, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), and many others across this place.

Let me go back to the flyer. What comes after Pride? We are a long way from answering that question at the moment—much further away than I would like us to be at this point in time. For now, I commit publicly to my community: I am here for you, I will keep fighting for you, and I will keep speaking out for you. We must stand together against those who are trying to divide us and sow division. In this great country, we all belong in our communities, no matter who we love or how we identify.

Like so many others, I have been made to feel that I do not belong in my lifetime. I have been unable to walk along the street holding my husband's hand. We have been the victims of a homophobic hate crime at our house. I am not going to go back to those times—I am not willing to go back to those times—and I know many across this House will stand with me on that.

As a former Pride organiser and a chair of trustees today, I thank all the amazing Pride organisers across the country who do so much hard work for their communities, often voluntarily and in their own time. I especially thank my local Pride, Southend Pride, and the Pride I founded, Basildon Pride. You all work so hard, because you believe in the cause you are fighting for; you believe in supporting your community and pushing forward to make things better. Do not stop, do not give up, and thank you.

3.10 pm

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): It is a huge privilege to follow that incredible contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson). I think many of us in this place recognise a lot of the experiences he talked about—many of us who know what it is to be holding hands with the person we love as we walk down the street, and then to see someone turn the corner and immediately let go of our loved one's hand, because we do not know if it is safe to continue holding the person we love close.

I pay particular thanks to the Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), for her powerful speech. She is doing incredible work to support LGBTQ+ rights, and she shared a powerful contribution from her constituent that it was very important to put on the record. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) not only for his powerful words, but for giving *Hansard* a real job with his foreign language skills.

There are those who say that we do not need Pride any more—that we have achieved equality; that discrimination and hate based on sexuality and gender is no longer

tolerated in this country—but there are also those who say that Pride is not suitable for children with “impressionable minds”, that gay men are “poofs” who mince about, and that if LGBT people “want acceptance”, they need to “stop making a big song and dance about it”.

Homophobic comments like these will sadly be familiar to many in this Chamber and across the country. To my mind, such intolerant views are profoundly un-British; they are also the words of Reform’s candidate in the Makerfield by-election. I do not think there could be a clearer demonstration of why we still need Pride, and why we still need today’s debate, than that.

I am proud to say that my constituency of Bracknell hosts its own Pride, which will celebrate its fourth year this July. Growing up as a young gay boy in Berkshire—my hon. Friend the Minister grew up in Berkshire herself—I never thought I would see a time when not only Reading, but smaller towns across our county, had a Pride. Wokingham, Windsor, Newbury and other towns all now celebrate Pride every year. This is important, because Pride should be celebrated in every community so that every person can feel that they are loved and included, wherever they come from and whoever they are. I remember how, growing up gay, I sometimes felt like I would never belong. That could be an incredibly isolating feeling. Even in the 2000s, it was very scary for me to come out, knowing that not everyone would accept me for who I was. I take this opportunity to thank everyone who has worked so hard to bring Bracknell Forest Pride to where it is today, and I look forward to celebrating with them later this summer. I want every young LGBT+ person growing up in Bracknell Forest not to have to feel the fear I experienced growing up.

In her opening speech, the Minister rightly recognised that the progress made on LGBT+ rights has been hard won, and that the battle for a society where LGBT+ people can truly live without fear of hate and discrimination is far from over. Through the Crime and Policing Act 2026, this Government have acted to equalise hate crime law, so that victims of homophobic hate crimes can know that perpetrators will be fully held to account. We are bringing LGBT+ veterans the justice they deserve after the suffering they have endured, and we are issuing nearly half a million pounds-worth of specialist funding for LGBT+ domestic violence services, as well as committing £21 million over the next three years to support the LGBT community internationally in this time of increasing hostility towards our community nationally and globally. We must now go one step further by delivering on our manifesto commitment to a fully trans-inclusive ban on conversion therapy, as we have committed to doing in the King’s Speech.

Those measures are welcome and important, but I cannot in good conscience say that the path of progress in this country is straightforward, even now and even under this Government. I will briefly touch on the draft EHRC code of practice laid before Parliament, which many Members across the House have mentioned. I recognise and respect the judgment of the Supreme Court. It is a narrow and specific judgment about a specific aspect of the Equality Act, but I do not think that in order to make the world safer for women, we must make it less safe for trans people. I have real concerns that where the new EHRC guidance was supposed to bring clarity, it has instead brought only more anxiety, fear and confusion. The Government can and must find

a way forward that balances the rights of women and of trans people. If we fail to do that, we risk the safety of both groups, and risk entrenching ourselves in a divisive culture war that we can and must move beyond.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I sit alongside the hon. Member on the Joint Committee on Human Rights, and he does phenomenal work there, including on the code of practice and the issues that he is outlining. Does he agree that it is worrying that whenever anyone in this House or outside this place tries to defend trans people, we see transphobia slip into homophobia and other languages of hate? The same tropes are being used against other people, in hopes of shutting them up. Does he share my concerns about the chilling effect that has on our democracy and the rights of LGBT people in the UK?

Peter Swallow: The hon. Member makes a profoundly important point. We have all seen the conversation around preserving the rights of everyone in our society—women and trans people—increasingly made into a political football and into something deeply personal. A lot of that is being driven by social media. Every Member who chooses to speak in today’s debate will have weighed up whether the comments they are making will be clipped and pushed out on social media, and whether they will receive abuse because of what they have chosen to say in this place. That is profoundly wrong. While I recognise that feelings from those on both sides of this issue often go well beyond the pale, it is incumbent on all of us in this place, whatever our views on this delicate and important issue, to treat the debate with the respect and dignity that those affected by it deserve. That is fundamentally where we need to get to on this important issue.

The hon. Member kindly highlights my role on the Joint Committee on Human Rights, on which I sit alongside him. That reminds me that the Gender Recognition Act 2004, which has been rightly championed in today’s debate, was passed in large part because of a ruling by the European Court of Human Rights that confirmed that trans people have the right not to be outed under article 8. A lot of us have spoken today about how important it is that we feel able to be our authentic selves and to come out. It is incumbent on us all to create a society where LGBT+ people feel that they can live their authentic lives and be honest about who they are. I also think that we all have a profound right to keep personal matters private, if that is what we choose. One of my concerns—it has been raised by many Members today—is that the draft code of practice undermines that human right to privacy, which is set out in law.

This is a really challenging debate to be part of. At times, it has been overwhelming, because I am so proud of my party’s record on LGBT+ rights and because, if I am being honest with myself, I think that reputation is at risk. We are at risk of losing our reputation as the party of equality, and our very soul as the Labour party, if we are not willing to stand up for the rights of everyone, including the LGBT+ community.

I want to finish on a slightly happier note by wishing everyone in Bracknell Forest and beyond a very happy Pride Month. This is a time to remember, to celebrate hard-won rights and freedoms, and to look forward

[*Peter Swallow*]

with a renewed sense of community and hope for the future—for everyone in our great country: all members of the diverse communities that call it home, including, today in particular, all members of the LGBT+ community.

3.21 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey) and the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew)—I will call him my friend—for starting the debate. I particularly welcome their comments about the importance of healthcare when it comes to supporting our LGBTQ community. Having spoken to LGBTQ+ people in Harlow, I know that there is still a real stigma when it comes to healthcare, and it is really important that we continue to talk about that.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) for her incredibly powerful contribution. I did quite well—I lasted about 10 minutes into her speech before the tears came. She talks about LGBTQ+ rights in a way that is powerful and real. The bit that got me was when she started talking about her constituent's experiences.

I do not want to get told off for not mentioning Harlow, so I pay tribute to everybody in my constituency who has worked so incredibly hard to make Harlow Pride a success. I feel very sorry for racist and homophobic people, because they miss out on the opportunity to go to some absolutely incredible events. I get to go to Pride events and to religious and cultural events, and I have a bloody good time. I am very proud of that.

I am a proud ally of the LGBTQ+ community, because I truly believe that no one should ever face persecution or abuse for being who they are, or for who they are in love with. That is hugely important. However, I am an LGBTQ+ ally who does not always get it right, and we should be honest with ourselves about that. It is always quite daunting to give the last speech in a debate, as I often do—except when I seconded the King's Speech; just saying!—but it was particularly daunting today, because every single contribution was absolutely incredible. Every single Member who has spoken in this debate should be incredibly proud of themselves. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson), who has been a friend of mine for many years, said that he was doing his small part in this debate. No; he does a massive part to support the LGBTQ+ community in his constituency and the wider country, so he should be particularly proud.

I feel quite positive in this space. The last Labour Government introduced civil partnerships and adoption rights, and got rid of the divisive section 28. When I talk to previous teaching colleagues who are gay about section 28, they still shudder at it, and they talk about that time with anxiety and a huge degree of fear. As my hon. Friend said, there was a generation of young people who were terrified to admit who they were, and that must have been absolutely awful. I criticise the last Tory Government for a lot, and I am always wary about being nice about the Tories, because last time I was, the Leader of the Opposition tried to recruit me, which was a bit weird. However, I pay tribute to the last Conservative Government for the equal marriage legislation that they took through Parliament.

I am glad that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies), is in her place, because during the LGBT+ History Month debate last year, I had the opportunity to mention my late Uncle Stephen. She and the right hon. Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra), who is not here, said, “Hear, hear” when I mentioned my uncle, and I am genuinely very grateful for that. I again proudly say the name Stephen Vince in this place. He was let down by our society because he was gay, but he was one of the warmest, kindest people I have had the opportunity to know. I am very proud to be able to talk about him, and the fact that he was my uncle. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Thank you. May he never be forgotten.

However, I also stand here with some fears. My hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh—he is getting a lot of mentions today—talked about the decision by Reform-led Essex county council to ban Pride advertising in libraries, including in Harlow, and I am very concerned about that. My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) spoke of his concerns—as did my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh, to mention him again—about people, not necessarily from Reform, deciding which books people should be able to read. I say this a little bit in jest, but I think hon. Members will understand why I say it: my son does not want to be a hungry caterpillar. The idea that reading books with LGBTQ+ role models in them will suddenly make young people gay is just nonsense, is it not? Let us be really honest about that.

Those books are really important for young people who are LGBTQ+ and are looking for direction and guidance, but it is also important for people like me to read about the LGBTQ+ community in books, and for that to be commonplace. I am a bit of a “Star Trek” fan—I am going off on a tangent, Madam Deputy Speaker, but this was not so long ago—and I remember how, in “Deep Space Nine”, Jadzia Dax kissed another woman. Do other hon. Members remember that episode? There was outrage, and that is just unbelievable to me. We should be really proud that we live in a society where members of the LGBT community, who should be able to walk down the street holding hands, can do so and not feel the way my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell described.

Tom Gordon: I am sure the hon. Gentleman looks fantastic when he turns up to Pride events in the glad rags that I am sure he wears. An interesting thing happened to me a few weeks back when I went for dinner at my mum's. My little niece was there with my middle sister. My middle sister and I have a very interesting relationship; we do not get along very well. With me, I had a friend—a Liberal Democrat member, who was off out knocking on doors ahead of the local elections—and my little niece, who is at primary school, turned to me and said, “Is that your friend or partner?”. It was an incredibly poignant moment for me, and I thought, “Gosh, I may not necessarily see eye to eye with my sister, but she's done a good job raising her kid.” Does my hon. Friend agree that the world is a better place when kids have an open mind and can ask such questions, and are inquisitive and not hateful?

Chris Vince: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, although I do not thank him for overtaking me in the marathon on mile 5—a long way ahead of the

right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden). The insight into the hon. Gentleman's family Christmases is fascinating, but he makes a valid point, as he often does in this place. He gives me the opportunity to mention that I used to be a teacher, which I have not done yet today—[*Laughter.*] I thank him for that. [*Interruption.*] I did not teach in Harlow, actually! I think about when I first started teaching in 2005, up until when I finished teaching in 2020. I did see that shift. When I first started teaching, a young person who was openly gay would have been subject to ridicule. I am not saying that we are in a perfect world where that no longer happens, but I certainly saw more young people at school in 2020 who were happy to be open about their sexuality, and that is something we should celebrate.

There are challenges, too. I do not want to end on a negative, but I have just started reading Esther Ghey's book about the horrendous murder of her daughter. It shows the horrendous impact of transphobia and we need to be really mindful of that, although equally there is hope.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): As a fellow Essex MP, I too was shocked by the decision taken by Essex county council on displaying Pride and LGBT+ material in libraries. Today I learned that, unfortunately, it appears that my own council of Thurrock, which is now run by Reform UK, seems to have directed the removal of Pride advertisements and LGBT+ awareness material from the Thameside complex in Grays. Ironically, the complex will be hosting Pride in June, which the Pride organisation in Thurrock is paying for fully. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a real backward step in what should be a safe space for the LGBTQ+ community in Thurrock?

Chris Vince: I thank my honourable bestie for her contribution. I absolutely agree with everything she has just said. I send my solidarity to members of Thurrock Pride and thank them for all they do. As my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh mentioned earlier—I will mention him again—all the Pride groups across the country are hugely important. They make a difference to all our constituents who may be LGBTQ+ and are perhaps wary because of some of the things we have talked about today. They do a huge amount to support people with their mental wellbeing and to make them feel part of the community, so I really want to thank them for that.

I will say to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) that there is also hope. The hope is all around us, because there has been representation in this debate from five political parties—I think I have counted that up right—with, yes, one notable absence. We should have pride that, whatever differences we may have, we all agree that it is hugely important that we support our LGBTQ+ colleagues, so I feel there is some hope.

Finally, I am saddened by what my hon. Friends the Members for Thurrock and for Southend West and Leigh mentioned about some of the decisions being made by councils that have recently changed political affiliation. It looks as though we will have to fight the battles of the past with regard to LGBTQ+ rights, but I say to everybody who has spoken in this debate that if we have to fight those fights again, we will fight those fights again and I will stand there and fight with you.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the shadow Minister.

3.33 pm

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): I thank all hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. It is always a pleasure to speak on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition. It has been a thoughtful, emotional and wide-ranging debate. The Minister's opening speech highlighted her joy at being at the Dispatch Box. Her story reminded us that so much has been delivered by people like her, who we all know locally and nationally, who continue to do so much. She spoke about hope and unity over division and hate.

I am always so proud to share the Opposition Dispatch Box with my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew). He spoke about how we balance trans people's rights and women's rights, and how we talk about dignity, respect, compassion and love. He speaks from such personal experience, I am so proud to share this debate with him and I am sorry he cannot be here for the closing of it.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) spoke powerfully about how Pride is a place. It was a beautiful speech, and I thank him for sharing it.

Pride should be an opportunity not only to celebrate LGBTQ people across our society but to recognise those who have lived with discrimination throughout history and to reflect honestly, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry did when he talked about his younger life. We have done that today when addressing the disparities that remain. We continue to renew our commitment to ensuring that Britain maintains its long and proud tradition of liberty and tolerance, and that we are truly one of the best places in the world to live as a LGBTQ person. We all want and need it to stay that way.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I know that you are particularly excited to be at Romsey's own mini-Pride, the One Romsey festival, next weekend, which is now celebrating its second year—it is maybe a chance for you not to wear black.

The Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), was powerful in her position and her thoughts, as always. She mentioned that equalities debates always take place on a Thursday. I love being here on a Thursday—I would be here every day of the week if they let me—but I agree that it is challenging for some of our colleagues to join us. I agreed with her statement that it is not one or the other in terms of rights—I have never thought that.

It was important that the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) spoke about the time people need to experiment with who they are and who they want to be. I wanted to be Madonna, Kim Wilde and Debbie Harry when growing up. Guess what, I still want to be—you can tell from the black eyeliner. The hon. Lady's speech was a reminder that we all go through stages, and that we need to give young people the space to learn. I really appreciated her speaking up in that way.

My party, and society more broadly, has gone through a profound shift in attitudes in recent decades. I will point out a few examples of that shift, and the pride

[Mims Davies]

that we have in our party: the election of Ruth Davidson—with apologies to the hon. Member for Aberdeen North—who was the first openly gay leader of a mainstream political party and brought so much to politics in Scotland; Justine Greening, the first openly lesbian Cabinet member; and the ennoblement of my friend, Debbie Stedman-Scott, an outstanding public servant and colleague.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): The hon. Member rightly says that much progress has been made towards equality across the LGBT family, and that many lesbians are now standing and being prominent voices in the political sphere. However, lesbian voices are so often under-represented in politics. We face distinct challenges in political representation, and in ensuring our particular social and economic experiences are reflected in policy. Will the hon. Member join me in my call to encourage more lesbians—and more people from across the LGBT+ community—to stand for elections at whatever level of local or national Government they choose?

Mims Davies: I am going to make the exact point that the hon. Lady raises in my later remarks, so I wholeheartedly agree with her. My colleagues have succeeded on merit, but, to the hon. Lady's point, they were asked to step forward, be part of things and stand. They did not rely on their identity; it was talent, dedication and leadership. That is in everybody, however we identify.

As has been said many times in this debate, who someone loves should not affect their success. There should be no barrier to someone's success and ambition, and who someone loves should not be the measure of what their ambition or success can be. Pride is there for everyone to be represented equally and for us not to be divided. Safe, fair and equal is true equality for all of us.

I am concerned that in some quarters, as has been raised today, Pride is not being used to unite; instead, it is being used to inflame tensions. It is important that we recognise that. Let us be honest: we saw this, in a way, with Monday's statement, when we heard speaker after speaker saying that the EHRC code of practice is exclusionary and anti-trans. We have heard some of that today. I fundamentally do not believe that, although I acknowledge that some people have said that today and that they do believe it. That is, of course, the reality of this place. I reiterate that I believe that that characterisation is not correct. The Equality Act remains clear in its protections, including those related to gender reassignment. The code reinforces rather than diminishes those protections. It is important, as I think we all agree, that the code works and that it does not diminish wide-ranging, hard-fought rights. Of course, it reflects on other areas, such as age and disability.

It is striking that in the debate earlier this week we did not roundly acknowledge the importance of lesbianism, which the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) has just referred to, and the fact that the code needs to work for same-sex groups, particularly lesbian organisations. I have spoken about this before. These groups have often found themselves at the sharp end of an increasingly fraught debate about the relationship between biological sex, gender identity and sexual orientation. There have been credible reports of lesbian

groups being deplatformed, pressured or silenced simply for asserting their same-sex attraction. That is the reality for some women. The fact that in 2024—just a couple of years ago—a representative of the LGB Alliance was required to offer a legal definition of the term “lesbian” in court is still, frankly, extraordinary.

The situation reflects a wider confusion that risks eroding hard-won protections. We should be wary—I think we have all said that in the Chamber this afternoon—of repeating past mistakes of marginalising and dismissing same-sex attraction in particular. As we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry, lesbian women played a vital role during the AIDS crisis in supporting gay men during some of the most difficult chapters of our history. That solidarity should never be forgotten, and neither should it be replaced with division.

I know that some Members in the House are supporting the measures in early-day motion 240. I believe they are doing so because they have not necessarily fully appreciated the implications for women's rights, particularly for lesbians who rely on the clarity of law to maintain their safe single-sex spaces. I welcome the thoughtful speech made by the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca), in which he covered his views and approach to that. I think that does accord. It is clear from what has been discussed around the code of practice that it is vital that healthcare for all matters. That is absolutely something we need to look at.

On flags, I personally think we need less tribalism and more grown-up and pragmatic conversations. We can and must protect women's rights, respect trans rights and find workable solutions. I do not think we should be arguing about flags. We can stand up for people, communities and, crucially, harmony. The Conservatives do that through the LGBT+ Conservatives. I am going to invite the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) out on the best night ever—once again, a Conservative willing to let him come out on the best night ever.

The Conservative party roundly believes that everyone should be treated equally before the law, regardless of their race, sex or sexual orientation.

Peter Swallow: The hon. Lady just said that we should not be arguing about flags, and I totally agree with her. In my view, it should be up to councils and community groups to decide the version of the pride flag that they choose to fly, whether it be the traditional pride flag or the progress pride flag. I do not think that that is arguing about flags; it is giving people choice. Is the hon. Lady comfortable with the Leader of the Opposition ordering Conservatives up and down the country not to support the flying of the progress pride flag, and does she not think that taking away that choice is, in fact, creating the argument?

Mims Davies: I am wearing my Conservative pride badge, so I am quite happy to wear a flag, as are many in our party. As I say, the Conservative party roundly believes in treating everyone equally before the law, regardless of race, sex or sexual orientation.

The original rainbow flag is a widely recognised symbol. I am wearing it today to show respect and support for gay people. My personal view is that the traditional rainbow flag already rightly brings us together and has a sense of unity. Its purpose should be to bring

us together, not to divide us. The progress pride flag, by contrast, can be seen by some as a symbol of identity politics, somewhat atomising society into different and divisive identities. Therefore, I am comfortable with our position in not being behind it in the way that the hon. Member described, but I fully respect his opinion, and I fully respect that other people feel differently.

Tom Gordon: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mims Davies: No, I will conclude.

There has been a lot of agreement in the Chamber, but let's be real: it is not going to be universal—that is the reality of politics and life today. Let me reiterate the phrase “safe, fair and equal”—there should be equality under the law regardless of race, sex or sexual orientation. That is my view.

