

**Wednesday
10 June 2026**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 10 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

Wednesday 10 June 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

ROYAL ALBERT HALL BILL [LORDS]

Motion made,

That the promoter of the Royal Albert Hall Bill [Lords], which originated in the House of Lords on 23 January 2023 in Session 2022-23, should have leave to proceed with the Bill in the current Session, according to the provisions of Standing Order 188B (Revival of bills).—(*The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means.*)

Hon. Members: Object.

To be considered on Monday 15 June.

Speaker's Statement

11.34 am

Mr Speaker: I should inform the House that the Peter Murrell case is sub judice until sentencing. However, I am granting a limited waiver so that Members may discuss wider issues raised in the context of this case. Members should not speculate about sentencing.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Economic Growth

1. **Chris Kane** (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support economic growth in Scotland. [900246]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): This Government are taking action to foster economic growth in Scotland. According to the latest figures, the UK is now the fastest-growing economy in the G7, and last week the OECD upgraded our growth forecast for this year, as did the International Monetary Fund. Scottish businesses and communities are benefiting from our new trading relationships with India and the United States and from the UK's defence dividend. Those are all creating and supporting good-quality jobs across Scotland.

Chris Kane: UK Government funding is transforming a former Ministry of Defence site in Stirling into a major film studio, creating opportunities for skilled jobs, innovation and growth across Scotland's screen sector. As this industry is international and relies on a skilled workforce to thrive, a joined-up approach across Government is vital. The funding unlocks the site, but what discussions is the Secretary of State having with

the Scottish Government, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and local partners to ensure that my constituency has the skills, infrastructure and support needed to maximise the opportunity? Will he join me in visiting the site to see its potential at first hand?

Mr Alexander: My hon. Friend is a tireless advocate for his community in Stirling. I am pleased to hear that the Stirling and Clackmannanshire city region deal has had a visible impact on the region, and I appreciate his invitation, particularly to visit a film studio. The successful transfer of former MOD Forthside land through the deal has already unlocked further funding for the studio. I assure him that my officials continue to engage with key stakeholders, including the Scottish Government and other Government Departments, such as DSIT and DCMS, to ensure that the UK Government's investment continues to generate opportunities for growth.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Aberdeen is the only UK city expected to grow by less than 1% between now and 2028, not least because of the UK's anti-oil and gas policies. The Rosebank production facility has now arrived at the field; it is ready and just waiting for the Government to permit it. Rosebank would bring £25 billion of investment into the economy and 2,000 jobs. Would the Secretary of State welcome that economic boost and those jobs for Scotland? If so, when did he last speak to the Prime Minister or the Energy Secretary about having Rosebank permitted?

Mr Alexander: I was actually in Aberdeen at the weekend, and I am fully aware of the contribution that oil and gas make to the north-east of Scotland and to the broader Scottish and UK economy. As was made clear in exchanges with the Leader of the Opposition at the Dispatch Box a few weeks ago, this is a quasi-judicial decision that rests with the Energy Secretary. I assure the hon. Lady that discussions continue not just with me, but with Cabinet colleagues in relation to these matters. Ultimately, given the terms of the legislation, the matter rests with the Energy Secretary.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): The Government have pledged major investment in Scotland, which I welcome, but too many Scottish high streets are still being hollowed out by Labour's job tax hikes while illegal vape shops, mini-marts and barbers thrive. Following yesterday's announcement for England, does the Secretary of State have any plans to hold discussions with the Scottish Government about increasing steps to tackle this issue and bring life back into our town centres?

Mr Alexander: In relation to the Pride in Place policies that we have set out, we are directly targeting support that can be provided to high streets across Scotland. The hon. Lady will be aware that within the devolution settlement, local taxation in relation to high streets rests appropriately with the Scottish Government. I wrote to the First Minister offering to meet him immediately on his appointment, but it is a matter of regret that he has not taken up that opportunity.

Promoting Scottish Interests Abroad

2. **Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to promote Scottish interests abroad. [900247]

10. **Martin Rhodes** (Glasgow North) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to promote Scottish interests abroad. [900257]

Mr Speaker: I call the Secretary of State—you're going to be busy.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): The Government are harnessing the worldwide reach of our diplomatic and trade networks to boost Scottish exports and attract inward investment. We have already delivered deals with India and the United States. I was recently in New Zealand and Australia on a defence-focused visit, meeting with key investors and banging the drum for our world-leading shipbuilding capability. As we speak, the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Kirsty McNeill), is leading a trade mission to China promoting Scottish tech innovation and expertise, along with Glasgow chamber of commerce and representatives from five Scottish cities, including Glasgow.