It would be remiss of me not to give an update from the Dispatch Box about Jed and Elliot's wedding—I know that you were waiting for the next instalment, Madam Deputy Speaker. Next month on the Isle of Wight, we will finally see the wedding. It is one of the most exciting things to be happening, and I am delighted to be part of that celebration, as are so many. I am also delighted to be reading at the wedding.

I am very proud of the Conservatives' successes. We have heard from others about same-sex marriage, the Turing law pardons, the apology to LGBT veterans, progress on HIV testing and PrEP, fair blood donation rules and the real practical progress that we have made to change lives.

We all welcome Pride Month as a time to celebrate the contributions of the LGBT people that we know and love both locally and in our national life, and we want more of them in our national life. We honour the progress made and commit ourselves to work for a future always grounded in fairness, respect and genuine equality for all under the law.

3.47 pm

Olivia Bailey: It is an honour to close this debate on behalf of the Government. I would like to begin by thanking Members across the House for their thoughtful and powerful contributions this afternoon. These are always the best debates to be in, and today has been no exception.

We have heard speeches about the progress won, the challenges that remain and the lived reality of LGBT+ people in communities across the country. I would like to pick out some highlights from the contributions this afternoon. The right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) opened the debate with a very moving speech, which included some upsetting testimony about his own personal experience of assault, and I commend his bravery in sharing that. He was also right to say that Pride is not just about big parades; it is about the teenager who is scared and alone. Pride is indeed a promise to remember those people and ensure that we bring our community together.

The right hon. Member for Daventry also asked a number of questions about LGBT+ health. We know that LGBT+ people experience significant health inequalities. That is why we asked Dr Michael Brady to undertake a review, which we will publish soon. We are committed to improving adult gender services, and our

10-year health plan will tackle health inequalities. I also thank the right hon. Member for Daventry for his support for our ambition to end new HIV cases by 2030.

The Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), made a powerful speech. She is a powerful advocate for equality in this place. I thank her for her comments on the code and I note that her Committee will have an important session next week with the chair of the EHRC.

I also thank my hon. Friend for sharing Teraina's powerful story. I commend Teraina for her bravery and for coming to share her fears with my hon. Friend. I agree, though, that Teraina's health is important. I just want to say to Teraina: your safety matters. It is protected in law, we have strengthened hate crime laws and we are clear that trans people should not be left without facilities, and the code gives a number of examples of how service providers can ensure that. My hon. Friend is also right when she says that this is not a debate on women's rights versus trans rights. We can live together, in her words, with joy and love.

The hon. Member for Guildford (Zöe Franklin) spoke about young people. She is right, and it is wonderful to see the totally different approach that the younger generations have to questions of sexuality and gender identity. I join her in celebrating that. She also asked me for clarity on the conversion practices timeline. I will say again that I am working really hard to publish our draft Bill as soon as possible.

My hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) made a powerful speech. He is right that his election as the first gay MP for Macclesfield matters. I also thank everyone he mentioned from Macclesfield Pride and Stride for Pride. I understand the concerns that he outlined and the fear that he described in the trans community. I say again: every trans person in this country deserves to live life safely and with dignity and respect. On the ILGA ranking, I want to see us climb those rankings again. I am proud that we will host the International Day against Homophobia, Biphobia and Transphobia forum in London next year, which will be an important moment for LGBT rights in this country.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) made a wide-ranging speech—it was a very good speech—but I will pick out a few points. On IVF, I will take away her comments and say that we recognise the unacceptable variability in access to funded fertility services. I agree with her and my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) about the importance of not forgetting the “B” in all our debates.

My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) made another moving speech. I remember the one he made in the last debate, when I had the pleasure of listening to him from the Front Bench. I found that a powerful speech then and I am glad that his constituent found it to be important and powerful too. I agree with my hon. Friend in his sentiment that Pride is not just a march but is everywhere—I thank him for that.

The hon. Member for Brighton Pavilion (Siân Berry) reflected a real fear among her LGBT constituents. It is a fear that the Government recognise, and we are determined to ensure that every trans person can live safely and with dignity and respect. My hon. Friend the

[*Olivia Bailey*]

Member for Basingstoke is right that we must never stop fighting for progress. I also greatly value his advocacy for his trans constituents.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson), my thoughts and best wishes go to the families of all those who lost their lives in the tragic Royal Navy helicopter crash yesterday. I think him for his remarks on that. I also thank him for his campaigning on the pride flag. He is right to challenge all those who want to stop the LGBT+ community expressing its pride. I join him in thanking all the activists in our communities, who make Pride Month and the whole year so joyous for the LGBT community.

Sarah Owen: I thank the Minister for her warm words on the fantastic speeches that we have heard and the action that so many Members have taken in and out of this place. It has been mentioned that one party has wanted to stop Pride and to stop pride flags being flown, but there are actually two: Restore and Reform. Who are they working for? Does the Minister agree that we need to look at not just what they are saying but who they are being funded by, whether it is Elon Musk—a transphobic megalomaniac—or overseas crypto bros with very dubious records?

Olivia Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for that important intervention. I will certainly challenge—and it is important that we all continue to challenge—any hate in our politics, wherever we find it.

I want to say a big thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh for all the work that he does in campaigning for LGBT rights.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) made a very powerful speech. As somebody who grew up gay in his constituency, may I say how glad I am that the LGBT community in Bracknell Forest have him as their representative? He made a powerful

speech, and I agree with him that we must conduct all our debates with the dignity and respect that the people involved in those debates deserve.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) is a fantastic ally and a fantastic champion for Harlow. Stephen Vince sounds like a wonderful uncle and a wonderful person, and I thank my hon. Friend for bringing Stephen's story to the House again today. I agree with his points about the importance of LGBT representation in literature, which was very important to me. I am delighted to have seen the expansion of LGBT literature in recent times, which has been an important step forward.

The range of voices we have heard today reminds us of something important: that Pride is not a single story. There are many stories—some of struggle, some of joy—but all are connected by a shared demand for dignity and respect. As I said in my opening speech, Pride is not just about celebrating how far we have come, but about recognising how far we still have to go. The hon. Members who have spoken in today's debate are right: we have so much more to do.

This Government will continue to stand with LGBT+ people in this country and around the world. We have acted to right the historic wrongs committed against LGBT veterans, committed to a trans-inclusive ban on conversion practices, equalised hate crime laws, funded LGBT+ focused domestic abuse services, put our HIV plan into action, and invested millions to promote and protect LGBT rights globally. We will always champion unity and hope over hatred and division.

Pride is not just about celebrating our LGBT+ community. Pride is also an antidote to shame. Our task is to ensure that every LGBT+ person can live openly and happily, safe in the knowledge that this is a country that embraces them for who they are and that will always protect their rights.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Pride Month.

General Medical Council

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

3.57 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): A nine-year-old constituent of mine, Jack Moate, died in 2015, two months after an operation was carried out on his hips by an orthopaedic consultant at Addenbrooke's hospital in Cambridge. Jack's mother, Elizabeth, said he spent his final weeks in "constant agonising pain". At the time, she had been told that his treatment had been properly reviewed and that no concerns had been identified, but an independent clinical review later found "evidence that fatal physical harm was caused".

A nine-year-old boy in constant, agonising pain.

As the case has been referred to the coroner, I am restricted by the sub judice rule under which we operate in commenting further on the details of Jack's case at this stage. It is, of course, vital that the inquest can ensure that the full truth is established.

One of the key things I want to achieve through this Adjournment debate, on behalf of Elizabeth, is to encourage the Minister, who is respected across the House, to ask for a full briefing from her officials on the full aspects of this case. It is not constrained by the sub judice rule, so she is able to get that briefing from her officials. I therefore hope that she will be fully sighted on the issues that it gives rise to.

What I can talk about at this stage is the wider regulatory landscape regarding clinicians, and specifically the role of the GMC, on which there is currently a live consultation titled, "Reforming the General Medical Council legislative council". As the Minister will know, that consultation is open until 23 June, so this Adjournment debate is timely.

The issues at Cambridge University Hospitals NHS foundation trust raise serious wider patient safety concerns in the context of the consultation, specifically where concerns are raised but a trust does not act, where a trust does not act even after a whistleblower has raised concerns, and where other clinicians fail to intervene, and where the regulatory oversight does not kick in. It is vital, in the context of that consultation, that the GMC takes the opportunity to review expeditiously how it reforms medical practices that are problematic, and to ensure that they are not strung out over a period of many years, as I will come on to highlight.

Where shortcomings in medical practice are discovered, the GMC should act immediately to protect patients, rather than waiting for the outcome of a coroner's process, which may take many years to conclude, during which time further harm could be caused. I hope the House will revisit the circumstances of Jack's case once the coroner's process has been concluded, and I hope the Minister will commit to returning to the House to make a statement at that point, so that the issues that cannot be raised today can be debated without restriction.

Alongside that issue with the GMC, I want to raise two further points. My second point relates to the GMC's judgment, and specifically its poor judgment in relation to antisemitism. The Minister will have noticed her own Department's response just this morning to Lord Mann's recommendations to tackle what he describes as "routine ostracism of Jewish people"

in the NHS—that is the description from the Government's adviser. Indeed, Ministers quite rightly have said that all racism in the NHS is abhorrent, yet current GMC practice, to me, falls significantly below the expectations set out in Lord Mann's report. Given that his recommendations have been welcomed and accepted by the Government in full, there must be an expectation that the consultation, and indeed reform of the GMC, will reflect that. Will Health Ministers require the GMC to change the current threshold for what it sees as a standard compatible with an NHS clinician?

Let me give a specific example that illustrates the current gap between the GMC and what I see as the Government's response to Lord Mann's report. Just a few weeks ago, the NHS clinician Dr Martin Whyte was seen as fit by the GMC to join the GMC specialist register—a senior role within the NHS. Yet when I was Secretary of State for Health, I reported Dr Martin Whyte to the GMC following abhorrent social media comments. While it is distressing to read them out, I think it is important for the House to hear exactly what this doctor—who has just been put on the GMC specialist register—had to say. For example, he said:

"hahaha zeig heil hahaha gas the jews hahaha just kidding but have you seen these youtube videos about the holohoax they're pretty convincing imo".

That is from a doctor. In another tweet, he said:

"Ahaa you thin skinned babyman. How are you still so prominent at the BBC? Did you and Tony Hall kill a prostitute together or something?"

Another tweet talked of "Jew banker goblins"—that gives a sense of the character we are dealing with.

Obviously, I had a sometimes challenging relationship with the British Medical Association during my time as Health Secretary, but interestingly even it, which Dr Whyte unsuccessfully tried to sue, said that he was someone who could never return to represent it in any elected office. The BMA found him unpalatable—but not, it seems, the GMC.

That is not an isolated case. The Campaign Against Antisemitism has said:

"Britain's regulatory bodies are failing the Jewish community. Time and again doctors who spew antisemitic bile online and in the streets are being allowed to continue practising medicine".

Again, that is a flavour of Lord Mann's report from this morning.

There are other examples. I will not go through them all, but I will give just one example. Dr Rehiana Ali, a consultant neurologist who was reinstated just last year, said that the architect of the 7 October attacks was a "legend", called for Israel to be "dismantled" and claimed that 9/11 was conducted by Mossad.

I have no doubt that such examples horrify the Minister, given her good reputation in the House, as well as Members on all Benches. But they do point to why the consultation is timely and why, in response to Lord Mann's report, we need to see action in respect of the GMC.

The third issue that I want to highlight regards the wider poor performance of the GMC. This is an organisation that spends north of £100 million on staff costs—it has got more than 1,700 staff—yet doctors' fitness to practise hearings are taking, on average, almost two years to process, with a recent increase in cases open for three years or more. That time matters because the NHS must continue to pay suspended doctors in full

[*Steve Barclay*]

until they are formally found to be guilty of misconduct or incompetence. It just adds to the grievance that families feel when they see a doctor being paid for years even though there are very serious concerns regarding their fitness to practise—never mind the fact that if they do continue to practise during that time, there may be ongoing risk to patients.

Further, in October last year it came to light that the GMC had allowed doctors with restrictions regarding their overseas practice to practise without restrictions here, which clearly can put patients at risk. It is notable that even the Medical Defence Union has called for new legislation so that the GMC can overhaul its processes. Will the Minister use the Health Bill as an opportunity to table amendments for that? If not, which legislation will she use to address some of these issues regarding the GMC?

In a spirit of balance, when dealing with regulatory bodies I want to be clear about the important distinction to draw between the sort of cases I have highlighted and those of medics who have made a genuine mistake—often in a highly pressured environment—where indeed we want to encourage a culture of openness and learning. Indeed, I think back to the 2011 case of Dr Bawa-Garba, where I think a lot of the backlash to that and concerns of the wider profession were about the sense that clinical reflections made in good faith as part of learning were being used in legal proceedings, as well as the extent to which a trainee was possibly being scapegoated.

I hope the House can see the marked distinction between the grave cases that I have highlighted today and the case of a clinician who, in the heat of a high pressure situation, made a genuine mistake and where the case is addressed in a spirit of openness and transparency. I am sure the Minister can draw that distinction.

I hope that I am correct in my understanding that Ministers are minded to give the Professional Standards Authority greater powers, including to ensure that it has the information necessary to make decisions on exercising its right to appeal fitness to practise decisions, and to enable a more agile approach to regulatory performance monitoring. If the Minister confirms that in her response, I would welcome that.

How we protect patients better is a long-running issue. I know a number of my predecessors as Secretary of State for Health were focused on this—indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) worked extensively on patient safety when I was his deputy in the Department. For my part, I focused on giving families a stronger voice in the NHS—through Martha's rule, for example, and increasing data transparency. It is clear from the Government's response this morning that the current ministerial team is also focused sincerely on how to enhance patient safety, but that does require a regulator that is fit for purpose, and there are significant concerns about the GMC. I hope that the Minister will use legislation before the House, alongside the current consultation, to address some of the concerns I have raised today.

4.11 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I begin by thanking the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) for bringing this debate to the House

today and for his advocacy on behalf of his constituents. I hope that Jack's family, at what must be a terrible time for them, gain a small measure of solace from his story being raised in this place.

I have the great privilege to be a co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the survivors of Fayed and Harrods. I say that because it gives me the privilege of working with dozens of survivors who bring their stories to us, and members of the APPG can drive forward the agenda of bringing the crimes to light and ensuring that the systems that enabled the abuse for so long are dismantled. That is why I wanted to take the opportunity of this debate to place on the record the serious concerns that survivors of abuse by Mohamed Al Fayed and his associates have about the failings of the General Medical Council in his case and associated ones.

I am sure that the House knows that Fayed has been accused of systematic trafficking for sexual abuse, aided by a network of enablers. So far, almost 500 survivors have come forward to tell their stories, and there are believed to be many more. Fayed has rightly been called the UK's Epstein. One dimension of the network that enabled his abuse relates to invasive medical examinations that he had doctors perform on female staff at various companies he owned. They were billed as standard company medicals, but they involved invasive gynaecological procedures and testing for sexually transmitted infections. In many cases, survivors say, results were delivered straight to their abuser without their knowledge.

The women have been left with significant trauma, and anyone who has directly heard their stories, as I have, will no doubt be astonished by the serious consequences of that abuse, yet the doctors who carried out these tests have not paid any price. Survivors are still waiting for justice. One of the doctors who has been accused is still practising on Harley Street today. The General Medical Council says it has a zero-tolerance approach to sexual misconduct—as it should, and as I am sure all right hon. and hon. Members would expect—yet survivors tell me that their complaints to the GMC have gone unacknowledged and unaddressed for far too long.

That is simply unacceptable, as I am sure we would all agree. It is appalling. These women have been left with nowhere to turn. Medical staff who should have been prioritising these women's safety and health, and who should have been a safe port of call for reporting abuse, were instead complicit in it. The GMC should strike off any doctor found to have participated in these disgusting abuses. I welcome the attention that the Government are rightly giving the issue. Yesterday was a difficult day; there was a meeting between the all-party group and the Prime Minister—the first sitting Prime Minister to meet a group of survivors of historical sexual assault and abuse. In that meeting, he made it very clear that the meeting was the first step in ongoing engagement on this. I wonder if the Minister could carve out an opportunity to meet me and the co-chair of the all-party group, the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), to discuss where the GMC's responsibilities lie on this, and whether there might be an opportunity for us to feed into the consultation that is open, so that we can ensure that the GMC takes action, although it has failed far too many women for far too long.

4.15 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I thank the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) for raising this extremely serious matter very powerfully on behalf of his constituent Elizabeth, following the tragic loss of her son Jack. Our thoughts are with her and the rest of the family. We Members of Parliament find ourselves dealing with tragedies, but we are able to give our constituents a voice, and that is a great honour—a sad one, but one we take very seriously. I commit to working with the right hon. Gentleman as we move forward.

As the right hon. Gentleman said, the General Medical Council is there first and foremost to protect patients and maintain public confidence in the medical profession. It is the regulator of all medical doctors, anaesthesia associates and physician associates practising in the United Kingdom. It defines standards for ethics, competence and patient safety, and it has a duty to investigate concerns about doctors' performance or conduct.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned the Verita review, so let me start there. In January last year, Cambridge University hospitals trust commissioned Verita, an objective investigations company, to undertake a review of the hospital's governance. Meanwhile, the Kennedy report into the missed opportunities surrounding Dr Stohr's case is still ongoing. Verita's report was published in October 2025 and made 23 recommendations. The broad themes that emerged from that investigation were: first, that doctors needed more oversight, clinical supervision and performance management; secondly, improving safety governance through better board-level visibility and escalation pathways; thirdly, proper oversight of clinical reviews, and ensuring that they are acted on promptly, and that changes are made; and finally, a change in medical culture and behaviour, so that staff feel empowered to hold their hands up when things go wrong. The trust has accepted the findings, published an action plan and apologised to affected families, as I understand it. We expect the hospital to implement the findings of the review in full, because Jack Moate's family deserve absolute transparency from the authorities, and they have the right to know that lessons will be learned when things go wrong.

The right hon. Gentleman wrote to the Department on 15 May, and his letter makes it very clear that this is one of the worst and most distressing cases that he, in his long experience, has ever encountered. Having read that letter, I agree with him, and I know he does not use those words lightly. I can confirm that the GMC has now done the right thing and launched an investigation into the conduct of Kuldeep Stohr.

The GMC is an independent body, and I cannot go into all the specifics of an individual case, as the right hon. Gentleman will know from his time as Health Secretary. It would be wrong for me to give any further commentary on a live investigation, not least because that could prejudice the outcome and be a barrier to Jack's family getting justice. Suffice it to say that I am just as appalled as the right hon. Gentleman is that this has gone on for so long.

It has taken almost a decade of missed opportunities for the families to start getting the answers they deserve. I understand that the former Minister for patient safety, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), met some of the families in November.

He also intended to go to Cambridge to meet families and representatives of the trust. Today I can confirm that the new Minister for patient safety, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill), is willing to meet the right hon. Gentleman and the Moate family to discuss the shocking circumstances of their case. I hope that they can take some comfort from knowing that although my hon. Friend is new in post, she takes these issues very seriously, she has been a champion for her own constituents who faced patient safety failures in her local trust, and she will be following this case very closely indeed.

It may be helpful for me to outline the broader principles that govern the GMC and its regulatory framework. When an allegation is made about a doctor, the GMC has a duty to investigate and, where necessary, take action to safeguard the health and wellbeing of the public. In serious cases, it can refer a doctor to the Medical Practitioners Tribunal Service. These procedures can result in doctors being removed from the medical register. That strips away their right to legally practice medicine in this country. The MPTS is a statutory committee of the GMC. It operates separately and independently, which is crucial to maintaining public confidence in its findings. The tribunals have a legal duty to protect the public, and we have clear expectations of them.

This year, we are taking action to modernise the regulation of all healthcare professionals in the UK. In March, we published a consultation on reforming the General Medical Council legislative framework. The reforms would make the process for assessing a doctor's fitness to practice swifter and fairer, and, as we have heard, the consultation runs until 23 June. The right hon. Gentleman tempts me to consider making amendments to the Health Bill. Given his experience, he will understand that I will not commit to doing that, but I can commit to discussing the matter further, and I encourage him and others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), who raised the shocking al-Fayed case, to engage with that consultation. We will consider the outcomes of that consultation before we bring legislation to the House, but we expect to lay the General Medical Council order before Parliament later this year, subject to those conversations. I am happy to ensure that the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire and my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield have any further meetings that are necessary with me or with officials, given the tight deadlines that will have to be met under that timetable.

I will touch on the Mann review, which the right hon. Gentleman also highlighted. As we all know, the NHS was founded on the principle of treating everyone equally and with respect. We have been crystal clear that racism and discrimination betray everything the NHS stands for and its ability to provide safe, world-class care. That is why the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), asked the noble Lord Mann to conduct a review into antisemitism and other forms of racism in the NHS. As the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire said, this morning Lord Mann published a series of robust and practical recommendations, and we support every one of them.

The right hon. Gentleman read out some shocking stories from his time as Health Secretary. I cannot comment on them now, but I assure him and other hon.