Torcuil Crichton: Most Scottish interests abroad this weekend will be centred on Boston, and if the Secretary of State is considering a last-minute bid for the world cup, he can fly there from Glasgow this weekend for just £740. That is just £100 more than it would cost my constituents to fly from Stornoway to Glasgow this weekend without the air discount. The rising cost of Loganair flights and the loss of the Stornoway-Inverness morning service is of great concern in the western isles, and we have already lost the Benbecula connection, with all the consequences that has. Will the Secretary of State work with Cabinet colleagues, the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Transport—when he returns from his jaunt to America—and others in the industry to review flights across the UK?

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Secretary of State must have got the gist of the “War and Peace” question.

Mr Alexander: First, I am sure that every Scottish representative, whatever their political affiliation, will want to wish Steve Clarke, Andy Robertson and the boys the very best in Boston. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Let's hope they don't come home too soon.

My hon. Friend raises a substantive and important point about island connectivity, particularly given the woeful, abject failure of the Scottish National party-led Government in Edinburgh in relation to the ferry service. The First Minister recently visited the western isles, and the ferry subsequently broke down; in a sense, that tells us everything we need to know about the Scottish Government's record. The Minister for Aviation should be happy to pick up this issue with my hon. Friend to discuss what more can be done.

Martin Rhodes: Given Scotland's significant assets in a variety of sectors, what steps is the Secretary of State taking with ministerial colleagues to ensure that city regions such as Glasgow are not only attracting inward

investment, but exporting their world-leading strengths in technology, life sciences and advanced manufacturing to key international markets?

Mr Alexander: One of the regrettable aspects of the SNP-led Scottish Government's record has been their failure to fully harness the capability of city regions and the economic contribution they can make. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland is in China along with Glasgow chamber of commerce and representatives from Glasgow and four other cities. At the moment, they are focused on a trade mission to the Shanghai international technology fair, specifically to champion the region's world-renowned strengths in technology, life sciences and advanced manufacturing.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): Scotland exports 10 to 12 times more electricity than it needs. The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero is doing a review of community benefits, and we are very concerned that that review will produce a poor outcome for the people of rural Scotland. Could the Secretary of State make representations on that?

Mr Alexander: I am always happy to make representations to colleagues within Government—of course, the Energy Minister is a fellow Scot, representing a Scottish constituency. I know this has been a matter of long-standing concern for the hon. Gentleman, and if he wants to write to me, I will make sure I take it up with the Energy Minister.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): When it comes to representing Scotland's interests abroad, football is right up there. My constituent, Mr Kenny Smith, has shelled out well over £10,000 on booking his tickets to go to the States. He had visa clearance—he actually had UK security clearance, which is pretty high powered—yet last Wednesday, his visa was revoked. This poor chap is in a very bad situation, so can I appeal to the Secretary of State to give Mr Smith and me any assistance that he can provide to sort this out?

Mr Alexander: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his concern. I can assure him that on Monday morning, from my desk in the Scotland Office, I met officials from the Foreign Office when I first had word that there were concerns about the electronic system for travel authorisation and the visa requirements. On Monday afternoon, I met the Minister for North America in the Foreign Office to raise this concern. Of course, the Foreign Office was at pains to recognise that visa and entry requirements are a matter for the country concerned—in this case, the United States—but it has already made representations on cases such as that of the hon. Gentleman's constituent, and will continue to do so. If the hon. Gentleman is happy to share the details after today's discussion, I will immediately take this matter up with the Foreign Office.

Mr Speaker: I call Dave Doogan, and welcome him to his new position.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. When the Secretary of State first took up his job in government, his first priority should have been advancing the economic interests of Scotland across the world, but we now know what he was really up to instead. His first external meeting as

Scotland Secretary and as a Minister was to meet Global Counsel, Peter Mandelson's international lobbying fund, and he conveniently forgot to declare that meeting for a year and a half. Was that meeting a function of official advice from civil servants in his Department, or is it just the case that when Peter Mandelson says "Jump", Ministers like him say "How high?"

Mr Alexander: The hon. Gentleman is going to have to do better than that. That was a meeting facilitated, attended and minuted by officials in the Department for Business and Trade. If he were actually aware, he would know that the Prime Minister has already stated that I have "acted appropriately" and no further action is needed, notwithstanding the hon. Gentleman's attempts.

When it comes to propriety and ethics, SNP Members might want to look a bit closer to home before they criticise us. Recalling the evidence carefully, and mindful of the direction of Mr Speaker, if they do look closer to home, they will find three coffee machines, seven games consoles, a motorhome, and some extremely expensive salt and pepper dishes. [HON. MEMBERS: "More!"]

Dave Doogan: On the case of Peter Mandelson, the Secretary of State expects—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. We have just had "The Generation Game" played.

Dave Doogan: On the case of Peter Mandelson, the Secretary of State says, "I'm in the clear because the Prime Minister says so." The Prime Minister is also up to his neck in the Peter Mandelson scandal, so that is no clean bill of health at all. We saw just this week a stream of gushing—nauseating, actually—messages between Peter Mandelson and the Secretary of State.

How are we to believe that the Secretary of State for Scotland is doing anything in the interests of the people of Scotland when two of his own Labour MPs this week described him as the "most absent" man in the UK Cabinet? What does it say about him that the only person who thinks he is any use is his pal Peter Mandelson?

Mr Alexander: The hon. Gentleman is full of beans—that is obviously what you get with three coffee machines. [HON. MEMBERS: "More!"] He really has to do a whole lot better than his pathetic attempts at smears.

Scottish Independence

3. **John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the First Minister of Scotland on a new referendum on Scottish independence. [900248]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): None.

John Cooper: My constituents will be alarmed to hear that, because Labour's "devolve and forget" approach is a huge problem. When the Secretary of State is away, the nats will play. We know that the First Minister has gone abroad using taxpayers' money to talk about the breaking up of Britain. Should the Secretary of State not be inviting the First Minister down for a meeting—without coffee?

Mr Alexander: Very good; I think the First Minister would probably bring the coffee with him, if he was willing to accept the invitation. The hon. Gentleman makes a serious point. I wrote to the First Minister congratulating him on his recent success and inviting him to meet, but no acceptance was forthcoming. That was exactly the same approach as what followed after I was appointed Secretary of State, where I offered to meet the First Minister and he refused. Crocodile tears are often spilt in Edinburgh at the suggestion that we do not have good intergovernmental relations, but if we want better intergovernmental relations, the ball is in the SNP's court.

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

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): Does the Scottish Secretary agree that given the incoming Scottish Government have a whole list of issues and problems on their plate, the last thing they should be concerning themselves with is another divisive referendum?

Mr Alexander: My hon. Friend brings long and valuable experience in both of Scotland's Parliaments to her understanding of these issues. In 2014, there was an agreement across all parties and across civic society in Scotland that there should be a referendum. There is simply no such consensus today. This is not the time for the SNP's obsession with independence. It is focused on division and grievance; we are focused on delivery.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I join the Secretary of State in wishing Steve Clarke and the Scotland team all the best in the upcoming world cup. I look forward to them bringing football home to Scotland on 19 July. It might be obvious to most why the SNP might want to distract people from the news at the minute, but it does not excuse it wasting more of Scottish taxpayers' money pushing its divisive separation agenda, which the majority of Scots do not want. Can the Secretary of State confirm that this Government will recognise the wishes of the majority of Scots and say no to another needless referendum, and does he agree that the SNP should get on with the day job?

Mr Alexander: Yes.

Oil and Gas Sector: Employment

4. **Alison Griffiths** (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on levels of employment in the oil and gas sector in Scotland. [900250]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): I have ongoing discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the oil and gas sector's future in Scotland, focusing on ensuring that our oil and gas workers have a future as part of our transition to clean energy. Indeed, the Chancellor and I met oil and gas sector leaders earlier this year.

Alison Griffiths: Many businesses in my Bognor Regis and Littlehampton constituency depend on contracts linked to the North sea energy sector. With this Labour Government driving disinvestment and deindustrialisation, skilled workers are fleeing the industry. Every Member in this House will have constituents whose employment

relies on this wider supply chain. Does the Secretary of State understand the chilling effect that his Government's policies are having on business confidence and investment in this vital industry?

Mr Alexander: It seems to have slipped the hon. Lady's mind that the energy profits levy was introduced by the previous Conservative Government. It also seems to have slipped her mind that fully a third of the jobs in the North sea were lost during the Conservative Government's time in office. They failed time and time again to come up with any credible plan. The status quo of that lost decade was 70,000 fewer jobs in the North sea.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Jobs were lost at Grangemouth following Jim Ratcliffe's decision to close the refinery. The then Tory Ministers, half of whom are now members of Reform, treated it as a commercial decision, and did and delivered nothing. In contrast, the UK Labour Government invested £120 million in December to save Grangemouth's ethylene plant, but given the closure of the refinery, we must move far more quickly. What efforts is the Secretary of State making to deliver a new industry in Grangemouth with the £200 million allocated to the site by the Labour Government?