[Karin Smyth]

Members that in the weeks and months ahead, we will work with all organisations that have been named in the review, including the GMC, to ensure partners across the system are supported in delivering meaningful change based on the recommendations.

Trust is the glue that holds our institutions together. The public have an absolute right to know that they can trust their doctor, and when things do go wrong, they have a right to swift and transparent justice. I cannot

begin to imagine what Jack's family, and especially his poor mum, are going through. I thank them for their consideration in discussing this with us, and I know that there are many other families involved. The system that we build has to do right by families like theirs. I commit to working further with the right hon. Gentleman and others in this place to do just that.

Question put and agreed to.

4.22 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 4 June 2026

[DEREK TWIGG in the Chair]

Home-to-School Transport

[*Relevant documents: Seventieth Report of the Public Accounts Committee of Session 2024-26, Home-to-School transport, HC 1238, and the Government response, CP 1587.*]

1.30 pm

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered home-to-school transport.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg, and I am grateful for having secured this important debate. At its core, home-to-school transport is a simple promise: where a child cannot reasonably walk to school, transport will not be a barrier to their education. However, that promise is under serious strain.

Across the country, and acutely in North Yorkshire, families are finding that promise being broken by policy changes that are short-sighted, poorly designed and, in many cases, deeply unfair. The national picture is stark; the Public Accounts Committee published its report on home-to-school transport in March, and its conclusions make for uncomfortable reading.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I serve on the Public Accounts Committee, and I was the spokesperson for that report when it went to the media. The report dealt specifically with the education of those with special educational needs and disabilities, and it became very clear that there is a complete drop-off at age 16, meaning that many young adults aged 16 to 19 cannot get to school. The other point I would like to make is that, in rural constituencies like my own, the local special school is not a mile down the road, so it can mean a two-hour round journey.

Tom Gordon: I thank my hon. Friend for her diligent work as a member of the PAC, and for making that point about SEND, which I will come on to during my speech.

Local authorities in England spent £2.6 billion on home-to-school transport in 2024-25, which was a real-terms increase of 70% since 2015-16. SEND transport alone more than doubled in cost over that same period, and it now accounts for £2 billion of that total. These are enormous sums, but remarkably, the PAC found that the Department for Education does not know whether this spending is achieving value for money. It does not have the data needed to oversee the system effectively, and it cannot adequately measure the relationship between transport and school attendance.

The consequences of that failure are visible in other figures: some 1 million young people in the UK are not in education, employment or training, and one in five children of compulsory school age misses at least a day of school per fortnight, which rises to one in three at sixth-form age. The Department's own assessment looks only at transport disruptions on the day they occur, not

the wider issue of whether the system is keeping children in school. This is a serious blind spot, and one that the Government need to address.

This is not just a North Yorkshire problem; the County Councils Network has warned that three quarters of councils are expected to tighten mainstream transport eligibility in the coming years. What is happening in my constituency today, and across North Yorkshire, is a preview of what families across rural England will face if this direction of travel is not reversed. Nowhere is the picture more stark than in some of the stories that my constituents have told me, which is why I secured this debate today.

At the heart of the problem is a growing disconnect between two systems that are supposed to work together but increasingly do not. We have a school admissions system built around catchment areas and feeder school relationships, and a home-to-school transport framework that has been interpreted ever more narrowly as being for the "nearest school only".

For many years, county councils bridged that gap pragmatically by offering transport to the nearest or catchment school. That reflects the realities of rural England, where many children live well beyond walking distance, where public transport is sparse or often non-existent, and where the geography means that the nearest school on the map is often not the most practical school to reach—sometimes there is a dale in the way, sometimes a river crossing, and sometimes a simple county boundary that bears no relation to how communities actually function.

As budgets tighten and authorities retreat towards the statutory minimum provision, councils are removing catchment transport and reverting to nearest school only. In rural areas like North Yorkshire, the consequences are severe and they are being felt right now. Within days of being elected, the issue of home-to-school transport was landing in my email inbox, and it has not stopped since. North Yorkshire council changed its transport policy to base eligibility on nearest school only, rather than the nearest or catchment school. The council says this is to address rising costs, which are now expected to exceed £52 million—one of the three largest areas of the council's expenditure—with unsubstantiated claims of savings of up to £3 million over the next seven years.

I understand budgetary pressures, and I understand that local authorities are being squeezed from every direction, but understanding a pressure does not simply mean accepting the response to it uncritically, when the policy is clearly not working. The system that North Yorkshire council uses to calculate the nearest school is not publicly available, so families receive decisions with no ability to interrogate the methodology behind them. That opacity alone is a problem, but when we look at what the methodology is actually producing, it becomes something worse than opaque; it becomes absurd.

The council measures distance using the shortest available walked route to school, which sounds reasonable until we look at what counts as a "walked route". That includes riverside paths, farm tracks, roads with no pavements or street lights, cliffside grass tracks and hiking paths over the dales. Campaigners have discovered that the council's mapping tool has even been thought to include a private farm track and a ford crossing of a river as an available walking route to school. In reality, the ford is passable only by tractor and the track is on

[Tom Gordon]

private land. One family appealed successfully against the use of the route, but it remains on the council's mapping system, ready to be used again.

The School Transport Action Group has documented routes that children have been expected to follow, including climbing over metal barriers on the A64 and using paths that cross an active military firing range. I am interested to hear the Minister's view of whether any of those constitute a "nearest available walked route", in North Yorkshire council's words. STAG, which was formed to fight the changes, has done determined and important work in documenting the human and financial cost of the policy. I pay particular tribute to Jo Foster, whose campaigning on the issue has been tireless and has helped bring the national attention that it warrants. STAG puts the situation plainly:

"North Yorkshire Council has lost the plot on home to school transport",

and I am inclined to agree. More than 1,000 families have been affected, with more than 200 appeals and 20 ombudsman cases in the past year alone. A senior councillor who voted for this very policy has publicly admitted that it contains errors, and some families have been left as losers. This is not a rounding error; it is a clear policy failure.

STAG has completed a survey of families going through the process right now, the class of 2026. The group has 60 responses so far, and the findings are telling: nearly 59% applied to a school because it was their catchment school, more than a third already had siblings there, and 84% live in towns and villages that have a school bus going to their chosen catchment school, yet 73% will not be eligible for free transport. Nearly two thirds of those families have no back-up plan at all.

Some have told STAG what their options look like in practice. One parent said:

"My back-up plan is to leave my job so I can drive my child to school."

Another said:

"We would have to consider driving, but we both travel with work and it wouldn't allow us to do our current jobs."

A single parent wrote:

"I would not be able to work. I am a single parent household."

One parent captured the particular absurdity of sibling cases:

"I shall have to take extra overtime at work in order to pay for my second child to sit on a bus that my eldest child is already on."

Those families who plan to buy a paid-for bus pass face a further cruelty. Those passes will not be confirmed until August. They will be subject to availability and can be withdrawn with one week's notice. The council has made it clear that its intention is to phase out catchment routes entirely, as soon as possible. Families are therefore being asked to plan their working lives around a service that may not exist by the time that their child starts secondary school.

Those are not edge cases; they are predictable, documented consequences of a policy that has stripped the transport system away from the admissions system it is supposed to support. The costs have not disappeared; they have simply been transferred from the council to the rural families who can least afford them. Council

officers have described the changes as ensuring "fairness and consistency", but I will put some individual stories on the record and let Members judge that for themselves.

Leanne lives in a village outside Harrogate. Her daughter has been waiting three and a half years for a diagnosis, but is on the SEN register and has a PDA—pathological demand avoidance—profile with emotional-based school avoidance. There is no public bus through her village and no safe walking route. Leanne's other child has Down's syndrome and an education, health and care plan, and cannot travel to school safely alone. Both children need to be at school at the same time; Leanne and her husband both work full time. Under the new policy, they have been denied free transport to the nearest suitable school and are now paying £94 a month for a bus permit. She told me:

"The system is broken and does not take into account personal circumstances or rural villages' needs."

I agree with her entirely.

David lives in Upper Wharfedale. Every morning he drives in convoy with his neighbours, following the school bus past his house, because his neighbours qualified under the old policy, but he did not. For him, the bus goes to the nearest primary school, the only school that anyone in the local area has attended for 60 years, along the only safe route available. North Yorkshire council, however, is now saying that his children's nearest school is Hawes, in Wensleydale. To get there, they would have to cross Fleet Moss, one of the highest and most remote routes in the country, which is treacherous in winter and frequently impassable. David and his family moved to the dales five years ago to run a farm diversification scheme, but they would never have come had this policy been in place then. He has told me that it will be "the death of these communities, and that's not hyperbole."

I believe him.

Sophie, a friend I went to high school and college with, lives in one of the villages straddling multiple local authority boundaries, with a Doncaster postcode, North Yorkshire council oversight, an East Yorkshire postal address and a West Yorkshire phone number. Her children's primary school cohort has been scattered across four secondary schools, in different local authorities and in four different directions. She made the point with her characteristic directness: it cannot possibly be more cost-effective to fund transport to four separate schools in four different directions than it would be to fund one bus to one school. The policy is not just unfair to families, but undermining the purpose that it is meant to be achieving.

There is also a wider consequence that is often not discussed. One in four small primary schools in North Yorkshire stands to lose pupils because of this policy. Small secondary schools in Settle, Whitby and Boroughbridge face an existential threat. When we hollow out the transport routes that sustain these schools, we do not just inconvenience rural families, but undermine the schools themselves and the rural communities they serve.

I also want to raise the issue facing SEND families specifically, and the additional injustice of a cliff edge at 16. I want to tell this Chamber about Noah, whose mother Catherine has shared his story with me. Noah deferred starting primary school by a year because he was unable to walk. After winning an appeal to attend St John's, North Yorkshire council offset that deferred

year and placed him in year 8. The consequence—I want colleagues to sit with this for a moment—is that Noah will now receive one fewer year of education than his peers, and four years of free transport rather than five because his transport entitlement ends at 16. He has already had more taken from him than other children, through no fault of his own, and the system's response is to take even more.

Noah cannot walk independently and requires one-to-one support. His taxi to school has become the highlight of his day because it is the one moment where he does not feel dependent on his mum—when he can feel something like freedom. His family have one income, claim universal credit and have little to no savings; they cannot find the money needed to pay the monthly costs for school transport. When Noah turns 18, the assumption is that his mum will simply be able to drive him because she has a Motability vehicle, which will strip away his independence that took so long to build. This is not a bureaucratic edge case; the system does this to families like Noah's without apology.

That is not an isolated experience. The Public Accounts Committee found that 40% of families with young people with SEND said that they needed to give up work because of transport provision ending when their child turned 16. Colleges report students failing to start courses because transport had not been agreed. I believe that there was an issue across the border in Leeds, where the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman has already found the council at fault for its approach to post-16 SEND transport, identifying both individual injustice and systemic failure. However, families continue to report inconsistent decisions, inadequate assessments and personal travel allowances that do not cover the actual costs.

The charity Contact put it clear in evidence to PAC: the policy is simply not working post 16. The change in entitlement can feel like a cliff edge. For families who have spent years building routines and supporting a young person with complex needs, that cliff edge can be devastating for the young person and for every member of their family around them. We cannot have a system that claims to support inclusion and participation while simultaneously pulling the transport that makes participation possible.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I wanted to come along and support the hon. Gentleman in bringing this debate forward. He is a very assiduous MP in this House, whether it be on the Back Benches in the Chamber or leading debates in Westminster Hall, and I want to congratulate him on that. I also add my support to what he is hoping to achieve because, although this is not a responsibility for the Minister—this issue is devolved in Northern Ireland—we have similar problems when it comes to SEND issues, disabled children and road safety. In his quest to have a better system, I wish him well. I hope that, back home in Northern Ireland where it is devolved—the Minister here has no responsibility for it—we will see changes as well.

Tom Gordon: I thank the hon. Member for his contribution. As ever, he puts his point eloquently and passionately. I agree that, no matter where a SEND child is living in this United Kingdom, they deserve a lot better than they are getting at the moment.

I want to press the Minister on a number of specific points. The single most impactful achievable change that this Government could make is also the simplest. The statutory guidance on home-to-school transport should be updated so that the minimum provision becomes the nearest or catchment school, rather than solely the nearest suitable school. That one change would restore the alignment between admissions and transport that rural families depend on. It would give councils a clear framework and remove the incentive to reinterpret eligibility ever more narrowly. It would protect the community-school relationships that anchor rural life, and it would not even require primary legislation. I urge the Minister to give that serious consideration.

Secondly, I urge the Minister to impress on her colleagues at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government the need to reinstate the rural services delivery grant. The rural premium matters enormously for local authorities such as North Yorkshire, where distances are not a policy choice, but a geographical fact. Cutting that grant has had real consequences for the decisions that local authorities have to make, and those consequences are being borne by families in villages across the dales, across my constituency of Harrogate and Knaresborough, and in North Yorkshire more widely.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): On that point, my first ministerial job was as Local Government Minister, and I think that the hon. Member makes an excellent point about the importance of the rural services delivery grant to councils such as North Yorkshire, which incur extra costs in delivering services in rural areas. Does he agree that that is an important aspect of local government finance that needs to be considered when MHCLG is looking at allocations, and that it is particularly important to our rural county of North Yorkshire?

Tom Gordon: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that point. It is one of the things on which we absolutely agree. I would like to see all parties and especially the governing party put that problem right. As I said, cutting the grant has had real consequences for the decisions that councils make.

Thirdly, we need to see expansion of the statutory minimum more broadly. The current system, which involves a 2-mile walking distance for primary, 3 miles for secondary and a duty that ends at age 16, was designed for a different era and different pattern of schooling. Where school systems have been reorganised, specialist provision has been concentrated and rural bus networks have been allowed to decline, the statutory floor is no longer fit for purpose.

Fourthly, will the Minister confirm that the Government will make data collection on home-to-school transport mandatory, as the PAC recommended? We cannot improve what we do not measure. Voluntary, inconsistent data collection across more than 100 local authorities is not a sufficient basis on which to run a £2.6 billion spending commitment. The Department needs a proper baseline if it is ever to hold local authorities to account and drive genuine improvement.

Home-to-school transport is not a niche issue. It sits at the intersection of SEND, rural sustainability, school attendance, the cost of living and the long-term viability of rural communities. In rural England, school buses

[Tom Gordon]

are not a luxury, but essential infrastructure. Families across rural communities such as those in North Yorkshire are not asking for special treatment. They are asking for a system that works, keeps their children safe, keeps them in school and does not price them out of the education to which they are legally entitled. There should not be a rural tax on education. That is not too much to ask, and I hope the Minister agrees.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I remind Members to bob if they wish to be called to speak in the debate.

1.46 pm

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. Massive congratulations to the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) on securing the debate. This issue matters to so many people around the country.

My constituency is a coastal community, but also very rural in parts. Many of the issues raised by the hon. Member apply directly to Sittingbourne and Sheppey. A notable issue is the recent school allocations in the east of the island of Sheppey that sent people what on paper was a few miles, as the crow flies, but given that it is an island, there is an enormous body of water in the way, and as the Harty ferry from Harty island went many decades ago, it was never going to happen—unless the kids were really good at swimming. They are being sent on a more-than-two-hour journey by public transport, often on snarled-up roads, and we have terrible bus services, like so many rural areas.

However, I want to focus on the issues for children with special educational needs and disabilities and particularly those aged 16 and older. Kent county council has recently changed the criteria that allow people to opt for school transport to their education and has now made it all but impossible for people with special educational needs to secure transport. In fact, more than 50 families have written to me about this in just the last couple of months, since it was announced that the policy was being changed.

Some of the stories that I hear are heartbreaking. Anthony is one young lad. He is 17 years old and non-verbal. He is attending sixth form at the moment. Although he is mobile on his feet, he needs a lot of help with his day-to-day care: his toileting—the ability to toilet—but also his interaction with people if they are on public transport. In fact, he would always need to be chaperoned, which is not something that can now be afforded in this system. That puts him at risk and puts the public at risk as well. He is distraught—visibly so—and his mother is distraught at the fact that now he may be unable to access schools and complete his education. He is just one example of many. They have been through the appeals process, trying to get that overturned, and it is really opaque. When I have written to people at the county council to try to find out what the process is and what the criteria are for challenging these decisions—for Anthony and many other children in this situation—I am told that it is a case of exceptional circumstances only, but then they struggle to define what exceptional circumstances are. As we burrow through this, we find that in the end there is an absolute veto in

terms of their local policies, which frankly, to my mind, just means that they can make it up as they see fit. There is no real guidance as to what is and is not possible.

Anthony is not the only one. One of my near neighbours in Sittingbourne is Mason. I went to see him. He is a young lad of 16 with cerebral palsy. He has a fantastic wheelchair. It is a big chunky piece of kit that he requires to get around on. He is having a great time in sixth form at the moment, but from September that is not going to happen, because although nominally some funding has been allocated to him, it is not enough to hire transport. More to the point, when his parents have gone round looking for available transport in the area and have phoned up all nine of the local cab companies in Sittingbourne, not one of them has an adapted vehicle. To the point made about how transport impacts parents and other members of the family, Mason's father drives their adapted vehicle to work and so is unable to use it to take him to school. Mason's mother does not drive and has to take their daughter to a different school and get to work herself. One of those two parents is now under pressure to give up work in order to protect Mason's education, which is going to be vital. This is a lad who could absolutely thrive as an adult if he can get through the key stages.

We know a lot of people with SEND need to go through the later stages in education all the way up to 25 to give them the life skills and ability to interact with other people, and a degree of independence that means people like Mason and other children who are affected can get into work and employment, which we know is one of the Government's key aims. In a constituency like mine, with particularly high levels of young people not earning or learning, the impact is felt ever further. There are other stories where people have gone through the appeals process. It is a very intrusive process pushed down on people where members of the extended family—uncles and aunts, near friends and quite distant members of the family—are all asked to give a reason why they cannot take the children to school. In one case, members of a family who live in Cornwall were asked to account for why they could not take the child to school, when, of course, my constituency is in Kent. Unless there is a rapid way of travelling, I do not think that is very likely. It is not very plausible and it just speaks to how the whole process is not coherent—and I am being very polite.

The hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), who is not here, as he often isn't, came to Kent soon after the election to give his opinion and to tell the Reform administration what he thought should happen. He was very clear. He said it was an enormous waste to spend money on getting kids to school. In fact, he said:

"There are things called parents who for as long as modern times remember have had the aggravation of getting their kids to school."

That is a very characteristic turn of phrase from him. This is the modern world, not the 1950s or the 1850s. Transport is very complicated and we have a very different relationship with people with disabilities. I think particularly of families in which both parents are working. It really feeds into everything that is happening in Kent under its Reform administration. The leader of the Reform council said that breakfast clubs are a disaster because parents should be feeding their children. The trouble is, when I spoke to the county council to try to get clarity about what the criteria are, it pushed it back on the national Government and said that there is no tight guidance.

In line with the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, who secured the debate, I ask the Minister what we can do nationally to ensure that local authorities deliver what we want as a national policy: getting people into education, work or training, and making sure that everyone has access to a full and vibrant life. Is there a way of updating the statutory guidance for local authorities to include funding for transport for young people who need post-16 SEND transport? We need to get that in black and white so that local authorities have to consider it and cannot flim-flam away in the way that Kent county council has. That is my main ask.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I advise Members that if they refer to Members who are not here, they should have let them know beforehand.

1.53 pm

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): As I have said to those on the Front Bench, I am unable to stay until the end of the debate, for which I apologise to you, Mr Twigg, and to colleagues. I commend the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) for securing the debate.

I am delighted that we have such an influential member of the Labour party here on the Front Bench—the Minister for School Standards, the hon. Member for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould)—because we cannot have this debate without mentioning the context of what this Labour Government are doing to rural areas. We have had the family farm tax, intolerable rate increases on pubs and hospitality businesses, and the Employment Rights Act 2025 hammering the ability of businesses, particularly those in rural areas, to take on young people. We have had the business inheritance tax issue, which causes huge problems for the continued success of many family businesses in rural areas, including in North Yorkshire. We are seeing policies of micro-managing moorland from Whitehall, rather than allowing long-term landowners to care for it as they have for generations. In North Yorkshire, we have a particular issue with the Labour mayor, who is looking to impose an overnight tourism tax, which will cause businesses more problems. He is also taking a greater portion than the Government wanted to give him for roads in York rather than across North Yorkshire.

The context is that Labour is hitting rural areas incredibly hard. I know the Minister is a fair person—she is on a very short journey to greater and more senior things in this Government. Though I disagree with them, the Government need to be a success. I urge her: please start thinking about rural areas across policies. We heard about the work that my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak)—the former Prime Minister, Chancellor and Minister for Local Government—did to protect rural areas with the rural services grant. That has been taken away, as has the fairer funding formula. North Yorkshire council is running a £42.5 million recurring deficit. That is the context out of which many of the things raised in this debate are coming.

North Yorkshire council has been forced to move to a policy of nearest local school, rather than the much more generous policy that it had before. We are one of the most rural parts—if not, the most rural part—of

England, but in order to be fair to other taxpayers and the services it looks after, this was the only position it could take. On a lightly political point, the Lib-Dem-led Westmorland and Furness council is having to look at this, as is Oxfordshire county council—everybody is facing these challenges.