Mr Alexander: I assure my hon. Friend that, together with officials, I am actively engaged in efforts to secure the future of the Grangemouth industrial cluster, and I was central to the UK Government's commitment of £120 million last December to secure the future of the wider site. In December last year, funding of up to £3 million was announced for the Scottish biotech company MiAlgae, which is expected to create up to 310 jobs over the next five years. However, the work continues.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): The list grows longer every week: BP, Hunting, Harbour, Chevron, Well-Safe, Petrofac, Ithaca, Xodus and EnerMech have all announced redundancies in Scotland's oil and gas industry. For some unfathomable reason, this Labour Government seem to think that everything is fine, but is it not the truth that they are carrying out the wilful destruction of this country's domestic oil and gas industry, sacrificing thousands of jobs and making the country poorer and less secure?

Mr Alexander: History did not begin in July 2024. The hon. Gentleman can run, but he cannot hide from his record: 70,000 jobs lost in the North sea under the Conservatives, the energy profits levy introduced by the Conservatives, and zero plans for the North sea under the Conservatives.

Andrew Bowie: It is clear that Labour Members just do not get it—or worse, they just do not care. A week tomorrow, there will be a referendum on our oil and gas industry in Aberdeen, and the choice could not be clearer. Only one party is standing up for the granite city, for Scotland's energy industry and for Britain's energy security, and that is the Conservative and Unionist Party. The Secretary of State must agree that in Aberdeen next week the choice will be clear: vote to get Britain drilling with the Conservatives, or vote for decline and job losses with Labour or the SNP.

Mr Alexander: That was rather more like a party election broadcast than a question. As always, I would recommend the good voters of Aberdeen to vote Scottish Labour.

Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal

5. **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): What steps he is taking with the Scottish Government to support the delivery of the borderlands inclusive growth deal. [900251]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): This Government are and remain committed to the successful delivery of the borderlands inclusive growth deal. In March, the UK and Scottish Governments approved a deal reset, which confirmed a more deliverable and affordable financial profile. The reset will boost the delivery of key projects such as the Chapelcross development and the mountain bike innovation centre in Innerleithen, and will help the deal to make a real difference to the south of Scotland.

Ms Minns: May I wish you a very happy birthday, Mr Speaker?

Members on both sides of the border and both sides of the Chamber believe that the deal has the potential to be transformative for our region. What steps are being taken to ensure that progress on the deal is maintained, and will the Secretary of State meet me, and my colleagues on both sides of the border, to discuss the reset?

Mr Alexander: I apologise unreservedly for the unforgivable oversight of not beginning my contributions by wishing you a happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

The borderlands growth deal is driving growth, which is why the UK and Scottish Governments have approved a strategic reset. I assure my hon. Friend that we will endeavour to take forward the work as described.

Economic Growth: Paisley and Renfrewshire South

6. **Johanna Baxter** (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to support economic growth in Paisley and Renfrewshire South constituency. [900252]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): The Government are committed to boosting Scotland's regional economies, including that of my former constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire South. The Paisley and Renfrewshire economy will benefit from £39 million of city deal project funding aimed at Clyde waterfront connectivity. The project is predicted to deliver up to 1,400 jobs and attract £230 million in private sector investment.

Johanna Baxter: A very happy birthday to you, Mr Speaker.

Last week we heard the very disappointing news that the principal investor in the Paisley Centre redevelopment project in my constituency has been forced to withdraw from the project after years of delays and uncertainty. I have repeatedly warned that continued delays would put this project at risk, and it is deeply frustrating that

those fears have been realised without, apparently, the SNP-led Renfrewshire council having any back-up plan. Will my right hon. Friend agree to meet me, along with local elected representatives and members of the Scottish Government, to see what we can do to get the project moving?

Mr Alexander: I know better than most the limitations of an SNP-led Renfrewshire council, and I applaud my hon. Friend's efforts to bring this initiative to the fore. As the UK Government Minister responsible for local growth in Scotland, the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Kirsty McNeill), would be pleased to meet her to discuss how we can work with the council to deliver a vibrant and strong future for the town.

Pride in Place Programme

7. **Lillian Jones** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues through the Pride in Place programme to support regeneration in Scotland. [900253]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): The UK Government are committed to empowering local people to deliver neighbourhood regeneration across Scotland. Our Pride in Place programme is directly supporting many of our most-in-need communities to shape the future of their local area. We are investing up to £480 million in 24 Scottish neighbourhoods over 10 years, and that includes £20 million for Kilmarnock.

Lillian Jones: Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

I was delighted that the Darvel Improvement Group was awarded £200,000 of Pride in Place funding, meaning that it can now progress its work to restore the Sir Alexander Fleming commemorative garden and create an educational memorial in Hastings Square. My right hon. Friend will know that 2028 marks 100 years since the discovery of penicillin, a world-changing breakthrough that has saved millions of lives across the world. For local people across my constituency, that is a source of deep pride—Scotland's contribution to science from a man born in Darvel in Ayrshire, aka God's country. Does my right hon. Friend agree that by putting power into the hands of local people, we are helping communities to deliver—

Mr Speaker: Order. The Secretary of State will have grasped the question.

Mr Alexander: Let me congratulate the volunteer-led Darvel Improvement Group, to which my hon. Friend refers, for securing £200,000 from the Pride in Place impact fund. She is right to recognise that the world owes an immeasurable debt to Sir Alexander Fleming, and it is entirely right that his birthplace in Darvel stands at the heart of celebration of his truly monumental scientific achievement.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Perth is still the only city in Scotland that has not received one penny from the Conservatives' levelling-up fund or the Government's Pride in Place programme. When I wrote to the Minister at the last allocation, she told me that we did not meet the methodologies or indices of deprivation.

The Secretary of State was once a failed candidate in the city of Perth and surely noticed that we have poverty, just like every other city in Scotland. Why have we not received a penny, and when will we get our share?

Mr Alexander: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right: I did fight Perth for Labour, although Perth fought back pretty effectively. I am fully aware of the contribution that the fair city of Perth makes to the economy of Scotland, and I am also very aware of the methodology that we have used, which is an objective basis on which to allocate British public funds.

Renewables Sector: Employment

8. **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on levels of employment in the renewables sector in Scotland. [900254]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): Producing the clean energy we need is not only right for our energy security and our climate; it is the right thing to do for jobs and investment. Last week, the CBI revealed that the UK's green economy has created more than 1 million jobs. In Scotland, the industry generated £10.2 billion and supported more than 105,000 jobs, predominantly benefiting local small and medium-sized enterprises and communities all around Scotland.

Gregory Stafford: We are losing over 1,000 jobs a month in our oil and gas industry, and despite what the Secretary of State has just said, we are not seeing a similar uptick in green jobs. Skilled workers are losing their jobs in oil and gas, and are actually leaving the country. The Government's actions are making the United Kingdom poorer and less secure, and we are waving goodbye to highly skilled jobs. How can the Secretary of State honestly tell this House that there is a transition going on?

Mr Alexander: Look at the work being done, and the investment being made, by Iberdrola and ScottishPower. The hon. Gentleman shakes his head, but that is real investment delivering real jobs. If he would like to comment further on this issue, perhaps he would like to apologise for the abject absence of a plan from the previous Conservative Government on the North sea, which explains the fact that they lost 70,000 jobs on their watch.

Scotland Defence Growth Deal

9. **Richard Baker** (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): What assessment he has made with Cabinet colleagues of the potential impact of the Scotland defence growth deal on Scotland. [900255]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): The UK Government's £50 million Scottish defence growth deal is a true step change for Scotland's industrial base. It will support jobs, skills and regional growth. The deal includes £10 million for innovation facilities, both on the Clyde and in Rosyth. Where the SNP will not back Scottish industry, young people or our national security, Scottish Labour and the UK Government will step in.

Richard Baker: Yesterday, the Secretary of State for Defence set out at the GMB conference how this Government's investment in defence is delivering for British workers. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that he will work with his Ministry of Defence colleagues to support Scottish yards, including Methil in my constituency? Last month, it delivered the Seahorse pontoon ahead of schedule and on budget, and it has a skilled workforce who are ready to take on new defence contracts, including Programme Euston.