I will not talk about SEND travel today, but a big issue in my inbox—as in that of the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough—is from parents who accept that things have to change, but who have seen anomalies impacting their kids and their ability to get their kids to school. For example, in Skipton and Ripon, there are selective and comprehensive schools either on the same road or very near one another. If kids are at the wrong end of town, they can be selected for one of those schools, particularly the selective schools, but are then unable to get free school transport because of the designated nearest school policy. In Settle and Upper Wharfedale, and other schools in the heart of the dales, feeder schools are needed to keep their numbers up. They have historical links with primary schools in Bentham, Ingleton and other parts of my constituency, but those kids are now being sent outwith North Yorkshire, into Lancashire and other counties.

Rishi Sunak: My right hon. Friend, who is my dear friend and constituency neighbour, is making an excellent speech. He talks about families in the dales. I am sure that he agrees that families in the upper dales and Swaledale have been acutely impacted by this policy. He knows the geography well; families are also now being directed to schools in Kirkby Stephen or Barnard Castle, and getting there requires passage on minor, single-track roads through high moorland—roads that are often unpassable and unsafe in the winter months.

The situation has obviously caused concern for the families involved. They are being very well represented by Councillor Yvonne Peacock. I join her in urging the council—it has to make difficult decisions, and my right hon. Friend was right to point out the climate in which it is operating—as it looks to refine and review this policy using the discretionary powers that Government guidance allows it, to think about the particular geography of Swaledale, the impact of weather on these roads and whether it is right for these children to be going to those schools. Often, they are having their education disrupted or travelling on unsafe routes.

Sir Julian Smith: I completely agree with my right hon. Friend. We have talked about Settle college, which is threatened by kids going outwith the constituency and is worried about its numbers, but in the upper dales, too—we heard about the Thomases and others in Oughtershaw—children have to go over the top into Richmondshire or to Settle college, which is much further away than Upper Wharfedale school. The impact is that historical links between communities and villages, and between primaries and secondaries, are being broken, and these schools are vulnerable to tiny changes in rolls from year to year. I urge the Minister to reflect on the fact that many of us have fought to keep some of these schools open, and this policy really is having a negative effect. There are issues with the siblings policy, whereby the school attended by a sibling is no longer taken into account. I hope that this and other examples will be considered as North Yorkshire completes its review and considers its post-implementation procedures.

[Sir Julian Smith]

We heard the proposal from the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough to look again at the definition of a local school and at the rural services grant. I think we need an emergency brake to ensure that Settle, Upper Wharfedale and other vulnerable schools are protected, and that one policy—in North Yorkshire or other counties—does not undermine schools. Parents also want to understand the opportunities for voluntary contributions. That interacts with commercial bus services; what are the options there? Above all, there is a need to look at the appeals process. Is the Department for Transport allowed to look at cases? In the case of Oughtershaw, it is just impossible to get over to the recommended school in winter; the Department had not really done an assessment of that.

Tom Gordon: It came to my attention that a freedom of information request to North Yorkshire council uncovered emails that suggested that the Conservative leader of the council was suggesting that there should not be more than one Liberal Democrat sitting on any of the council's appeal panels. Does the right hon. Member agree that we need full transparency to understand what has been going on there and how the council might have been looking to fix who sits on those appeal panels?

Sir Julian Smith: Well, I thank the hon. Member for that point. [Laughter.] All I would say is that, knowing the personalities involved and their integrity, I think North Yorkshire council has been grappling with a difficult challenge. It accepts that there will have to be changes. It is key that we move forward, and a way to do that is to ask whether there can be a more empathetic approach to appeals and whether North Yorkshire can look at some of the points that the hon. Member and others have made about the fact that we are such a sparse area and need some changes. Ultimately, though, this falls on the Government. Although a small increase in home-to-school funding was earmarked in the previous local government funding settlement, it did not reach the need and the amount of money that North Yorkshire spends. We really need the Government to look at the specific needs of rural education, and to look again at how to assess sparsity and rural factors, in this and every other policy they have a part in.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Time is moving on, so before I call the next speaker, I kindly suggest that Members keep their speeches to about six minutes so that we can get everybody in with a similar amount of time.

2.3 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) on securing this debate. I will focus my remarks on home-to-school transport for SEND children and young people, as I know others will talk about other aspects of the home-to-school transport system.

The home-to-school transport system for SEND children and young people is a good lens through which to view how parts of the SEND system in general do not really

communicate with one another. There is currently a statutory duty to provide home-to-school transport for children with additional needs who need to travel to a place of learning that is not within walking distance or is not their local place of education. However, the way that is applied often leads to rather negative outcomes for these children.

There are obviously financial constraints on local authorities, which are obliged to provide home-to-school transport, and that often leads them to going with the lowest possible bid from a company that can provide it. A number of home-to-school transport companies market themselves as “specialists”. In reality, however, their staff have minimal specialist training, which often consists only of how to correctly load and unload a wheelchair, and the vehicles are often highly unsuitable for transporting children with special educational needs—sometimes it might just be a taxi. Obligations are placed on parents, who can be deeply worried about putting their child in a car with an unfamiliar person, particularly if that child is non-verbal or has communication difficulties. Safeguarding concerns often come to the fore.

There also does not appear to be a great deal of monitoring or holding of companies to account for the service that they provide. Parents in my constituency tell me that their home-to-school transport turns up late or fails to turn up at all, and that getting replacement drivers or assistance for their children is a regular occurrence. One parent said that if they were taking their child to school and regularly dropped them off half an hour late, the school would have something to say about it. Indeed, schools quite often like to send messages out to parents—as they should—to remind them of the importance of punctuality and being at school on time. Lateness has a huge knock-on effect for children and young people. Disabled children are often at a disadvantage to their peers to begin with, and if a child needs a routine in their day and to begin their day in a certain way, constantly turning up late to class and having to be signed in at the office can put a real dampener on their day.

The costs of home-to-school transport have been increasing for some time, and I believe it is projected that they will continue to increase. The Minister will probably speak about how the SEND reforms will go some way to address that. The County Councils Network, among others, has called for the Government to consider means-testing home-to-school transport for disabled children. It highlighted cases where councils were sending transport to pick children up to travel sometimes for upwards of an hour and a half each day and claimed that that was unsustainable. To be clear, we do not means-test education for anyone in this country, and I do not believe that parents who happen to have a disabled child should be treated any differently here.

There is a hidden cost of having a disabled child that an income-based means test would not take into account, as has been pointed out by Contact, the charity for disabled children and their families. Often, a child has to travel a long distance to go to a school that meets their needs because the system has catastrophically failed to meet their needs any closer to home. That failure usually lands squarely at the door of the local authority, which attempts to dodge having to pay for it by means-testing and putting the onus back on parents. It is reprehensible that a system that has failed to

provide an education, failed to intervene early enough to stop issues escalating, and failed to find somewhere suitable to educate someone close to their home tries to make parents pay for the privilege of sending their child to a special educational needs establishment a long distance away. I would welcome the Minister's assurance that there are no plans to introduce means testing of parents of special educational needs and disabled children for home-to-school transport.

I will touch briefly on another aspect of the system that probably could do with changing. The statutory duty to provide home-to-school transport for children with SEND currently covers those between five and 16 and those between 19 and 25. That leaves ages nought to five not covered—in some cases, children begin school at age four, which leaves a year-long gap during which the parent has to take them to school until the duty kicks in when the child turns five—and a gap between 16 and 19, where it seems that legislation has not kept pace. We acknowledge that some people require additional education until age 25, but we do not have the statutory cover for them to receive transport to get to a place of education.

I will leave it there, as I think I have gone over my six minutes.

2.9 pm

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) on securing the debate. Members will be pleased to know that my speech will be under six minutes, so we will have brought that time back.

I want to speak about home-to-school transport for children with special educational needs and disabilities and in particular about Lewis—that is not his real name, but he is a real Eastbourne boy with special educational needs. What happened to Lewis should never happen to any child. Lewis was physically restrained, relentlessly and brutally, by his passenger assistant on his home-to-school transport. His mum only found out when he came home that evening visibly distressed and bruised. She had not been told. That is because, shockingly, there is no statutory requirement to report incidents of physical restraint on home-to-school transport. We only know the specifics of what happened from looking at it, because it was captured on CCTV in the vehicle, and it was only captured because Eastbourne borough council—coincidentally, when I was a councillor—pushed for mandatory CCTV in cabs that facilitate home-to-school transport.

I raised Lewis's case at Education questions last April and secured a meeting with the Minister's predecessor, the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell), who acknowledged that there is a clear gap in regulation. When I raised the issue again at Prime Minister's questions in November the Prime Minister looked into the eyes of Lewis's mum, who was in the Public Gallery, and said that the principle of safety and tailored support for every child would be "central" to his SEND reforms. I am asking, and Lewis and his mum are asking, why the issue was not addressed in those reforms. Why was that gap in regulation not filled?

The Challenging Behaviour Foundation, which does lots of amazing work and research in this area, has set out exactly what is needed. It has rightly said that we

need national training standards for all staff on home-to-school transport—something that does not exist now but could have helped Lewis. We also need a statutory duty to record and report to parents any use of restraint on home-to-school transport. That duty exists in school settings, but the situation is patchy for home-to-school transport. The Challenging Behaviour Foundation has rightly said that stronger safeguarding guidance, linked to "Working Together to Safeguard Children", is required.

Those are not complex or costly asks. They are nowhere near as complex or costly on a human level as the trauma that Lewis has experienced and the anguish that his family have been through.

Jen Craft: The hon. Member is making an excellent point. I hope he will forgive me for adding another ask to his list. In assistance and drivers for home-to-school transport for disabled children—particularly those who have autism or neurodiversity—consistency is key. Does he agree that best practice guidance, setting out things such as consistency and the three points that he has made, would be very welcome?

Josh Babarinde: I completely agree. My little brother is autistic so, as a family, we see up close how important consistency is and how disrupting the consistency of a particular service can be hugely disruptive to the flow of his life. The same goes for many others with special educational needs and disabilities, so I would absolutely add that ask. I hope that the Minister can address it in her winding-up speech.

Those four points are the minimum that Lewis and every SEND child travelling to school deserves. I hope that the Minister will meet me and Lewis's mum to discuss this issue further—things fell through the cracks with the change of Minister at the last reshuffle—so that we can finally get closer to delivering on the promise that the Prime Minister made.

2.14 pm

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) on securing this important debate.

Connection and mobility are key to a social, happy and healthy society—and, as we are hearing, an educated one. The ability to build networks, reach community and simply get where we need to go matters, and it matters most in the early years of a child's development. It councils' responsibility to ensure that money allocated is properly spent, but it is Government's responsibility to ensure that councils have adequate funding, including for home-to-school transport. That funding is provided through recurrent general funding allocations, and the Government must make absolutely certain that their funding formula matches local needs. When it does not, families and communities pay the price.

I have a local example of exactly that. When Ancells Farm, a housing development in my North East Hampshire constituency, was built with the promise of a local primary school, families moved there in good faith. That school was never built. However, as part of a new arrangement, Hampshire county council promised a

[Alex Brewer]

free bus to take children to their catchment school. That promise, too, has now been broken. What exists today is a bus service restricted solely to eligible students, with no spare seat capacity whatsoever. The decision to reduce the bus size, removing additional seats that parents were not only willing but actively prepared to pay for, has had real and serious consequences. It is the subject of a stage 3 complaint with Hampshire county council and has been referred to the ombudsman, but while complaints work their way through the bureaucratic channels, families are struggling today.

Let me be specific about what that looks like. I am all in favour of children walking to school whenever practical and possible. Parents are doing the school run twice a day, every day. Even by car, that is still time taken away from work. For those in paid-hourly or shift-based employment, it means hours lost, and hours lost mean money lost. For those in salaried roles, it means arriving late, leaving early or relying on the good will of employers, which cannot be taken for granted indefinitely. Some parents have had to reduce their working hours; others have had to turn down responsibilities or opportunities at work. Those ripple effects reach into every corner of family life. Less income means less financial resilience. It means fewer after-school clubs, fewer activities and fewer of the enriching experiences that support a child's development and wellbeing. The broken promise of a bus is not just an inconvenience.

For the parents who do not drive, the situation is simply unworkable. The walk to the catchment primary school is 2.4 miles according to Google Maps—other maps are available—which is 54 minutes on foot. For a five-year-old, it would take considerably longer, as I am sure we can all imagine. For a parent doing the round trip twice—there and back in the morning, and again at the end of the day—that is close to four hours of walking every single school day. Those are four hours that cannot be spent working, caring for other children, managing a home or doing any of the other things that family life demands.

The route crosses the railway station entrance with no pedestrian crossing, and runs along the town's busiest roads at rush hour. Parents have raised serious concerns about its safety. They have paid out of their own pockets for an independent safety assessment, which has identified real hazards, while Hampshire county council has refused to conduct a safety assessment of its own. One school is 10 minutes closer, which is not nothing for a young child, but it is not in catchment, and there is no public bus as an alternative because rural bus services, even in semi-rural commuter towns, have been cut.

Let me turn briefly to the law, because it is instructive. The Government's own guidance on free school transport sets out clearly how children qualify. Rightly, they qualify if they cannot walk to school because of special educational needs, disability or mobility problems. They qualify when there is no safe walking route, but if the council refuses to undertake a sufficient assessment, who decides what is and is not safe? They qualify if the school is more than 2 miles away and they are under eight, or if the school is more than 3 miles away and they are eight or older. That often leaves families in the ridiculous situation of having to walk an eight-year-old to school while their seven-year-old is on the bus.

It is arguable that, for families on Ancells Farm, every single one of those criteria is met for every child in one way or another, yet parents have been fighting for years to keep the bus service going. We must consider what more the Government can do to ensure that local authorities are adequately funded and meeting their statutory duties towards the children in their care. I urge the Minister to consider what families are facing in Ancells and elsewhere across the country.

2.19 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship in this important debate, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) for securing this debate and for the way he introduced it and shared his constituents' stories. Our constituencies are very different, but the stories I heard were very familiar. The thread running through them is that children who are reliant on home-to-school transport are often failed.

For another 10 months, my Woking constituents will be served by Surrey county council, and that is a real challenge for them. I have called many times for the children's services at that council to be investigated and put into special measures, and home-to-school transport is another area in which I think the council lets people down. Surrey has third biggest local authority spend—at the last count, it spent more than £65 million in one year—on home-to-school transport, and it regularly overspends. The vast majority of that money is spent on home-to-school transport for children with special educational needs. Last year, *The Daily Telegraph* said that

"Workers in Surrey have been left unable to book a taxi first thing in the morning because firms are too busy ferrying pupils to...schools".

On top of that, I speak to many parents and carers in Woking who are struggling and fighting to get the home-to-school transport that their children need. No one is happy with the system; it is not working for anyone, be they parents, carers, taxpayers or the wider community. It is broken, particularly in Surrey, where the county council has not invested enough in SEND school places. That means that the school places available for SEND children in Woking are often far away, making home-to-school transport absolutely essential. If we had capital investment—an invest-to-save approach—to build more SEND school places, the bill for home-to-school transport could be reduced and the quality of life for my young constituents would improve. Surrey county council is not doing that, and I think that is disgusting.

A young male constituent of mine, who is in a wheelchair because of cerebral palsy and suffers from epilepsy, was given an education place 25 miles away from his home. He had to leave my constituency and go through the next constituency, through the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Alex Brewer), and then into another. The county council did not think that that journey merited home-to-school transport; it said that the child was on their own. That decision was absolutely appalling, but thankfully it was reversed.

My county council has also tried to suggest that children should travel on inappropriate routes so that it can avoid providing home-to-school transport. One young girl was told to walk down a narrow country

lane, with no streetlights and no pavement, to ensure that she would not qualify for home-to-school transport. Yet again, we got the right decision via tribunal, following complaints from my office, but parents should not have to fight time and again to get what they are entitled to.

I therefore echo the calls from my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough, especially for a joined-up approach to school places and home-to-school transport. He talked a lot about the challenges for home-to-school transport in rural areas. I agree that the rural services delivery grant was important, and it is sad that it has gone. Surrey is the fifth most congested place in the country, so there are other challenges in my Woking constituency. Having a home-to-school transport system in a congested county is a real challenge.

Another issue that I have raised before is safeguarding. I have led Westminster Hall debates about safeguarding, following the appalling abuse, torture and murder of my 10-year-old constituent, Sara Sharif. That case has huge implications for local authorities and children's services—I will not repeat those now—but it also has a significant impact on home-to-school transport. Sara's father and murderer was a licensed taxi driver. He was employed by the county council to support vulnerable children with home-to-school transport. Even though, from day one in her life, the council knew that Sara was at risk from her father, it did not give that information to the taxi licensing team or the home-to-school transport team.

I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde). I was there when he raised this issue at Education questions and at Prime Minister's questions. There are clearly safeguarding issues, and I urge the Minister to meet me so that we can improve the situation. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 made notable improvements on data sharing, but I do not believe it goes far enough to have stopped what happened in Surrey.

I hope this debate forces the Government to review home-to-school transport and reassure constituents that services will not be taken away from them. I believe that we can deliver better value for money and the better service that young people deserve.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): The Front Benchers will have roughly 10 minutes each.

2.25 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) on securing this incredibly important debate and on setting out this deeply concerning issue eloquently and passionately. It does not affect his constituency alone; as we have heard from right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber, it is an issue right across the country, from Yorkshire right the way down to Kent and Sussex, and everywhere in between.

It feels a bit basic and obvious to say this, but it bears repeating: every child deserves to be able to get to school. There is a legal requirement to educate our children, and their ability to get there is a fairly basic right. They also deserve to get to school safely, efficiently and on time, yet the shocking stories that we have heard from around the country show just how hard that is for

far too many children. The fact that the changes in Yorkshire mean that parents are being charged almost £900 for bus passes is, frankly, ridiculous.

Sadly, those stories are symptoms of wider failures by a number of Administrations to consider the needs of rural communities and SEND families. As a London MP and a born-and-bred London girl, both of whose children walk fewer than 10 minutes to get to their primary and secondary schools, I hesitate to talk about rural communities, but I hear from colleagues in my party and others about the real challenges of getting to school in rural communities. I have seen that when I have been on visits to Shropshire and talked to families and schoolteachers.

Under the last Conservative Government, bus services withered. Between 2015 and 2023, the number of local passenger journeys fell by a quarter—1 billion trips—and many routes were scrapped altogether. We have heard today about the Public Accounts Committee's recent report on SEND home-to-school transport, which highlighted the ongoing decline of bus services, particularly in rural areas. It notes:

“Better local transport options...would reduce home to school transport costs”.

I will address the soaring costs that local authorities face when it comes to home-to-school transport, but I will first take a moment to focus on the fact that it is the most vulnerable in society who are impacted by poor transport provision. I find it somewhat surprising that the Department for Education seems to have little interest in what transport looks like for those who use it. As we have heard, it does not collect clear data about who receives home-to-school transport or whether it is reaching those in need.

As we have heard from Members from both sides of the House, children are being made to feel that their education does not matter because of where they live. They miss after-school clubs and activities and are made to walk on unsafe roads, often in the dark before school starts. As we have heard very clearly from some case studies today, parents are forced to sacrifice their time and income to drive their children to school, all because a computer said no—because of the rules that have been put in place by their local authorities. Grandparents or other extended family members are forced to go out of their way and step up when no one else is able to—although, as the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) pointed out, Cornwall to Kent seems rather extreme and pushing it somewhat.

There is, however, a larger underlying issue here. We have seen the costs of home-to-school transport soar alongside the need for SEND provision. While the Government have made the welcome move of committing to write off local authorities' historic SEND deficits, that, sadly, does not extend to transport costs. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I have been urging the Government to exempt SEND transport operators from the Government's national insurance contribution increases to curb further cost increases.

I hope the Minister will address that issue in her response today and will set out what the DFE is doing to address it now. Pushing it into the reforms that we have seen announced, which we know are going to take years to implement, will be too slow to address this particular issue.

[Munira Wilson]

The cancellation of a number of planned special schools around the country does not help this situation. I strongly urge the Minister to revisit and reverse the cancellation of planned special schools. As I think my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr Forster) said, if the specialist provision was closer to home, we would not need to spend quite so much on home-to-school transport.

Tom Gordon: I have been campaigning since before I was elected to get the special school for autism in Bilton Woodfield reopened. The situation has now been dragging on for years. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to see North Yorkshire council, the trust that has now been appointed and the DFE work together to get that open on time for this September?

Munira Wilson: I 100% agree that they need to crack on as soon as possible.

The challenge we had with the Government announcements before Christmas was that some local authorities were given the option to crack on with the special school or be given money instead. From talking to councillors on the ground who went for the money, I know that it is not going to be anywhere close to what they need to cover the provision that they were looking for, but they felt kind of forced to take that option.

I am really worried about what these announcements will mean for the continued ferrying of children with special educational needs and disabilities very far away from home. Parents of children with SEND battle against the system enough as it is. It seems really unfair that they are now being made to choose between the right school for their child, but not being able to get them there without further sacrificing time and income, and getting their child to a school, but not one that can actually provide the right support.