Mr Alexander: There is no more doughty defender of, or advocate for, the Navantia yard than my hon. Friend. I was delighted to visit the yard with my hon. Friend a few weeks ago, and I congratulate the workforce on completing the Seahorse pontoon ahead of schedule. Having visited the yard, I have seen at first hand the expertise and commitment of the workforce, and of the young apprentices there. They are delivering for all of us.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I know that the thoughts of the House will be with those affected by the events in Belfast this week. I should inform the House that charges have been brought against a man following the attack on Monday night. That case is now sub judice. It is possible that other charges will be brought, including in respect of events in Belfast in the aftermath. I am granting a full waiver to allow Members to discuss wider issues raised in the context of this incident. However, I must urge Members in the strongest terms not to discuss the details of any individual case. This includes not discussing any motive, nor the guilt or innocence of any individual. Members should avoid wider speculation that could be prejudicial in any future criminal trials.

Oral Answers to Questions

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900331] **Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 10 June.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): Last week, I noted the helicopter crash in Devon, and I want to put on record our sincere condolences to the families of Lieutenant Commander Chris Gayson, Lieutenant Lily-Mae Fisher and Petty Officer Owen Green. Our thoughts are with their families at this tragic time.

I also send my condolences to the family of Michael Storey. Michael worked as a driver in No. 10 for over two decades. He was a remarkable gentleman who was held in the highest regard by all who knew him, and will be deeply missed.

Mr Speaker, people are rightly sickened by the horrific attack on Monday night in north Belfast. As you have just said, the man who was arrested has been in court in Belfast this morning and charged. I thank the Police Service of Northern Ireland, other first responders and members of the public, who responded with such bravery. Our thoughts are with the victim.

But let me be clear: the acts of violence and arson that followed are totally unjustified. This morning, I spoke with the First Minister, the Deputy First Minister and the Chief Constable, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is meeting leaders in Belfast today. We are united in calling for calm and we are determined to restore order, support the police and all those on the frontline, and ensure that justice is done.

On a lighter note, Mr Speaker, as the world cup gets under way, I would like to wish the best of luck to both Scotland and England. I would also like to wish you a happy birthday.

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

Melanie Ward: Happy birthday to you, Mr Speaker. Let me associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about the situation in Northern Ireland, and about the Scottish football team. [*Laughter.*]

The existence of Israeli settlements and settler violence against Palestinians is a major and deliberate impediment to peace. By working with Israeli human rights researchers, I have uncovered 32 British charities that are funnelling money to Israeli settlements on Palestinian land. Last week, I submitted a formal complaint to the Charity Commission about them. In the last five years, they have sent over £28 million to illegal settlements, with a likely taxpayer subsidy through gift aid of more than £5 million. Our constituents will be appalled by this. Does the Prime Minister agree that funnelling money to Israeli settlements is extremist activity, not charitable activity, and will he be clear that it is banned?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend. Settlements are a flagrant breach of international law, and no UK charity should be supporting them. The Middle East Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), met the Charity Commission today to discuss those concerns. We announced yesterday further sanctions against those who support settler violence, and we will continue to look at strengthening those sanctions. British businesses should have no economic involvement in illegal settlements. Let me just say that the situation across Palestine remains desperate, and the UK will continue to lead efforts to prevent human suffering and get aid in, and to preserve the viability of a two-state solution.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I, too, wish England and Scotland the very best in the world cup. I wish you a very happy birthday, Mr Speaker—many happy returns. May I take the opportunity to associate myself with the remarks that the Prime Minister made about the helicopter crash? Our condolences go to their families, and to the family of Michael Storey.

I thank the Prime Minister for his short statement on Belfast. The scenes in Belfast are deeply, deeply disturbing. A man is in hospital after a brutal attack and now families are frightened after a night of violence. There is a live criminal case, so we must be careful about what we say, but we can be clear about this: people have a right to be angry—I am angry—and people have the right to expect their politicians to secure our borders,

but no one has a right to burn families out of their homes or to burn public property and attack the police. We all have a duty to stand up for public safety in every way.

Last night, America carried out strikes on Iran in response to the downing of a US helicopter. This comes just days after renewed attacks on Ukraine. The world is getting more dangerous and the British public want to know that this Government are doing everything they can to protect our national security. Can the Prime Minister tell the House, will the full defence investment plan finally be published this week?

The Prime Minister: I agree with the Leader of the Opposition that in relation to both Iran and Ukraine, we are facing a more volatile world than at any time during our lifetimes. So far as defence is concerned, we have already taken a number of measures. We have increased defence spending from 2.3% to 2.6% in 2027. That is spending of £270 billion over this Parliament. We have carried out a strategic review of defence and we are committed to publishing the defence investment plan before the NATO summit, which is in just a few weeks' time.

Mrs Badenoch: That sounded like a no. We have wasted two years waiting for the defence investment plan. Projects have been put on hold and Britain is getting weaker with every passing day. It has been reported that the Chief of the Defence Staff told the Prime Minister that the Ministry of Defence needs an extra £28 billion. Will that requirement be met in full?

The Prime Minister: We will set out the defence investment plan. It is a 10-year plan and it is the first line-by-line review of defence budgets in 18 years. The right hon. Lady is wrong to say that it has been delayed by two years. The defence strategic review was published a year ago and we have been working through the details to make sure that we get this right.

We are the Government who increased defence spending from 2.3% to 2.6%. I remind the Conservatives that when they came into power, defence spending was 2.5% and they took it down to 2.3%. We have taken it up to 2.6% by 2027. The defence investment plan will be published before the NATO summit. We have already signed 1,400 major defence contracts, and 94% of those are with British businesses. As the Defence Secretary said, that includes helicopters made in Yeovil, drones made in Swindon and armoured vehicles made in Telford. We have also given our armed forces the biggest pay rise in over 20 years. That is Labour making investment to safeguard our national security.

Mrs Badenoch: I welcome the pay rise for the armed forces. The Prime Minister says he has increased defence spending, but he has not. This year he is cutting it by £3.5 billion. What he is talking about are hopeful increases, and we do not know if he will make them because there is still no defence investment plan. At a time when we need leadership, we have total paralysis. It is reported that the Chancellor is only willing to find £13 billion for the DIP. At the London defence conference last year, the Prime Minister said that defence would be the "central organising principle" of his Government. How can that be the case when he is giving the armed forces less than half of the minimum that they need?

The Prime Minister: We have already increased defence spending. We will spend £270 billion in this Parliament. What did the Conservatives do on defence spending? They took it from 2.5% and cut it to 2.3%. We will take no lectures from them. They sat at the heart of a Government that failed our armed services. They cut frigates and destroyers by 25%. They cut minehunters by 50%. They cut the Army from 100,000 down to 72,000. They missed Army recruitment targets every single year for 14 years, and they left morale in the armed forces at an all-time low, so we will take no lectures from them on the defence and security of our country.

Mrs Badenoch: We have heard the Prime Minister say that about 100 times. There is still no defence investment plan. He is the Prime Minister now—at least I think he is. Should I be calling Andy Burnham instead to ask these questions? He is the Prime Minister, and the reason he is dithering is because he does not know where the money is coming from. The military is waiting and the bond markets are watching. He has only three options: cutting spending, more borrowing, or higher taxes. We know that the Chancellor wants to put up tax to pay for defence. Will the Prime Minister rule out raising taxes?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady asks the House to simply ignore the last 14 years, saying, "We may have failed the armed forces and hollowed them out, but please just forget all that and act as if it didn't happen." Well, we cannot forget all that, given the damage the Conservatives did to our armed services. She says, "Forget all that," but I remind the House that when they left office, 47 out of 49 major defence contracts were delayed or over budget. That is what we are fixing. We cannot just scrub it away and forget. I know that the Conservatives want to forget their last 14 years in power. So do the British public—that's why they are sitting on the Opposition Benches. We have increased defence spending, and we are going to publish the defence investment plan. That will be done before the NATO summit that is coming up in just a few weeks' time.

Mrs Badenoch: I remember when the last Government led Europe when we were fighting the war in Ukraine. When Russia invaded, we were ready. We supplied Ukraine with munitions. We increased defence spending. But I was not asking the Prime Minister about our record; I asked him if he would rule out tax rises. He did not rule out raising taxes, so tax rises are coming. He cannot borrow more, because the markets have no confidence in him. The Prime Minister is in this mess because he maxed out on spending in his first two Budgets. That is why the benefits bill is set to rise to over £200 billion by the end of the decade. He has things the wrong way round: he has a benefits plan until 2031, but no defence investment plan. Why not just cut welfare?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady talks about leading the way on Ukraine. I did, and do, pay tribute to what the last Government did on Ukraine, and we stood with them. We continue to lead the way. It is the United Kingdom and France that are leading the coalition of the willing that have got the military plans together for security guarantees in Ukraine. Equally, on Iran, it is the UK and French Governments that have put

together the military plans for the coalition for reassurance as soon as the strait of Hormuz is open. That is what we are doing to lead. We are not going to take lectures on defence from the Opposition after what they did to the armed forces, and neither are we going to take lectures on the economy, which they crashed and we have had to pick up.