A number of hon. Members have today highlighted the cliff edge in transport provision for students over 16 both with and without SEND. Local authorities do not have a duty to provide a universal transport system after the age of 16. For young people with SEND, their access to education is at the discretion of their local authority. Given what we have heard about financial pressures, it is sadly no surprise that young people with SEND are around 80% more likely to not be in education, employment or training than the average student.

The Public Accounts Committee has said:

“the Department appears unconcerned about the clarity of offering for this age group or the impact that losing transport at 16 may have.”

My hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden), who cannot be here today, told me that the cost of a Stagecoach South West termrider increased in September 2025 from £238 per term to £444 per term. Sixth-form students who are not entitled to free transport are being forced to pay more than £1,300 per academic year to access education. I want to be clear with the Minister that the increase was due to the rise in national insurance contributions, which meant that, over and above all the other inflationary cost pressures faced by the company, like many others, it needed to generate an additional £3,500 per year per vehicle to make ends meet.

In the light of the Milburn report published last week and the shocking numbers of young people not in education, employment or training, it is deeply disappointing that the Government's policy on national insurance has exacerbated the problem. Like me, the Minister is a London MP. We are very fortunate that our 16 to 18-year-olds have free transport to be able to get to college and education, so this is not an issue for our constituents, but it is shocking to read those numbers for residents in other parts of the country.

I understand that local authorities are under immense financial pressure. As was rightly said by the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), who is no longer in his place, home-to-school transport is a problem for all political colours, right across the country. Sadly, the policy on national insurance has made the problem worse. I hope that the Minister will consider the exemption I called for, and I echo the request made by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough for the Government to review and update national guidance on home-to-school transport. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) for the passion with which he has campaigned for his constituent in the terrible case of Lewis. I urge the Government to look at safeguarding standards for home-to-school transport.

2.35 pm

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) for securing this important debate, and hon. Members across the House for their thoughtful contributions. When introducing the debate, the hon. Gentleman rightly advocated for his constituents, talking primarily about North Yorkshire. Although he left in some political barbs about his Conservative-controlled local council, he, like the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), had the decency to recognise that the problem is not local, but is faced by all counties and councils.

My right hon. Friends the Members for Skipton and Ripon (Sir Julian Smith) and for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) highlighted the scale of the challenge in North Yorkshire, which is now the highest spending local authority in the country, at £52.5 million a year. When talking about North Yorkshire specifically, we must consider the context of the council having one of the worst outcomes in the country from the Government's so-called “fair” funding review, as well as losing the rural services delivery grant. I am afraid to say that this Government have whacked rural areas quite broadly. Honestly, it is felt on the Opposition Benches that that takes a partisan flavour.

The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) made a fluid and passionate speech. I am not familiar with the geography of his part of Kent, but it is clearly not sensible for councils not to take into account where bodies of water are—obviously, that is utterly ridiculous. The hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) said that the failure of local authorities to build spaces locally is upstream of this issue, and that building places locally where children and parents want them would help remedy the problem.

The speech from the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) was one of the more moving contributions to the debate. He articulated the story of Lewis, which

is disgraceful. I hope that in the Minister's response, she will assure the hon. Gentleman that he will get the changes that he is campaigning for. The hon. Members for North East Hampshire (Alex Brewer) and for Woking (Mr Forster) talked about the necessity of safe walking routes to school. Often, councils mark their own homework in determining that, so I would be interested to hear how the Minister might be able to hold councils to account on upholding their statutory obligation.

In this country, legislation is intended to ensure that no child is prevented from accessing education due to lack of transportation, which all hon. Members here support. However, the reality is that growing demand and spiralling costs are causing councils to question the sustainability of their current policies. An estimated 520,000 pupils use local authority-funded home-to-school transport, which cost councils a staggering £2.3 billion in 2023-24—a 70% real-terms increase on the cost in 2015-16. Of that money, £1.2 billion was spent on transporting under-16s with special educational needs to school—a figure that has gone up by 106% in real terms since 2015.

Home-to-school transport is about more than just getting children to school. The Public Accounts Committee found through its evidence gathering that for many children and young people, home-to-school transport is also about gaining a sense of independence, building their confidence and preparing for life beyond school; I know from speaking to my constituents that it is also relied on by parents so that they can go to work. However, the figures show that the rising cost of home-to-school transport is placing significant financial burdens on councils, which, they warn, is making delivery of their statutory obligations increasingly unsustainable.

If meeting statutory obligations is becoming an increasing challenge, the non-statutory things that make our communities what they are all get squeezed. We also know that local authorities are consistently spending more on home-to-school transport than they have budgeted. In my time in the cabinet of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead in the mid-2010s, the home-to-school transport budget was one that continually popped out with significant pressures. I know that it is many magnitudes different today.

We have to look at how we can make home-to-school transport more sustainable for the future. We have had many discussions in this House about the pressure on the SEND system more broadly. While many questions remain, it is right that the Government are talking about reform. Children deserve the right support, and parents want a system that works for them and not against them. As Members have highlighted, the huge increase in the number of children with EHCPs, which went up by 166% between January 2015 and January 2025, has had a knock-on impact on demand for home-to-school transport.

The National Audit Office estimates that around a third of pupils with EHCPs attend special schools. As those schools tend to serve broader geographical areas, it is more likely that their pupils will live beyond a statutory walking distance and therefore qualify for transport. A survey conducted by the Local Government Association suggests that the average cost per child of providing SEND transport is now nearly £9,000 per year. That is almost triple the average cost of providing mainstream transport, which is just over £3,000 per child.

Effective SEND reform is essential if councils are going to be able to sustain school transport services for those who rightly require them. For SEND children, the Education Secretary has said that the Government will “respond to the challenges that local authorities are facing with home-to-school transport...by improving provision closer to home.”—[*Official Report*, 23 February 2026; Vol. 781, c. 75.]

That is welcome in principle. However, we know that implementing that scale of reform will take a substantial amount of time. The bulk of the reforms will not be introduced until 2029 at the earliest. Local authorities and children who rely on their services need help now, not in three or four more years.

In some instances, I am afraid to say that we are actually going backwards. In my own constituency, the much-needed Chiltern Way Academy Trust, a 100-place specialist school that was promised for west Windsor, was withdrawn from the Government's free school programme. Instead, £5.4 million of additional high needs capital funding was offered and accepted by the Liberal Democrat-controlled royal borough. In my view, that is a deeply disappointing short-termist decision. I am sure that is a story replicated across many constituencies across the country.

What are the Government are doing now to help local authorities cut the ballooning cost of home-to-school transport in the immediate term? What specific assessment has the Minister's Department conducted of the longer-term impact of SEND reforms on the cost of home-to-school transport? The Public Accounts Committee has warned that plans to write off 90% of the historic deficit from overspend on SEND

“fail to take into account burgeoning home to school transport costs.”

I implore the Minister to urgently clarify what those funding arrangements will actually mean for home-to-school transport cost pressures.

It is also worth highlighting that school places nearer to home could go a long way towards supporting young people to build their independence as they move into adulthood. While independent travel is not possible for everyone, it is right that the Government make every effort to support those who could use public transport to start building experiences while they are in school. The Association of Directors of Environment, Economy, Planning and Transport found that travel experience from daily to-and-from school transport could help children to become independent and use public transport. In some cases, helping children gain the tools that they will need is what true support might look like.

Rather than launching attacks on individual councils for decisions to align their policies with DFE guidance and address rising, unsustainable financial pressures, we need to look at how we can support all councils to manage those pressures and make home-to-school transport sustainable for the future. That is not just an issue facing a handful of councils. The spiralling cost of home-to-school transport is a nationwide issue, and without urgent action from the Government, those pressures will only continue to grow.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I ask the Minister to leave a few minutes at the end for the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) to wind up.

2.44 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould):

It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank all Members for an incredibly constructive and thoughtful discussion. It was particularly powerful that so many Members brought the lived experience of their constituents and some of the challenges that they face with home-to-school transport to the Chamber. I welcome the visibility given to those stories.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Tom Gordon) on securing this important debate. His passion for and commitment to this subject came across in his speech, as did the fact that he has been an avid campaigner who has widely engaged with families. We have heard today why this is such an important issue.

We also heard why the support that is available through home-to-school transport matters to families. It is the mechanism through which many disadvantaged families, many children in rural communities and many young people with SEND are able to access education. We heard how the existing statutory rights are incredibly important.

In addition, we heard about the particular challenges faced by rural communities, where the distances are greater and home-to-school transport costs are higher. That is why the Government made changes as part of a fair funding review, which included a distinct home-to-school transport relative needs formula, based on pupil numbers and home-to-school distances. The focus on distance deliberately supports those authorities with the longest distances and recognises the needs of rural communities.

We heard about the statutory guidance and about the discretionary opportunities available to local authorities. Local authorities have a discretionary power to arrange free travel for children who do not meet the eligibility criteria, in recognition of specific local factors. We have heard about some of the challenges that areas face, and local authorities are best placed to make those decisions.

We heard from the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough about the importance of data, and about the data that the Department holds, in holding local authorities to account. We have added a new absence code to reflect issues with local authority-arranged transport. Since September 2025, local authorities have been able to evaluate absences that are the result of home-to-school transport. Just 0.011% of the total number of school sessions that are missed is due to such transport; for special schools, the percentage is higher. That is really important data. Of course, any missed school session is one too many. Data helps with accountability, but I understand that the hon. Gentleman was referencing wider data and I would be very happy to have a follow-up conversation about that.

We also heard from many other Members about the interaction between SEND and disabilities, and about the increase that we have seen in the need for home-to-school transport for children and young people with SEND. As I have engaged with children around the country, that is something that I have heard time and again. Sometimes, children have to spend up to two hours on transport to access education. For some children who sometimes have issues regulating and who can find

change disruptive, as well as for their families, that can be an incredibly distressing experience, despite the best efforts of the providers.

This also disconnects children from their communities. I always remember speaking to an 18-year-old who travelled a long distance to school every day. He said that when he returned to his community, he did not have friends or networks within it, so he felt very isolated going into adulthood. It is therefore incredibly important that children have access to SEND provision locally and closer to home, and Members today have agreed with that. Improving home-to-school transport is core to the SEND reforms.

The hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin), who spoke for the Opposition, rightly challenged me on how we can move as quickly as possible to deliver such improvement. As he knows, we are investing £3.7 billion into 60,000 new places. That investment has gone in last year and this year, so it is going into communities urgently to help them to address those challenges.

We are supporting a large number of free schools to go forward. As we have heard, some local authorities have chosen to use their share of that investment to move faster in providing new places, at a cost of around £50,000 per place. The development of new places is critical, but it is also critical to make schools more inclusive for students—everything from improving school buildings and teaching—to develop the expertise around schools, so that local schools are accessible for children with SEND and every area has the right specialist provision available.

This investment will transform children's outcomes; it not only reduces travel time but, as we have heard, saves money, which is also important. And the money that is saved can go back into improving outcomes for children in some of the really critical issues that have been raised during this debate.

We also heard a number of Members talk about support for young people post 16. There was a particularly powerful speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) on the topic.

At the moment, local authorities have a statutory duty to make sure no young person is prevented from attending education post 16 because of a lack of transport. Local authorities must publish annual transport statements on this, and it is expected that local authorities will make reasonable decisions. Many local authorities do subsidise transport for young people post 16, but I have very much heard the passionate responses in the Chamber today. The issue also came up in the SEND consultation that we recently completed. We will look carefully at those responses.

As the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Windsor, said, the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) made a powerful speech about an incredibly distressing story from his constituency. I will of course meet him and Lewis's family to discuss it and look at what we can do to make changes in the future. I thank him for raising that—I am sorry that they got caught in that transition.

The hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) also raised issues about safeguarding and an appalling tragedy that happened in his constituency. He will know that some of the measures in the Children's Wellbeing and

Schools Act 2026 were very much a response to the lessons learned from that horrendous case, but again I am very happy to meet him to discuss this further.

More widely on the national criteria and the statutory guidance, we heard a powerful speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft), who is a brilliant campaigner on these issues. I want to reassure her that there is no intention to look at means testing. We absolutely reject some of the calls we have heard from, for example, the Reform leader of Warwickshire county council to try to reduce those statutory distances. We are not in the business of reducing disabled children's rights to transport.

In conclusion, this has been a thoughtful and important debate. A number of issues have been raised that we must continue to look at. I hope we can follow up on conversations in relation to not only special educational needs and disabilities but the wider system and our shared ambition, which have been highlighted in this debate, to ensure that people have access to opportunity and education.

2.52 pm

Tom Gordon: This has been an involved and thoughtful discussion. I appreciate the cross-party support for this issue across the Chamber; it is one of the few areas where the right hon. Members for Skipton and Ripon (Sir Julian Smith) and for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) and I see relatively eye to eye. I appreciate them both turning up today to make this case to the Conservative-run North Yorkshire council.

It was, as always, fantastic to hear from the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) on the work she does around disabled children and SEND. She is one of the best voices I have heard in this place on those subjects. Hearing from my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) regarding the horrendous situation he outlined and Lewis being physically restrained is heart-breaking. I hope he gets a solution and the accountability that is needed.

I appreciate the Minister's response. I would love it if she could be open to the further conversation she mentioned and make sure we can rule out things such as the nearest available walking routes to schools including river and motorway crossings and so on. There might be something in the statutory guidance that we could tease out to put some prohibitions on those things being part of those calculations.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered home-to-school transport.

2.54 pm

Sitting suspended.

High Street Businesses: Government Support

[EMMA LEWELL *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for high street businesses.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. For decades, centuries and even millennia, towns and their high streets have been the focus of commercial and community activity—not just for the towns themselves, but for surrounding villages and rural communities. Whether it is for market day, celebrating great events such as VE Day, essential services such as banking and laundrettes, or spending time eating and drinking with friends and family, high streets and urban centres have long offered so much. However, across the country, our high streets and their businesses are struggling as never before. Too many, sadly, are falling into disrepair, with empty shops, cracked pavements, antisocial behaviour and crime, and streets strewn with waste.

Such issues are seen across the country. The 2025 Simply Business “SME Insights Report” on small and medium-sized enterprises found that more than half, or 63%, of small businesses believed that the high street as we know it will be obsolete in the next 10 years. This debate is an important opportunity to set out why central Government support is essential for high street businesses to thrive.

My constituency has three towns. I will say a little about the challenges and opportunities that they each face, before covering three key themes on the support that they and other high streets and businesses need. Didcot is the largest town in my constituency. It has seen huge housing growth in recent years, a trend that continues with the ongoing development of Valley Park. The town centre does not have a single focus, such as a traditional market square. Instead, it has two key areas: an older high street called the Broadway and a new retail park called the Orchard Centre.

Both the Broadway and the Orchard Centre face the challenges of antisocial behaviour and shoplifting; far more co-ordination between police, local authorities and businesses is needed. Didcot Broadway contains a range of shops, cafés, takeaways and restaurants. I thank Little India for the fantastic paneer jalfrezi that I got for a takeaway on Monday evening. Broadway also has the wonderful Mulberry pub at its western end. The Broadway forms the centre of the town, but businesses face many challenges, including the presence of the popular Orchard Centre retail park close by.

Amer Siddique, owner of Snack@Teas, formed a group of local business owners and is a passionate advocate for investment in the Broadway and town centre. I shall explore a number of those business owners' concerns in my speech. Didcot's last bank closed this year, despite the town's population having grown to more than 32,000. It remains to be seen how well a proposed banking hub will fill that void. Parking in the town is a big concern as well, as a result of the rising population, although I am pleased that the Orchard Centre listened to vociferous local concerns and changed its mind on introducing car-parking charges.

[*Olly Glover*]

In the east of my constituency, Wallingford is the smallest of the three towns, but more than makes up for that with its history, which goes back to Anglo-Saxon times. Its town centre high streets have a range of small businesses, full of character, such as the independent Wallingford Bookshop and Le Clos, a wine bar also offering amazing food, including tarte flambée with a range of toppings—baked flatbreads originating in the Alsace region of France. A key challenge for an ancient town is how to accommodate car traffic and parking to maintain visitor levels, given the large towns and cities fairly nearby. There is also frustration in Wallingford that NHS criteria seemingly prevent more than one pharmacy being able to serve the town.

Finally, Wantage is the second largest town in my constituency and the birthplace of King Alfred. In Wantage, the great Market Place is lined with independent shops, cafés and restaurants, with a retail park in the town centre, too. Wantage's Argos store has been shut for two years, and New Look has now closed its doors as well, so vacant premises are a concern and many existing businesses highlight the crippling impact of significantly increased business rates—including the Vaults bar and pizza restaurant, the Kings Arms pub and the Bear Hotel, the last of which reports a doubling of its business rate charges. Consultation and debate are ongoing about how to further improve Wantage Market Place, which is dominated by car parking and bus stops. Special events that see Market Place closed to traffic, including the annual Dickensian evening, are popular and see the place filled with visitors.

The three towns, and their high street businesses, have three themes at the heart of their challenges and concerns, the first of which is the growing burden of business taxation and costs. Local businesses are feeling hammered by rising costs and barriers to their growth and hiring people; they feel there is an unfair playing field, given that online businesses are not taxed in the same ways and to the same degree. They feel that business rates are a flawed tax that is not directly related to either income or profit. Businesses in my constituency feel that recent Government changes to business rates have done little to ease the difficult situations they face, and certainly fall well short of the radicalism that was at least implied in Labour's 2024 manifesto.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I salute the speech that my hon. Friend is giving; I am seeing the same situation play out in my constituency. Brecon has one of the most beautiful high streets in Wales, with its gorgeous Georgian buildings, but local businesses are telling me exactly the same thing. They are taking an absolute hammering from this Government's decision to push through business rate revaluations. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a real concern? Does he believe that the VAT cut to hospitality that the Liberal Democrats are calling for would at least help to restore some activity, life and profit to our hospitality businesses?

Olly Glover: I agree that such a VAT cut would help, because it is not just business rates that small businesses on high streets are facing. On top of business rate increases and the burden of value-added tax, they are

also paying for increased labour and payroll costs, including the higher national living wage and increased employer national insurance contributions. Some of those measures are understandable, and they will of course be welcomed by some, but the story I hear from my high street businesses is that the cumulative impact of all these things in a small space of time is creating challenges. Many businesses are also still servicing debts from the covid-19 pandemic, such as repaying bounce back loans, which further restricts their finances to ride out the current challenges or invest in the future.

Electricity, wage costs, business rates and general taxation are adding up to a perfect storm when combined with ongoing cost of living pressures for consumers, which affect demand. Constrained finances in high street businesses have a knock-on effect on their capacity, meaning that owners are particularly reluctant to hire entry-level or younger workers. That is exacerbated by the recent compression of the wage floor with changes to national insurance contributions and the national living wage.

While recognising the benefits of such changes for workers, businesses raised concerns in Alan Milburn's interim report, "Young people and work", saying that these pressures make them consider reducing staffing altogether, or hiring fewer, more experienced workers. This affects the flexibility of the businesses to staff correctly against fluctuating footfall, and reduces opportunities for entry-level workers. Labour is effectively one of the few remaining adjustable cost bases within owners' control, and it is suffering accordingly.

High street retailers continue to adjust to the changing nature of consumer behaviour, such as online competition and destination shopping. There is a lack of consistent support available to high street businesses at a local level to support retailers through these challenges, and I will come on to say a little bit more about that.

The second key theme is transport and access, which is a key challenge as a result of population growth and central Government housing targets. A growing amount of car traffic, competing for a constrained amount of car parking in town centres, creates real challenges, particularly in older towns such as Wallingford. That is why the reality is that more must be done to help those who can, and would like to, walk and cycle by providing them with safer and better options for doing so. For example, cycle parking can reassure them that their bicycle will be safe.

At this point, I should say that when we get into a debate about transport, it is often presented as an either/or between cars and public transport, walking and cycling. However, those things are not mutually exclusive. The Netherlands does not just have a globally leading cycling infrastructure and culture; it has the most comprehensive motorway in Europe, as well as a fully electrified mainline railway network. Public transport, walking and cycling are complementary to cars—we need both. Even small increases in the use rates of public transport, walking and cycling can help to ease congestion and free up parking spaces for those who need them.

Investment in roads, pavements and general town centre infrastructure is also a concern. Poorly maintained pavements can be a barrier for older residents and those with mobility issues, increasing the risk of falls

and discouraging visits to the town centre. Improving accessibility would help to attract more visitors and support local businesses.

The third theme is local government funding pressures. Of course, many small businesses in my constituency, entirely understandably, look to local councils to help them with their high street and business challenges. I want to explain why local councils are too affected by central Government policy and face reduced budgets amidst growing costs.

With their origins in European Union funding streams, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse district councils have, until now, benefited from allocations from two funds: the UK shared prosperity fund and the rural England prosperity fund. Between them, those funding streams have supported more than 130 local projects across the councils so far. Projects were hugely varied, but they included grants to support businesses and community groups with a transition to more efficient and affordable energy use—pubs and cafés, for example. They also included providing capital investment into equipment that supports productivity gains, funding a huge range of business and skills support programmes, often targeting those most at need; developing a visitor economy support programme to support our market towns; and making several small-scale improvements to the public realm across the two districts.

Unfortunately, this Labour Government have decided to scrap those funds, and their replacements, Pride in Place and the local growth fund, are principally targeted at city regions and areas of high deprivation. The impact of the abolition of the two funds is not trivial. In 2025-26, the allocations from the two funds across the Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire districts were £1 million; in 2024-25, the total was £2.4 million. At the same time, changes to local government funding formulae mean that Oxfordshire county council will lose £24 million in funding over the next three years.

Those changes affect all three councils' abilities to invest in high streets and support local businesses. They also make it harder for them to explore new ideas, such as the ones requested by the town councils of the three towns I mentioned: grants to town and parish councils to invest in civic pride, such as floral planting, hanging baskets, more street cleaning and more ways to promote local shopping; or funding to employ town centre managers to link the town council with retail centres and independent traders.

I want to set out my key asks of central Government. Once again, the Government need to go much further in reforming business rates—a form of taxation that bears little resemblance to a business's earnings. Does the Minister recognise that evidence submitted to Alan Milburn's interim report into young people not in education, employment or training identified labour costs as a key concern? The Government, to their credit, have announced serious intentions in relation to energy prices, but what should be done in the meantime, particularly with no sign—very sadly—of war in the middle east abating?

Once again, will the Minister heed Liberal Democrat calls for a 5% cut to VAT for hospitality? Does he agree that taxation arrangements need modernisation, given the rising threat to physical businesses posed by online retail? Given rising demand and the same amount of space for car parking, do the Government agree that greater investment in public transport and walking and

cycling infrastructure is needed to make it easier for people who need to drive to have the road space and car parking to do so?

What fresh, new ideas do the Government have to help our high streets? I have a few examples to consider. National "buy local" schemes would incentivise and reward people for spending their money locally. A "high streets back home" scheme would give people a clear route to invest in their own community, whether by restoring heritage building, supporting local enterprise or helping to secure community assets. The Government could give councils the power to designate independent shop zones, protecting and championing small locally owned businesses against the tide of chains and empty units.

Does the Minister accept that, for councils not benefiting from Pride in Place funding, including in Oxfordshire, the end of the UK shared prosperity and rural England prosperity funds constitute a cut to local government funding? That undermines their ability to invest in staff and initiatives to help small businesses improve town centres, and to award grants to businesses and community organisations to help them reduce their energy bills or upgrade their equipment. Our high streets and local businesses are critical to the successes of our towns and surrounding communities, and I call on the Government to give them the support that they deserve.

3.13 pm

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) on securing this debate.

I want to focus on an important lever that the Government should pull to regenerate our high streets: tackling the illicit financial activity that is hollowing out towns and undercutting legitimate local businesses. That matters because these streets are the soul of our communities; they are where local traders serve their regulars, and where the greengrocer, butcher and corner café have always been part of who we are as a country.

Despite all the pressures that our high streets face, brilliant independent businesses—whether new ventures like Hive in Westhoughton in my patch, or long-standing local favourites like Serendipity in Horwich, run by Chris and Kath Parbery—are still choosing to invest in our communities. But millions of us no longer recognise the high streets where we grew up. The bakery, now a barber shop, is somehow always empty. The greengrocer is now a vape shop. The pub on the corner is boarded up for the third time in five years. The Woolworths is long gone, replaced first by a pound shop and then by something called an "American candy store". Now, just like all the empty barber shops, vape shops and mini-marts, the high street is silent.

The number of vape shops in England has grown by nearly 1,200% in a little over a decade. The number of barber shops per 10,000 people in the UK has more than doubled in the same period. Meanwhile, the National Crime Agency assesses that at least £12 billion of criminal cash is generated in this country every single year, and our high streets have regrettably become a primary route for washing those proceeds. Behind some—not all—of the cheap shop fronts sits drug money, trafficking money and money stripped from the most vulnerable in

[Phil Brickell]

society. The proceeds of human misery are being cleaned through card machines on high streets in every town represented here today.

The all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, which I chair, has spent the past year speaking to individuals on the frontline with responsibility for tackling the explosion of cash-intensive businesses. Representatives from the banking sector told me that they hold significant data on suspicious cash flows but lack the legal architecture to share it usefully. Legitimate hard-working barbers being driven out by criminal operators told me that their trade is being tarnished in plain sight. Officials in local government told me that they watch shops close one week and reopen the next under a new name and a new nominee director, with the unpaid business rates simply written off.

The NCA's Operation Machinize has shown what is possible. In my constituency, Horwich Mini Market on Lee Lane was closed for three months last year after the seizure of almost 20,000 illegal cigarettes, hundreds of illegal vapes and 7 kg of illegal tobacco. The nearby Texaco service station on Chorley New Road was prosecuted in December 2024—the first prosecution of its kind in the north-west of England—with more than 7,000 illegal vapes seized across four visits. But let us be honest: Operation Machinize has visited more than 2,500 premises across two waves, and its initial wave produced only 10 permanent closures—that is 10 out of 2,500 businesses. Organised crime will absorb that figure as an operating cost and shrug it off by the end of the week.

After years of austerity and inaction under successive Governments, I know that this Government understand the severity of the situation facing our country. Measures announced include a new £30 million high street organised crime unit, which I was proud to lobby the Chancellor for before last year's Budget, and 75 new officers in the worst-affected regions, including the north-west of England. Trading Standards will receive £6 million, after a decade of cuts that halved its capacity.

Other measures include a new cross-Government taskforce, 350 new His Majesty's Revenue and Customs investigators, a new abusive phoenixism taskforce and a consultation on extending closure orders. All that shows real progress, and the APPG that I chair has campaigned hard for many of those measures, so it would be remiss of me not to thank the Minister and his colleagues across Government for their work over the last two years.

But money alone will not finish the job. The criminals hollowing out all our communities have to know that they are no longer welcome, and that must mean three things. First, we should adopt a British equivalent to the Dutch Bibob regime. The officials in the port city of Rotterdam I met earlier this year told me how they have spent 14 years dismantling the organised criminal infrastructure that we are struggling against in the UK. Dutch officials in one Rotterdam suburb told me how their integrity screening regime reduced the number of firms from 111 to 65 without recourse to a single criminal prosecution, removing suspicious businesses en masse. We should learn from our Dutch counterparts and give our local authorities similar powers to refuse

permits to applicants linked to criminal intelligence and to look through nominee directors for the real money behind them.

Secondly, we should move to mandatory licensing for barbers, vape shops and the other high-risk sectors that have become criminal franchises in plain sight on our high streets. If someone needs a licence to sell a pint of beer, someone should need one to open a barber shop or a vape store.

Thirdly, we should extend closure powers so that persistent offenders are shut down for good. Members of the Chartered Trading Standards Institute overwhelmingly back the idea: 98% support extending closure orders and 97% support permanent closure for repeat offenders. And let us remove, in a single line of legislation, the absurd £1,000 cash seizure threshold that lets criminals wave goodbye to trading standards officers with fistfuls of notes in their hands. Let officers seize every pound of ill-gotten gains from the till.

Our high streets are where this country lives. They bind our communities together and they are where the next generation of British entrepreneurs will cut their teeth. Businesses like Hive, Serendipity and Blackedge Brewery are proof that there is still enormous pride, creativity and resilience in our towns. They are worth fighting for, so let us do so.

Emma Lewell (in the Chair): There will now be a five-minute time limit on Back-Bench contributions.

3.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) on securing the debate, setting the scene and giving us all a chance to participate.

In Northern Ireland, the future of our high streets is of great concern. We have seen some of the steepest falls in footfall on our high streets compared with the rest of the United Kingdom. Six or seven years ago we would not see an empty shop front in Newtownards; now there are 10 or 11. Owners have retired from family firms and been unable to get someone to take over. I saw in the paper the other day that businesses are closing and people cannot sell their businesses. Perhaps, Minister, there is something to be done to encourage people who want to have a business on the high street but are unable to.

There used to be 11 butchers in Newtownards town, but now there are two. That is because of changing habits: all the big stores now have a butcher's counter—they have a cabinet—and purchasing is done differently. The Minister and the Government are not responsible for certain things, but something can be done for those who want to open a shop.

All four UK nations record year-on-year declines in footfall, which is a reminder of the economic pressures on our high street shops, some of which are forced into administration. Our high streets have been hit hard by the cost of living crisis, both directly as a result of their costs going up, and because footfall has decreased due to the effects of the crisis on potential customers. Smaller independent retailers made up 84% of all closures in 2024; that shows the effects of decreased footfall and increasing costs.

As an increasing number of shoppers use contactless payments, businesses are suffering, with increased amounts of their revenues going to payment providers. Shops processing £10,000 a week in card payments are paying around £13,000 a year in fees, and there has been a big increase in credit card payments. The Government have no say in that, but could contact be made with credit card companies to ensure that they drive down their charges? That might help a bit. To put that figure into perspective, it could cover several months of rent or the salary of a part-time staff member. These costs are one of the reasons why high street businesses are not employing new staff—they have to cut back somewhere.

Crime and antisocial behaviour leave high street firms facing extra expenses for security measures, insurance, replacing stolen or damaged stock, getting CCTV and establishing contact systems with local police. Larger retailers are not unaffected, with retailers such as Claire's Accessories, Poundland and River Island announcing closures. Even charity shops such as Cancer Research UK are on the list.

Large banks are also affected, the impact of which cannot be overlooked, as their branches act as an anchor, driving foot traffic to surrounding high street shops. Eleven banks have closed in my constituency. We have been able to get banking hubs to fill in the gaps, and there are post offices in nearly every Spar shop down the Ards peninsula, so there are ways of addressing this. Fewer people are visiting town centres, leading to high street decline. The combination of higher running costs and less disposable income has led to more and more vacant premises.

A considerable factor in this decline is the rise of online shopping, which again relates to the people's habits. It poses a particular concern to smaller enterprises, which are unsupported when it comes to e-commerce and accessing the necessary technology. Consumers should be encouraged to consider the fact that online shopping cannot replace the experience of face-to-face contact with retailers and the opportunity to see, touch and assess products themselves.

We are very fortunate in Newtownards, the main shopping town in my Strangford constituency, to still have many family shops—I think of Knotts, Wardens and many clothes shops that are family firms as well. Consumers' ability to make more informed choices will contribute to the creation of a more loyal and consistent customer base for our high street shops. Retail parks and larger shopping centres have fewer economic pressures because they have the car parks. Sometimes the car parks in towns charge fees, which by their very nature create issues.

In conclusion, I endorse all the recommendations made by the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage. There are some really good ideas that would help each and every one of us, including our constituents. The Government's aim should be to create a more resilient high street that can survive as well as thrive long term. We look to the Minister so that the high street can be supported for our customers and shopkeepers.

3.25 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship this afternoon, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) on securing the debate.

For some time now, there have been unrelenting efforts from colleagues across the House, many of whom are here today, to keep the future of our high streets firmly on the desks of Ministers. That reflects how important our town centres are not only to local economies but to the social fabric and cohesion of communities right across the country. High streets are where people come together. They are places of commerce, but also places of connection, identity and pride. When they thrive, communities thrive. When they decline, the effects are felt far beyond empty shop fronts and reduced footfall.

One issue that has become impossible to ignore is the growing criminality taking root on some of our high streets. Alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt), I have been leading a campaign to shut down dodgy shops, which has now secured the backing of more than 50 Members from across the House. We were really pleased to meet the Chancellor recently to discuss the steps to tackle the organised criminal enterprises operating behind many premises. I am pleased that significant action has been taken across Government Departments to address the issues, some of which I will outline today.

Progressive announcements in the Budget included increased resources for trading standards officers—I feel I am repeating things that my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) mentioned, but it is worth reinforcing. Budget announcements also included the creation of a dedicated cross-Government taskforce to develop an intelligence-led understanding of organised crime on our high streets; the deployment of 350 newly recruited criminal investigators in HMRC's fraud investigation service; and the recruitment of 50 additional Insolvency Service staff through a new abusive phoenixism taskforce. These are important and welcome interventions, and they would not have happened if not for my hon. Friend and the APPG he so ably leads.

Under the Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026, the Government are introducing a licensing scheme for retailers selling tobacco and vape products, helping to strengthen enforcement and improve accountability across the sector. Most recently the Home Office announced a £30 million enforcement blitz to target organised crime gangs that exploit UK high streets, sending a clear signal that the Government understand both the scale of the challenge and the need for co-ordinated action.

All that will come as very welcome news to residents in communities such as mine in Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes, because local people are absolutely fed up with seeing their high streets abused. They are frustrated when they see businesses apparently operating outside the law, while honest traders who pay their taxes, employ local people and contribute to their communities in many different ways are expected to compete on an uneven playing field.

However, if we are to achieve the tangible change that communities want to see, the Government must go further and faster. Speed matters because, while we discuss these issues in Westminster and in rooms like this, more of these businesses continue to appear on our high streets. They pop up every single day. Every month that passes without visible enforcement undermines confidence in the rule of law and leaves legitimate businesses feeling completely abandoned.

[Melanie Onn]

If this is a Government priority, as I believe it is, we must consider how to encourage more local authorities to move the issue higher up their agendas. Many councils face severe pressures on resources and capacity, but tackling high street criminality cannot be viewed as an optional extra. It must be recognised as central to economic regeneration and community safety. We must continue to reinforce the message that these enterprises are not simply untidy retail operations or minor breaches of regulations: organised criminality, tax evasion, exploitation and fraud lie behind many of them. Frankly, their presence drags down shopping areas, deters investment and damages public confidence.

The prize for getting this issue right is enormous. Economically thriving high streets support local jobs, encourage investment and help small businesses to succeed. Socially, they provide communities with places that they can be proud of, and morally, they help to restore faith that the rules apply equally to everyone. In too many towns across the country people feel left behind, ignored and increasingly sceptical that the law is being enforced fairly. Pulling high streets away from criminal exploitation offers an opportunity not only to revitalise local economies but to rebuild trust. That is why I welcome the progress the Government have already made, but urge Ministers to maintain the pace, strengthen enforcement and ensure that communities finally see the change they have been waiting for.

3.30 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) on securing this debate. I declare an interest as the owner of CellarDoor, a bar and cabaret venue in Covent Garden, and as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the night time economy.

Small businesses, hospitality and the night-time economy are the backbone of our high streets. In London alone, they support nearly 1.5 million jobs and generate close to £50 billion a year. Yet the independent, locally-owned shops that once defined our high streets have been squeezed out and far too little has been done to nurture those that remain. That said, I welcome new investment in my constituency. Primark is coming to the Wimbledon Quarter—Primark's first new London store in nearly a decade—and Aldi, Marks & Spencer and Barclays have all recently invested in Wimbledon town centre, but they are international chains with deep pockets and preferred borrowing arrangements. Their confidence must not mask the fact that there are fewer and fewer independent businesses in Wimbledon. Such businesses are worn down by costs that they can no longer absorb.

Like the coalition in 2010, this Government received a hospital pass from their predecessors, but that is no excuse for making matters worse. The rise in employer's national insurance contributions—Labour's tax on jobs—fell hardest on high street businesses, whose staff cannot be automated or offshored. That measure, along with record increases in the minimum wage and an expansion in the legal burden of workers' rights, both of which have a disproportionate effect on small businesses, seemed almost designed to destroy growth and hold back our high streets.

Online shopping is a major contributing factor. By failing to enact sensible reform of the business rates system, successive Governments have failed to address the unfair advantage enjoyed by online retailers. Increasingly, high streets are filled with things that one cannot get online, but even here, Government policies are failing responsible employers. Take the hair and beauty sector as an example. The first Headmasters salon opened in Wimbledon village more than 40 years ago. Across the sector, the number of apprenticeships dropped from 16,000 to 6,000 between 2016 and 2023 because of a VAT regime that incentivised salons to use self-employed staff rather than to grow and develop their own talent.

However, my constituency is doing better than many parts of the country. Footfall in Wimbledon town centre is rising, and Wimbledon village was recently named the UK's top neighbourhood high street. However, the same is not true of Morden town centre, most of which has been part of the Wimbledon constituency since the 1980s.

Morden town centre was once a go-to destination. I am a south Londoner, even though my parents were both cockneys, because my mother came to Morden from Hackney one day in the 1940s to attend a *Sunday Pictorial* film stars garden party—as a fan, not as a celebrity, I hasten to add—in nearby Morden Hall park. She was enraptured by the thriving art deco high street that she encountered and decided on that day that she wanted to live in south London.

Sadly, Morden town centre has been in decline for many decades, despite Merton's Labour council promising, for at least the last 30 years, to rejuvenate it. The council's latest plans have now been put on hold till the end of the decade. Sadly, nothing is happening. I thank the Minister's colleague—the former Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, the hon. Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris)—for meeting me to help to move things forward, although sadly Merton council declined to attend that meeting.

Nationally, the Liberal Democrats are offering concrete solutions. We would cut VAT for hospitality from 20% to 15%, which a study from the Night Time Industry Association shows would pay for itself by increasing sales and VAT revenue. We would reform business rates to reward occupancy and community value, while agreeing a youth mobility scheme with the EU to resume the flow of young, eager Europeans keen to work in hospitality in their gap years. We would also reform the apprenticeship levy so that our hair salons and other small businesses are incentivised to develop talent. Our high streets need urgent help. Too many shops have put the “closed” sign up for the last time. I look forward to hearing how the Minister is proposing to reverse that trend.

3.35 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Lewell.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) on securing this important debate. The question of support for our high street businesses cuts to the very core of what economic policy in this country sets out to achieve. For decades, a flawed orthodoxy has promoted the concentration of economic activity in a few urban centres, with the expectation that

the rest of us will commute from the towns and villages we live in to the city centres for work. It is a vision for the economy that reduces the hopes and talents of citizens in every part of the country to units of social capital that should be deployed in the most “efficient” manner, and one that measures success in GDP figures rather than in thriving communities.

The reality is that an economic theory based on principles of agglomeration and spill-over effects has next to no relevance for improving the daily lives of our constituents. Whether measures of productivity would be zero-point-something per cent higher over the next 10 years if we focused on high-growth centres is totally beside the point when it comes to what makes for true prosperity. That can come only from ensuring that every high street is a success.

High street businesses give life to the heart of a community. Independent traders, entrepreneurs and innovators give a place its identity. Pubs, bars, coffee shops, community hubs, restaurants and the rest provide the social space for a town to come together and connect, rather than us remaining atomised in our private lives. These are the businesses that so often offer those first, defining jobs for young adults, and where staff build genuine connections with local customers, keeping an eye out for the elderly and vulnerable if they need a bit of assistance. In short, the success of our high street businesses is essential for a healthy, happy society. We are very fortunate in North East Hertfordshire to have many fantastic high street businesses, including G’s Deli, Vutie Beets and the Uniform Monkeys in Letchworth, the Cheese Plate in Buntingford, Bow Books in Royston and Café Luna in Baldock, to name just a few.

There is no denying that our high street businesses are under enormous pressure, and we must take immediate, decisive action to help them. I ask the Minister to look at the following priorities as a matter of urgency. First, energy bills are crippling our high street businesses. They need support just as much as domestic users but have none of the protections, and that must change. Secondly, the business rates system is manifestly unfair and a huge burden. Frankly, the Byzantine complexity of the whole edifice is mind-boggling. We cannot keep debating discounts, transitional support and multipliers. In the manifesto that this Government was elected on, Labour—my party—promised to abolish business rates and replace them with a fairer, more transparent system. We must deliver on that promise now.

I urge the Minister to ensure that, as we deliver reform, we not only remove the loopholes that allow huge corporations to practically choose how much tax they pay while independent businesses play by the rules, but shift the burden of taxation away from high streets, which give so much to our communities, and balance that with a fairer share being paid by online sales giants.

Finally, we have to recognise that, to create the environment for thriving high street businesses, we need to reverse the huge damage done to our local councils by the years of austerity under previous Administrations. Only with properly funded councils will local democracy have the power to take back control of empty shops and give commercial opportunities to a wider range of retailers and local entrepreneurs, rather than the endless parade of vape and betting shops that too often seem to be the preference of absentee private landlords.

What is more, properly funded councils are essential for tackling the scourge of overflowing bins, littered streets and crumbling roads, which do such a disservice to our high streets when it comes to attracting people. We need councils that are able to make more than a merely financial decision about the cost of parking around our high streets, and that can take a more creative approach to the differing needs of small market towns such as Buntingford and large towns such as Bishop’s Stortford down the road.

To conclude, supporting our high streets is essential for spreading genuine prosperity across every part of our country. I hope to hear from the Minister today about more decisive action to achieve just that.

3.40 pm

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) on securing today’s debate. As we have heard, we are all increasingly concerned about the state of our high streets.

As the House will know, I am a former furniture retailer. That was many years ago, and I think I would struggle in today’s environment. My plea to the Minister and to the Government is to change tack and support wealth creation. The high street is really suffering. Hospitality venues, independent retailers, SMEs, post offices, pharmacies and other local businesses are all facing rising costs and challenging trading conditions.

The diversity that thriving high streets depend on is being destroyed by cost increases caused by this Labour Government. We have seen an increase in taxes for employing new people and in business rates, which makes it even harder for businesses to invest, grow and create jobs. My party has come up with an alternative plan. I am sure that the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), will articulate what we think are the solutions to this huge problem, but here are the highlights.

The back our high streets Bill would introduce a permanent 100% business rates relief for the retail, leisure and hospitality sector in England. The get Britain working Bill would scrap job-killing elements of the Employment Rights Act 2025, and the reducing bureaucracy Bill would repeal and cease a number of environmental, social and governance reporting requirements. We also have the save British industry and cheap energy Bills. Others have spoken about energy costs, which have put significant pressure on businesses. The middle east is part of the problem, but some of the Government’s policy decisions are only going to exacerbate those issues.

A local wine merchant in Kings Langley, who provides white labelling for multiple retailers, is really struggling. They said that extended producer responsibility cost them an additional £240,000 in its first year of being introduced, and new bureaucratic regulation cost £15,000 to manage and adhere to, with an overcomplicated application. It feels like death by a thousand cuts for these businesses. It is affecting decisions to invest in those businesses, which in normal times would be increasingly successful.

Hubs, a franchise owner in my constituency, said that his national insurance contributions alone increased by £138,000 from April to September, and he expects the

[Mr Gagan Mohindra]

figure to be £275,000 in the full first-year cycle. Mark, the Rickmansworth Waitrose branch manager, said there has been a 45% increase in wages in the last five years, and NICs are costing Waitrose millions. If a huge high street giant like Waitrose is suffering to this level, how can a small independent retailer of whatever type survive?

My plea to the Minister, for whom I have the utmost respect, is to think twice about the burdens we are putting on businesses. Local councils can help, for example by not introducing parking charges for short stays. That would encourage footfall. We saw the upside of strong communities and high streets during the pandemic, where it was typically the retailers who knew their customers inside out who could identify where particular elements of our communities were suffering and proactively reach out to them. My worry is that if we continue with the drive towards online shopping—I am as guilty as anyone else—we will lose the face of our high streets, and the soft power relationship between retailers and the clients and consumers they serve.

3.44 pm

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) for securing this debate and introducing it in the way he did.

Earlier this week, the second largest settlement in my constituency, West Byfleet, lost its last bank. That is a stark, sad reminder that high streets are really struggling in Woking and across the country. They are under pressure because of business rates, energy bills, increases to national insurance contributions, the Ukraine war causing inflation costs and, quite frankly, customers not having so much money because of the cost of living crisis, so they cannot shop and visit as much.

Heartbreakingly, my constituency also recently lost its last local brewery, Thurstons, whose demise is another example of the decreasing number of pubs—we lost more than 300 across the country last year. My constituent John, who used to run Thurstons but still runs a local pub, the Crown, said that this was “death by a thousand cuts”.

It was not one thing that caused the brewery to close; it was the cumulative impact of many problems.

One of my other Woking constituents, Jo Moulton, owns and runs a salon in Knaphill. Hairdressing is another sector that is really struggling. Several hairdressers have closed in my constituency recently. Jo’s salon, Sorella Hair Salon, is facing a 340% increase in its business rates over five years. That is unacceptable. No business can cope with that, and that is why so many are closing.

Pubs, the hospitality sector and hairdressers are so important: they make our high streets thrive, and they are key employers of local young people. Given that we have increased the bill for businesses of employing people, we cannot be surprised that they are not employing young people any more or providing those vital training opportunities, but it is a real concern.

Despite what feels like the Chancellor’s best efforts, there are actually thriving high street businesses in Woking—fortunately, my constituency is doing better

than most. Ihlara restaurant in Woking town centre and the Drumming Snipe pub in Mayford have recently been nominated for awards. Many businesses have adapted to the changing world after the pandemic: with people working from home more, every village and high street in my constituency now has a café. A Cup of Peace in Kingfield is amazing. The owners regularly pick my brains on foreign policy, because they are from Iran and are really concerned about what is happening there.

Businesses can adapt, but they need the Government to give them a break. That is why I urge the Minister to look at the Lib Dem proposals to cut VAT, including a 5% cut for pubs, the hospitality sector and, I hope, hairdressers.

Property taxes—business rates, council tax and stamp duty—are some of the most controversial and despised taxes in the country. We should look at property tax reform and genuinely reform business rates. I am pleased that the Government have given support to some businesses, but the fact that they are tinkering around the edges shows that the whole system is broken.

I urge the Minister to look at the effectiveness of the high street rental auctions scheme. At the last count, Woking town centre had 112 properties that have been empty for a year or more. Very few of them are being brought back into use, and I know that the same is true elsewhere. I do not think the rental auctions scheme is working as well as the Government had hoped, and I urge them to review it and work with local authorities to ensure they are empowered and have the resources to bring those properties back into use. If the Government do at least some of that, we can grow our economy, provide employment and training for young people, and ensure that our high streets thrive.

3.48 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) for securing this debate. Many in my constituency will welcome the comments by my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) and for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn), given the kind of shops that we have in Bexleyheath and Crayford and the changes we have seen in recent years.

I declare an interest: I am a member of the USDAW parliamentary group. I spent 11 years working in retail. I started as a Saturday boy—an old-fashioned term, I know—in my Marks & Spencer in Bexleyheath, and I worked my way up to a management role, so I understand the importance of high street businesses to our communities.

In my constituency, we have two town centres in the two towns, with a mix of large retailers and independent stores, a smaller high street in Northumberland Heath and a number of smaller shopping parades. I appreciate that, in the 32 years since I first worked in retail, our town centres have changed, and that has been heavily driven by changes in our shopping habits.

In my constituency, with a retail park in Crayford and a 1980s shopping centre in Bexleyheath, we have lost some of our high street shops from the shopping centre, which has a higher footfall, because of the pattern of businesses, particularly my former employer, that want to be in those retail parks. I know from the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) that my

former employer has recently invested in its store in his constituency—in fact, in a number of stores in London—but with a very defined model, which is very different from when I first worked for it 32 years ago. It is about food retail rather than clothing, and it is about retail parks. That is the reality of where some of our high street businesses have gone; we cannot replicate the high street of the 20th century.

There are some issues unique to my constituency. I thank my local business improvement district and Broadway shopping centre in Bexleyheath for the work they do to diversify opportunity and to try to bring leisure opportunities into the town centre. I hope there is some good news coming, with a new retailer in the near future. I receive requests, notably from the Kings Arms, Globetrotters soft play, Masala Inn, Zingara, Stuzzichini and Buddha restaurant in Bexleyheath, and the Duke's Head, and the Duchess of Kent in Northumberland Heath, about the pressures on the hospitality industry. I thank you, Ms Lewell, for the work you do leading on those issues.

I support the Government's Great British summer savings, which I hope will increase footfall for a number of those businesses. I note that Government changes have meant that two thirds of the pubs in my constituency have seen their business rates go down this year, but there is more we need to do and, while any measure would need to be costed, I am receptive to looking at the rate of VAT in the hospitality industry.

On cash, there are no longer any banks in Crayford and Northumberland Heath. We rely on post offices in those two places for cash services. We need to look further at the criteria for banking hubs and make sure there are more of them.

I welcome the Government's announcements on the high streets strategy. I engaged with the previous Minister and I look forward to engaging with the new Minister to look at more investment in my patch. On Pride in Place, we are seeing £20 million coming into Slade Green; the retailers in Forest Road and Slade Green will look forward to that investment.

On transport, I continue to press Transport for London for a direct bus route between Crayford and Northumberland Heath to support the shopping parades, and to press my Conservative council to introduce a fairer short-stay parking arrangement for traders in Northumberland Heath.

I welcome measures in the Crime and Policing Act 2026. I have been at the forefront—I have wrestled shoplifters to the floor, many times—and I welcome the measures that the Government have brought forward, but there is still much more that we need to do to support people, and I will continue to press for that.

My policing teams have done some great work in Crayford around illegal working, particularly with delivery drivers in my retail park, with arrests and deportations as a result. I thank my policing team in Crayford for that. They have also worked on shoplifting there. In Bexleyheath, they have done similar work; I went out on a raid with them last summer and looked at the work they do. They have also done some great work on illegal shops, which hon. Members have commented on, but they still need an increase in police numbers.

I have welcomed the changes that have been brought forward. Police in Bexleyheath now have higher police numbers at the end of the day and at school kicking-out

time, and on a Friday and Saturday night. That is as a result of changes that were controversial, but which I have supported.

There is more that the Government could do to support our high streets and businesses. I will continue to press them on that, but, as I have said, I support them on a number of the things that have already been done.

3.53 pm

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the chair this afternoon. Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) for giving us the opportunity to speak in this debate on the importance of high street businesses.

It was once said by American President Calvin Coolidge that the chief business of the nation is business, but high street businesses in Tiverton and Minehead tell me of how they feel more squeezed than ever before. I must confess that my deepest frustration as an MP is seeing people and enterprises held back stubbornly and unnecessarily by basic challenges, and by Governments who have spoken the language of growth while too often acting against it. The cost of energy has been crippling for high street businesses. I commend the Government on having the antenna to keep out of Washington's war, but that has not left us insulated from its effects; as alluded to by many, energy prices have soared.

The hikes in national insurance contributions, business rates being at the level they are, and the rise in the minimum wage make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to hire local young people looking for work, who often rely on summer jobs over the school holidays. We see that borne out in the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training, and in the mental health epidemic making victims of so many of our young people.

The high street is as much a place of commerce as it is of human connection, and when that hollows out, so does something vital in the lives of local people. I therefore simply ask this: what happens when the goose is no longer laying the golden eggs, when the tax revenue is no longer there, and when the properties sit empty? This is not sustainable.

I would like to say just a brief word on Europe: the most powerful growth lever available to this Government requires no new spending, no new legislation and no great political imagination; it is to ease the red tape choking trade with Europe. My constituents, including my farmers, tell me—in language rather more colourful than parliamentary convention permits—about the bureaucratic absurdities they have to navigate just to trade with our nearest neighbours.

In Tiverton and Minehead, threadbare transport is a choke on high street trade. For a significant portion of my constituents who do not have access to a car—and I have one of the poorest constituencies in the country, even though it is beautiful—public transport provision is so painfully limited that employment opportunities just a few miles away might as well be on another planet. That is a structural drag on our local rural economy.

It is also true that a local economy is only ever as strong as the talent feeding it. The skills gap that employers in my constituency raise with me begins here; backing business has to mean investing in the pipeline that feeds it. Without that, we get a brain drain away

[*Rachel Gilmour*]

from rural areas. While that is far from a new phenomenon, it is a cumulative one, and my local rural economy bears the cost: businesses lose potential employees and communities lose the purchasing power and energy of young professionals, who might, with the right provision, have chosen to stay and build their lives in their community—the most beautiful constituency in the United Kingdom.

3.57 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) for the interest, passion, desire and ideas that he brought to the debate—I think we all really appreciate that—and I thank my other hon. Friends for all their good ideas. I will give a particular shout-out to the hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) for his ideas about enforcement and dealing with illicit businesses on the high street—I think all our constituencies would benefit from those.

It is clear that we have a serious problem. Local pubs, family-owned shops and restaurants matter—they make our communities tick—but up and down the country they are closing at an alarming rate. I want to quantify just what that means: according to figures from the British Beer and Pub Association, 161 pubs—nearly two per day—closed in the first three months of this year across England, Scotland and Wales, taking with them 2,400 jobs, and in 2024 the UK lost 37 shops per day, with almost 13,500 closing. Preliminary figures for 2025 indicate that last year was likely even worse and could surpass 2022, the previous record year for closures. Alarm bells are ringing.

A successful high street is not just about shops; it is about community and connection. As almost everybody in the room has said, it is about bringing community together and giving people opportunity and fun. It is on us as politicians to do our best to make that happen and ensure that it survives. The Lib Dems have been calling consistently for a package of support that recognises the scale of the problem: cutting VAT for hospitality and attractions from 20% to 15%; reforming business rates to reward occupancy; and strengthening the town centre-first principle in planning policy to tackle vacancy rates. That requires applications for main town centre uses to be located in town centres rather than edge-of-centre locations, which should be used only if suitable sites are not available in the town centre. I will give a special shout-out to Witney as an example of a place where decades of support from planning officers and councillors has kept the high street lively, as opposed to everything being dragged out of town. Well done to everybody for doing that over decades.

Let me turn to the problems. I will start with the big stuff: at the top is the failure to get our economy moving. As my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) just mentioned, being back inside the European single market and customs union would not cost anything—it makes really good sense. Dealing with tax reform makes really good sense. Those measures would cut the cost of doing business by reducing the cost of food, addressing the chronic vacancy rate in hospitality, easing labour shortages and reducing the cost of energy. This is all doable.

At the top of the charge sheet are national insurance contributions. As an ex-entrepreneur, I feel the horror of this daft tax on headcount. Before getting out of bed in the morning—before generating any revenue, let alone profit—businesses are being whacked, and they do not want to hire people. That is really bad news. Liberal Democrats have consistently opposed the change and think it should be reversed in full. We are also calling for a consultation on a new NICs band from £5,000 to £9,100, with a lower rate to better support part-time workers, on whom the hospitality industry relies heavily.

Then there is VAT—that is the 5% cut—and business rates. The numbers on business rates are terrifying. Statistics from the Valuation Office Agency show rateable values rising by an average of 30% in 2026 for pubs and restaurants in England, and by an average of 70% for pubs with accommodation—imagine if that was your business!—outstripping the still substantial average increase of 19.4% across England for all properties. Those increases are completely unsustainable, and I do not think the Government are doing nearly enough to address them.

In my constituency we have fabulous high streets. We have the medieval wonders of Witney and Burford, which rightly attract visitors from around the world. We have much-loved and much-defended free parking, which matters a lot to people, and we are working hard to better our local transport, whether that is buses, walking or biking. As my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage said, we need all those things, not to pit one against the other. Often-overlooked Carterton and Faringdon have tons of wonderful independent shops and need so much more support than we are currently giving them.

I want to focus on a few examples. Lisa and Kirsty have been running Sassi, a clothing shop on Witney high street, for over 15 years. Their business rates bill has gone up by £1,200 this year. Clive, who runs The Flooring Centre in Witney, has seen his business rates increase by 15% this year. This is not being addressed as a problem. Given the dire economic circumstances, such big increases in rates are a disaster.

Let me turn to solutions and return to the need for a 5% VAT cut, a reversal of the increase in employer NICs, and the proper and fair reform of the business rates system that businesses have long been promised. As an interim support measure, we have called for the Government to keep in place the existing 75% relief for retail, hospitality and leisure until the new system is in place.

Our high streets and town centres are places that we all rely on and depend on, hang out in and have fun in, and they are going in the wrong direction. I look forward to hearing the Minister's thoughts on what we can do about it.

4.3 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): What a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Lewell, and to make common cause with so many hon. Members. Our passion for our high streets—something we share, as proud representatives of our constituents—has come through in all the contributions to the debate. I thank the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) for sharing that with us. I speak on behalf of my own wonderful high streets in Midhurst, Storrington, Arundel, Steyning, Petworth, Pulborough and Henfield—we are so lucky to have them, Ms Lewell. I hope that

you will come and visit them, and the Minister always has an invitation to see the wonderful enterprises in my constituency.

Here I fear that the consensus may break down a little, but I hope that the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage and his colleagues will join me in condemning the decision of my local Lib Dem district councils to increase parking charges and bleed the life out of our high streets—an unwarranted headwind, transferring economic life into the coffers of the town halls. I invite the hon. Member to join me in seeking to reverse that unwarranted decision.

The Minister is a good man, and many of these measures were not of his making, but I fear that what we are seeing is the Government's fundamental—albeit perhaps unintentional—misunderstanding of business: what it is to combine so many different factors of production, to take risks and to try to give back, through economic activity, to our communities. We heard many examples of that today. We heard about the difficulty for employers of making ends meet with the unwarranted increase in national insurance—not just the rate but, in particular, the threshold. Anyone who really understood the granularity of business, and the number and mix of part-time employees who were previously outwith the national insurance net, would never have made the decision to reduce the threshold from £9,100 to £5,000, encompassing at a stroke hundreds and thousands more employees. What do businesses do when faced with the anaemic top-line growth in the economy and the pressure on consumer household spending? They have to sit down on a Sunday afternoon and work through the shifts, trying to pare back hours and work out which employees they may let go.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) the challenges of making the business rates calculation add up. I accept that this challenging problem did not start at the last election—I am very ecumenical in that sense; it has been creeping up on us for a long time—but the first and best advice that I got was that when you are in a bit of a hole, you should stop digging. Rather than the permanently lower business rates that we were promised and that businesses relied on—many placed their votes accordingly—we have got permanently higher business rates. That started with a swingeing increase. The Government, under pressure from other parties represented in this House, listened—eventually—and have mitigated that increase through some welcome measures in the short term, but they have done nothing to provide the long-term relief that for many would mean they had a viable future as a business.

I know that the Minister will have been given some brilliant lines to read out this afternoon, but I ask him, in all seriousness, to hear the will of the House on the perennial challenge of business rates, perhaps work on a cross-party basis and see what we can do over time to lance this very difficult boil. This is part of an overall picture of spending first and taxing second—certainly, that is the view of the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, from his description of meetings with so many of his colleagues.

The challenge is that we are just not seeing any top-line growth, any confidence in the economy, anything to make people think that it is a good idea to go and start an enterprise, to hire people, to take some risk in our high streets. We all want that for our communities.

We want our high streets full of lively, independent, diverse shops catering to the needs of local people, not merely those catering to the lowest common denominator—vape shops—or, meritorious though they are, charity shops in perhaps too great an abundance.

There is a real desire to work on the future of the high street, because we all care so much about it. We need the employment opportunities for our young people. We have heard about the challenges for the hospitality sector. VAT is of course one potential relief, but what people are telling me is, “Just do something. Stop piling more and more taxes and levies”—packaging taxes, bed taxes—“on us. Let's have a little bit of a moratorium.” My party's fully costed plan would go much further by taking 250,000 small businesses out of business rates entirely. I know that the Minister will disagree, but I am afraid that we would go back to the very settled status of employment law that was good enough for Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. It persisted for many years and gave many of our young people the opportunity to get their first foot on the ladder, particularly with starter jobs. Indeed, some hon. Members have spoken today about their own first experiences working in hospitality and retail.

I will leave it there, but I am very keen to hear from the Minister what new hope he can inject into our souls and hearts—we want to take it back to our high streets to give people good cheer, so that they are no longer just surviving, but thriving. I leave the final word to the Prime Minister's Chief Secretary, a man infamous for his self-confidence and, I am told, more than a little ambition. Upon discovering that the nation's growth plans are in the hands of the right hon. Member for Leeds West and Pudsey (Rachel Reeves), he said:

“It doesn't fill you with confidence.”

4.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Lewell. I congratulate the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) on securing this important and passionate debate, and I thank him for his own thoughtful and passionate contribution.

It was interesting to hear so many hon. Members name different local businesses in their areas without necessarily explaining what those businesses did—I am intrigued what Serendipity in Horwich or the Uniform Monkeys do. I would be remiss if I did not abuse my position by naming some of my favourites in my own constituency, including Bica in Netherlee; Wheataly in Clarkstown, which does the best Italian food in Glasgow; The Pad in Neilston; and Valentini's ice cream in Giffnock.

What is encouraging about this debate is that it has placed the role of high streets in its proper context. Yes, they are full of businesses, which are about a bottom line, but as was said by the hon. Members for Woking (Mr Forster) and for Tiverton and Minehead (Rachel Gilmour) and my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff), this is about more than just soulless economics; it is about how we feel about where we live. It is essential that we understand that.

We must also place high streets in the wider economic context. They are not only the engines of very local economies but a barometer for how the wider economy

[*Blair McDougall*]

feels. We have to recognise that the reason why so many of our town and city centres sometimes feel so down at heel is that before we lost the shops on those high streets, we lost the industry at the edges of towns.

It is important to put this debate in the context of the Government's wider efforts to reindustrialise the country, to create good work and a sense of economic pride and purpose in places. I disagree with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith): yes, to tackle the insecure work and low incomes that left people without the money to spend in the neighbourhoods where our high streets are—

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Whenever we talk about high streets, we think primarily about town centres, but there are smaller communities and sub-neighbourhoods, such as Bilton and Starbeck in my Harrogate and Knaresborough constituency—and even Kings Road, just a little further outside the town centre—that often miss out on support from the likes of the local chamber of commerce or business improvement district. Does the Minister think there should be additional measures for those that struggle because they are a little further from the town centre?

Blair McDougall: One of the hallmarks of our efforts through Pride in Place and other measures is recognition that there is not really a one-size-fits-all solution. In my constituency, we do not have one central high street; we probably have about a dozen separate ones, which sounds similar to the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

It is clear from what everyone has said during the debate that high streets are facing real pressures, from changing consumer habits to crime and increasing costs. There is not a single quick fix—there is no one-size-fits-all solution. It will take determined effort and real strategy from the Government. A key part of that is our small business strategy, which was launched just short of a year ago and aims to cut red tape, cut costs and make things just a little easier in challenging times. We will build on the strategy later this year as we bring forward a cross-Government high streets strategy that aims to support the businesses that we have been talking about today and equip local authorities with the tools that they need to drive long-term regeneration. We are working really closely on that with businesses, representative organisations and, indeed, Members from across the House.

We have already started taking significant action through, for example, our high streets innovation partnerships—a £301 million package that aims to help local areas to reinvent and reimagine high streets, to make them more attractive places to live and put more services into them. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) mentioned a Woolworths that had been replaced by businesses of lower value over the years. There is a challenge for all of us within our areas, working with local authorities and health authorities, to make sure that we locate more services in our areas and drive more footfall to them.

I will give an example of that type of action. I also oversee the Post Office, and as well as the Government making the decision to keep the Post Office network open at its current level, there are really exciting plans under way from the Post Office to create a new community

hub model for post offices in towns across the UK. That will offer a place for commercial services and public services to be delivered, and enhance the role that post offices have as an anchor in the high streets.

I will turn quickly to some of the issues raised by hon. Members and outline the areas that the Government are focusing on within each of them. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised the issue of payment providers. That issue was raised with me by Kadir's, a chip shop in Barrhead in my constituency. The payment services regulator recently carried out two market reviews in this area to look at those cost increases and is currently looking at what action to take as a result.

Many hon. Members rightly raised the impact of business rates on high street businesses. They say that all of heaven rejoices more over one sinner who repents, so I welcome the acknowledgment by the shadow Minister that we inherited a system that was, frankly, a mess. It was chaotic; it kept changing. It did not give people any sense of stability. For high streets, we have to ensure that our business rates system is fair, stable and responsive to the changing economic situation that hon. Members have described. That is why, in the face of the cost of the first revaluation since the pandemic, we have put in the £4.3 billion support package.

The hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) asked when we will take on the big online giants—the warehouses—and start to shift some of the burden on to them and away from high street businesses. That is exactly what we did with those lower multipliers. That was paid for by putting the burden on to the big warehouses. We are working in that area. Rather than tinkering, we are doing that big structural change.

Let me turn to jobs, and particularly youth unemployment and the link to high streets. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) said that he was a Saturday boy. I was a Saturday boy as well in Beveridge's fishmongers in Giffnock. It taught me everything about how to talk to people. It gave me confidence. Every time someone came into the shop, I had to re-find my confidence—remake myself. I do not think that I would be where I am now had I not had that experience.

Some Members raised national insurance contributions in that context. Businesses still have those reliefs for under-21s and for apprentices under 25. It is worth about £2.5 billion. In terms of national insurance, there is relief there for employing young people, but I absolutely take the point. Obviously, the Milburn review is working on the much bigger issue of the number of young people not getting that opportunity.

Daniel Francis: I spoke to Alan Milburn about this yesterday. Does the Minister accept that, although there is a clear job for Government in this matter, there is also a clear job for retailers? The kind of schemes the retailer I worked for had in the '90s for young and disabled people have gone by the wayside for many large retailers. We need to bring them round the table and get them to bring back some of those schemes.

Blair McDougall: My hon. Friend will know from talking to Alan Milburn that he is very much of the view that this is not something the Government can do alone; it will need to be done in partnership with industry and, as my hon. Friend says, with retailers in particular.

Nothing in recent years has made people angrier than either experiencing retail crime or seeing videos and images of it on social media, in which shop workers are treated appallingly. Despite that, there are encouraging signs that our efforts to tackle retail crime are beginning to bite. Shop theft has started to fall, following really sharp increases under the previous Government. At the heart of that effort was the revitalisation of neighbourhood policing with 13,000 additional personnel being delivered, 3,100 of whom are already in place.

My hon. Friends the Members for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) and for Bolton West spoke, rightly, with some anger at how organised crime—as they correctly named it—has impacted the way that our high streets feel. We are seeing legitimate, independent and valued businesses having to compete with businesses that are not real, and that is simply unfair.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West was right to talk about his campaign and efforts, along with other Members, to deliver the high streets organised crime unit to bring about the system-wide response that he described—bringing together HMRC and local authorities, and working with Companies House, the Insolvency Service and the organisations that I oversee. As part of that, my officials have joined the Home Office in engaging with the Dutch Government to learn the lessons from their approach with the Bibob Act, highlighted by my hon. Friend, with a view to exploring whether a similar approach could be taken here.

The Home Office will shortly launch a consultation on strengthening closure orders, with stronger powers for local authorities being considered as part of our work on the high street strategy. Importantly, this is all backed by funding for the organisations that we rely on to do this. This is about fairness, but it is also about the way people feel about where they live. It is one of those issues on which our constituents have been ahead of us; they have noticed that there is something wrong on the high street, and we need to deal with it.

Finally on the point about that sense of where we live, many hon. Members referred to Pride in Place, and the nearly £6 billion invested to support hundreds of places around the country. This is not a one-size-fits-all approach and it is not directed from Whitehall; it is communities shaping for themselves how they want their high streets and local areas to be reimaged.

Alongside that, hon. Members mentioned the perennial problem of empty properties. They are one of the most visible challenges facing our high streets. High street rental auctions are now beginning to bite, not just in terms of the number that have gone through the whole process; the very ability of local authorities to have that conversation is letting them engage with landlords, changing the nature of that relationship and changing things on the high streets. This week, we announced £10 million of funding to support the expansion of high street rental auctions to help councils to identify opportunities, deepen engagement with landlords and get properties ready for use. That is a practical and important step forward.

Finally, hon. Members raised the issue of banking hubs and the loss of banking facilities in local areas. In Barrhead, a large industrial town in my constituency, we recently lost our last bank, so I get the frustration, particularly with the process of deciding whether an area gets a banking hub or not. As hon. Members will

know, the Government commissioned an independent review into access to banking services. Alongside that, we are supporting the roll-out of 350 banking hubs, 235 of which are already open. That is alongside the work that we are doing to make sure that the Post Office network is sustained, invested in and able to provide the banking services that people rely on.

I thank again the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage for securing the debate. As I have said in this room before, we sometimes talk about high streets as being an important part of the community, but for me, as many hon. Members from all parties have made clear today, they are not just a part of the community but where community happens. They are where people get services, meet their friends and have fun, and where those who are otherwise socially isolated find companionship and community. That is why we have to do far more to support them, to ensure that all the places that we represent thrive and have a sense of pride.

4.26 pm

Olly Glover: I thank all hon. Members who have attended the debate. I hope I will not get in too much trouble for suggesting that this is a bit of a graveyard slot, so in that context I welcome that hon. Members from four parties and from many geographical parts of the UK have given their time to attend. I will briefly bring out some of the wide range of important themes that other hon. Members raised during our discussion.

On the important issue of illicit businesses on the high street, the hon. Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) cited good practice in the Netherlands—as did I, for different reasons—on tackling illicit and suspicious businesses. It really is a remarkable country in terms of how much good practice there is to be found there. The issue of an EU youth mobility scheme remains important for helping with labour shortages and boosting opportunities. The hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) definitely deserves a mention, given his experience of wrestling shoplifters personally. It is important that we have people in this House who can bring such real-world experience to bear here. My constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard), mentioned the critical issue of pub closures, the huge issues that pubs face and the very valuable role that they play in the rural economy.

I thank the Minister for his remarks. From what he said, I could hear that he very much recognises the importance of high street businesses. I shall read with interest the small business and high streets strategies, although I hope I am not being too cynical in noting that history is paved with the paper of Government strategies that have not always translated into action. He mentioned the Post Office community model; he will be receiving a parliamentary petition about East Hagbourne post office in his ministerial inbox. My concern is that, while the community model may be suitable in some locations, the Post Office as an organisation may be a bit too keen to foist it on areas for which it is less suitable.

The Minister's comments did not address the impact of the scrapping of the UK shared prosperity fund and the rural England prosperity fund, perhaps as it is an issue more for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. Perhaps he will be so good as to take that point to his colleagues.

[Olly Glover]

I thank everybody for attending and giving their time. Let us hope that all of us across this House can work together to ensure that we continue to have thriving high streets, with thriving businesses on them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for high street businesses.

4.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 4 June 2026

EDUCATION

Children's Social Care: Enduring Relationships Strategy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): Transforming children's social care is central to our mission to break down the barriers to opportunity. It is fundamental to ensuring that every child grows up safe, supported and able to thrive. Today we are publishing the enduring relationships strategy, which sets a clear direction for children's social care in England by placing relationships at the heart of the system's purpose.

This publication builds upon our recent work to legislate for social care reform, reset how the system operates and give our partners clarity on delivery. The enduring relationships strategy establishes a guiding principle, bringing coherence to reforms by placing relationships at the heart of the system. The independent review of children's social care called for a relentless focus on family networks, reunification and other forms of permanence that promote lifelong relationships to support the best outcomes for care-experienced children that endure into adulthood.

The evidence is clear: a single stable, trusted and loving relationship can transform a child's life, improving resilience, health, education and their long-term outcomes. There are professionals across the sector working tirelessly to support children to build and sustain trusted relationships.

However, this is too often dependent on individual commitment rather than reliable structures. Children can experience multiple moves, separation from family and community, and too often leave care without the networks of support that most young people rely on. The enduring relationships strategy addresses this directly. At its heart is a simple but fundamental idea: the purpose of the children's social care system must be to build, protect and sustain children's enduring relationships, so that they can feel safe, supported and able to thrive.

To enable this, our reforms are aligned to four key outcomes, and supporting enduring relationships is the golden thread that runs between them.

First: focusing practice on enduring relationships

Relationships should be treated not as an add-on, but as the core purpose of practice and the lens through which all professional judgment is exercised. This is reflected in the families first partnership programme, where mandatory family group decision making will ensure that children's families and wider networks are involved in decisions about their care at an earlier stage. In addition, the Government have strengthened local authorities' duties to promote sibling contact for children in care.

At every stage of decision making, the system should consider not only whether a child is safe, but who matters to that child and how those relationships can be enabled and sustained.

Second: creating homes for enduring relationships

All children should have a home that meets their need for love and support. Homes for children in care are not simply placements; they are where relationships are formed, sustained and strengthened. The system must create the conditions for those relationships to flourish, rather than contributing to their breakdown.

The majority of children should be supported in family-based homes. The Government are investing £88 million to reform fostering and recruit 10,000 new foster carers, working with fostering hubs and the sector, as set out earlier this year in the fostering action plan. Kinship care is also being strengthened, with every local authority required to publish a local kinship offer, supported by £126 million to pilot seven kinship zones, including family network support packages to help families step in and care for children within their networks.

Residential care should be used for far fewer children and only where it best meets their needs, with a focus on maintaining and restoring family connections. To address gaps in provision, the Government are rolling out regional care co-operatives to improve planning and commissioning. In addition, I have commissioned Emmanuel Akpan-Inwang to review professional development for staff in children's homes, ensuring that the workforce can better support children to build and sustain meaningful relationships.

Third: supporting the transition to adulthood through relationships

Young people leaving care should be supported to move into adulthood with strong, lasting relationships in place. Too many leave care without the network of connections that most young people rely on as they begin adult life, and this must change. The Government are strengthening support for care-experienced young people so that they can move towards interdependent living, underpinned by trusted and enduring relationships.

Programmes such as Staying Put and Staying Close are ensuring continuity of care and connection beyond the point of leaving care, while strengthened corporate parenting expectations mean that public services play a more active and consistent role in supporting care leavers.

Recognising that many children in care have already lost important relationships, a national roll-out of Family Finding will be taken forward across all local authorities, with the aim of helping children identify and reconnect with the people who matter most in their lives.

Fourth: embedding relationships through accountability and inspection

The importance of children's long-term relationships must be embedded through accountability and inspection. Care should be judged not by placement numbers or types, but by children's experiences and the strength of the relationships they are able to build. To support this, the Government will introduce an enduring relationships measure to gauge improvement and provide accountability, alongside working with Ofsted to ensure that inspection frameworks reflect this priority.

We will take forward this work in close partnership with local authorities and the wider sector. Local authorities will be engaged as learning partners, reflecting their

central role in leading practice and driving improvement. We will work closely with Coventry, Dorset, North Yorkshire and York local authorities, with the aim of publishing a best practice guide next spring.

This is a call to action for practitioners and leaders working with children in and leaving care to ensure that every child leaves with a network of enduring relationships. We ask the sector to strengthen how services support these relationships, engage in sharing what works, and act now by building on existing knowledge and good practice.

The publication of the enduring relationships strategy marks an important step in establishing a clear and consistent purpose for children's social care. Every young person should be able to rely on children's social care to meet more than their material needs. They should have a community of people who know them well and the confidence that someone will always be there for them. We cannot accept a system that does not provide this for our most vulnerable children. That is why these reforms are designed to support children's futures beyond their time in care, ensuring that they have the love, stability and opportunity they need to thrive.

A copy of the enduring relationships strategy will be deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS89]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Antisemitism and Racism in the NHS: Mann Review

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (James Murray): Today I am publishing the outcome of Lord Mann's review into antisemitism and other forms of racism in the NHS, alongside the Government response.

The review was commissioned in October 2025 to examine how the NHS, employers and UK health regulators identify, report and respond to antisemitism and other forms of racism, and to ensure that both patients and staff are better protected from discrimination and abuse. The Government welcome the publication of the review and are grateful to Lord Mann for his detailed and thorough work. We have considered the recommendations in full and our response sets out in clear terms that we are fully supportive of all the recommendations in the Mann report.

In the wake of a series of horrific attacks on the Jewish community across the country, the Government are clear that tackling antisemitism is the responsibility of the whole of society—including the health service.

The review finds that racism, including antisemitism, remains a persistent issue within the NHS and wider society, with discrimination affecting both staff and patients, undermining confidence in services and the experience of care. It finds that unacceptable levels of antisemitism have led to extreme consequences, with some Jewish patients reporting not wishing to present for treatment, and Jewish staff considering leaving the NHS. The review is equally clear that other forms of racism and discrimination against NHS patients and staff are at unacceptable levels, and that NHS employers are the first line of defence and must be taking urgent action.

Lord Mann's report sets out a comprehensive set of recommendations to strengthen accountability, improve reporting and investigation processes, and embed an anti-racist culture across the health system. These include:

- Strengthening leadership accountability for tackling racism, including through the NHS oversight framework and the forthcoming staff standards;

- Improving the quality and transparency of data, including through the workforce race equality standard;

- Enhancing processes for reporting and investigating incidents, including clearer national guidance and improved capability;

- Ensuring greater consistency across professional regulators in addressing racism; and

- Strengthening training and development, including mandatory education on racism and cultural competence for NHS leaders and staff.

The review also emphasises the importance of clear definitions of racism to support consistent understanding and action across the system.

As part of the Government response to this review, today I am also asking NHS England to adopt the UK Government definition of anti-Muslim hostility and set clear expectations that every trust, integrated care board and arm's length body does the same, as part of our wider efforts to tackle all forms of racism and religious hatred in the NHS. Use of this definition will support more consistent identification, reporting and response to anti-Muslim hostility across health and care sectors.

We will deliver meaningful changes based on the recommendations of the review that are for the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England. This work must be supported and reinforced at all levels of the healthcare system. This includes working closely with NHS England, regulators and other system partners, as well as with affected stakeholders, to assess how all of the recommendations can be implemented optimally—to ensure NHS staff and patients are kept safe from hate.

A copy of the report and the accompanying Government response are available on gov.uk.

[HCWS91]

Palliative and End-of-Life Care Modern Service Framework: Interim Update

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): In November 2025, I announced that the Government would develop a modern service framework for palliative care and end-of-life care in England. This MSF is one of the only six MSFs announced, which clearly demonstrates that palliative care and end-of-life care is a top priority for this Government. The MSF will help address rising demand; late identification of need; inequitable variation in access, experience and outcomes; and the wider pressures facing the health and care system. Today I am providing an update on progress ahead of publication in autumn 2026.

The MSF is a clinically led, evidence-based framework to support sustained improvement in outcomes for patients and carers, including by systematically identifying, measuring and reducing health inequalities, and reducing unwarranted variation in access, experience and outcomes. This Government's goal, being developed with partners, is that every person who needs palliative care or care at the end of life will have equitable access to high-quality support, shaped by what matters to them, their families

and carers. There will be a notable shift towards outcome measurement to understand improvement, including a specific focus on identifying and reducing inequalities in outcomes across different population groups. Systems are already beginning to implement these reforms, so that by March 2029 we will have delivered impact against the aim, set out in the neighbourhood health framework, of increasing by 10% the number of people identified as approaching end of life, and reducing non-elective admissions and hospital bed days for this cohort by 10%. Furthermore, as part of the 10-year health plan commitment to at least double the number of people offered a personal health budget by 2028-29, so that they can have more control over their care, we will start trialling PHBs for those with palliative care and end-of-life care needs by the end of 2026-27.

We are undertaking extensive engagement with more than 70 organisations across the health and care sector, including clinical experts, the voluntary sector, people with lived experience, and those representing babies, children and young people, adults and older people, and their carers.

A review of the evidence, and our engagement to gather real-world examples, has identified five working sub-goals for the system to drive change. With our stakeholders, we will build on these insights to develop areas for action for those commissioning and delivering services:

Support our staff and our population to better understand palliative care, death and dying.

Provide a person-centred approach and ensure equitable access to earlier and more effective identification of needs, in all settings of care.

Prevent distress through proactive and equitable assessment and management of need closer to home.

Ensure equitable access to personalised palliative care.

Deliver a palliative care response that is timely, effective and equitable, including access to out-of-hours telephone support, within this Parliament.

Performance and outcome metrics will support system accountability and will measure what matters most to people receiving care, and to their families and carers. There will be separate measures for adults, and for babies, children and young people, with a focus on unwarranted variation and health inequalities, and a commitment to developing person-centred outcome and experience measures.

The strategic commissioning framework sets out how integrated care boards, in partnership with local authorities, will focus on long-term population health strategy and planning, and care redesign. The MSF will support this by setting standards and the clinical evidence base, and by highlighting areas for innovation to inform integrated models of palliative care, guide population health improvement plans and align with neighbourhood health. This will support the shift to strategic commissioning, including the requirement—in line with ICBs' statutory duties—for clear and transparent contractual arrangements for commissioned palliative care activity across all providers, including hospices, to meet population health needs, with explicit regard to reducing inequalities and improving outcomes for underserved and disadvantaged groups.

The national director for primary care and community services will be informing the systems, setting out two actions to ensure progress is made towards strategic commissioning of palliative care and end-of-life care services:

Action 1: Produce an integrated needs assessment and understand service provision and utilisation.

Action 2: Move to sustainable contracting of hospice services.

The Government are also committed to publishing a 10-year workforce plan to ensure the NHS has the right people, in the right places, with the right skills to deliver for patients, including those approaching the end of life.

We will continue to co-design the MSF with people with lived experience, their families and carers, and sector partners, to refine the themes and areas for action, and finalise the metrics and accountability framework. We remain on track to publish the final MSF in autumn 2026, supported by system delivery and commissioning approaches.

Attachments can be viewed online at:
<http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2026-06-04/HWS88/>

[HWS88]

HOME DEPARTMENT

China: National Security Response

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): Yesterday, MI5, alongside our Five Eyes allies, issued an intelligence bulletin to warn that China's military intelligence is targeting Five Eyes Government and military personnel to gain access to sensitive or privileged information.

The bulletin reveals that Chinese military intelligence is using online job platforms to cultivate long-term relationships with a range of Five Eyes nationals. This includes posing as employees of private consultancies, think tanks or HR firms, and placing online job advertisements for foreign policy and defence analysts.

This bulletin once again highlights the exceptional work of our intelligence and security services and the strength of our enduring Five Eyes partnership. It is through their joint efforts that we are able to keep our people safe.

I encourage everyone to read and digest the separate "Applicant Beware" guidance from the National Protective Security Authority on spotting the signs of online targeting. Doing so will ensure that people do not inadvertently become targets of China's efforts. The disclosure of certain types of data can place the lives of frontline military personnel at risk, can weaken our economic prosperity, and enable interference in our democratic processes.

We have always been clear that we will engage with China on areas of mutual benefit, including developing a positive economic relationship. However, we have also been clear that China poses security threats to the UK. The Government will continue to tackle activity that infringes on our national security and sovereign affairs and raise our defences.

The Government are undertaking a range of work to further secure the UK from state threats activity. This includes:

The continued delivery of our counter-political interference and espionage action plan;

£170 million invested in renewing the sovereign and encrypted technology that civil servants use to protect sensitive work;

The removal of surveillance equipment manufactured by companies subject to the national intelligence law of the People's Republic of China from all sensitive sites that the Government operate around the world;

Ongoing support to the higher education and research sector to address national security risks to international collaboration through the research collaboration and advice team;

Bolstering efforts to support universities to identify and combat foreign interference, supported by additional investment of £3 million over the next three years; and

Delivery of a £210 million backed Government cyber action plan, which aims to increase the cyber resilience of UK Government systems and to ensure that the UK is a hard operating environment for any threat actor.

We have recently seen the first National Security Act prosecutions in relation to China on May 7. This continues to demonstrate that those who break our laws will face prosecution.

The Government will continue to update Parliament as we take the necessary action to protect our national security.

[HCWS90]

ORAL ANSWERS

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