Mrs Badenoch: At a time of increased global instability and tension, with war in Europe and the middle east, the Prime Minister is paralysed, giving the armed forces less than half of the minimum that they need. Tony Blair says to cut welfare for defence. Lord Robertson, a former NATO Secretary-General—and also one of them—says to cut welfare for defence. We all know why he will not cut welfare. It is because he is too weak—too weak to make a decision, too weak to face down his Back Benchers and cut benefits, and too weak to stand up for our national security. As the sun sets on his premiership, he is scrabbling around for a legacy, but is it not the case that his real legacy will be a bloated welfare state and weaker armed forces?

The Prime Minister: When the Conservatives were in office, they did not reform welfare spending or invest in our armed services. The right hon. Lady sets out that choice, but, on their watch, defence spending went down and welfare spending went up—£88 billion overall, with £33 billion alone under the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Central Devon (Sir Mel Stride). The Conservatives neither reformed welfare nor spent on our armed forces.

Every week, the right hon. Lady reminds us why the British public sent them packing. She ignores the fact that we are turning the country around: growth is up, but she does not want to talk about that; interest rates are down, but she does not want to talk about that either; immigration is down, after she cheerlead for it to go up, and NHS waiting lists have come down at the fastest rate in 17 years. I am going to keep fighting for the people who elected a Labour Government and sent us here two years ago—people who want to live in a safer world, parents who want a better future for their children and young people growing up in poverty who deserve a better future. *[Interruption.]* We are investing in this great nation and standing up against those who divide us for a stronger, fairer Britain.

Mr Speaker: Order. There will be a taxi, and it might be for somebody who did not request it.

Q2. [900332] **Richard Burgon** (Leeds East) (Lab): I associate myself with the Prime Minister's comments on the horrific events in Belfast. The co-founder of US tech giant Palantir once claimed that the NHS "makes people sick". Now, Palantir is running the NHS's new data platform. The *Financial Times* has reported that Palantir staff have had "unlimited access" to identifiable NHS patient data. There are also deep concerns about Palantir's human rights record in relation to Trump and US Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Israel's military action in Gaza. NHS patient data should not be left in the hands of a US tech giant. The Government have an opportunity to end this contract through a break clause next year. Will they take that opportunity and kick Palantir out of our NHS next year?

The Prime Minister: As the Health Secretary has said, the existing contract will be reviewed as it always is ahead of the break clause. Data security is always a priority; there will be strong cyber-security protections for the single patient record and we will protect that data, as we do with all health data. We are focused on modernising the NHS so that patients do not have to repeat themselves and can get the care they need more quickly. Our investment has cut NHS waiting lists, delivered millions of extra appointments and improved A&E and ambulance response times, and I am proud of what we are doing.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I join the Prime Minister in sending our condolences to the families of those killed in last week's helicopter crash. I associate myself with his remarks about the horrific knife attack in Belfast; our thoughts are with the victim and his family. I join the Prime Minister in condemning the disorder last night.

In Carer's Week, I celebrate the millions of family carers who make huge sacrifices to look after their loved ones. I also look forward to an England versus Scotland world cup final, and wish you, Mr Speaker, a happy birthday.

As the chaos over the defence investment plan goes on, I am sure that Members across the House were shocked to read yesterday's reports that the Government are considering slashing the hospital programme to fund the shortfall. Surely in 21st-century Britain people can expect both a decent local hospital and armed forces that keep them safe, so will the Prime Minister rule out any cuts to the NHS budget to fund defence?

The Prime Minister: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman about the amazing work of our carers.

I will take the measures necessary to defend our country—the first duty of any Prime Minister. The Government will also take the measures to invest in our public services, as we have done already. Forgive me, but I was running a public service when the Government that the right hon. Gentleman's party was part of were stripping them bare under austerity. We are really not going to take lectures on austerity from him.

Ed Davey: I was hoping we were going to hear more about defence investment. I urge the Prime Minister to look at our plans for defence bonds to get £20 billion into defence.

I will turn to the horrific scenes in Belfast. We have seen the same pattern too many times: an appalling crime is committed, making us all feel immense pain and anger, and then extremists exploit that grief and anger to spread hatred and violence, aided and abetted by social media barons like Elon Musk and their divisive algorithms. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is not who we are as a country, and that it is not free speech if it is controlled by tech billionaires and their algorithms? Will he therefore crack down properly on platforms like X that are fuelling violence and hatred?

The Prime Minister: We will crack down on anyone who is fuelling this division. I agree with the right hon. Gentleman: we are heading into a very difficult situation

in Northern Ireland. I have spoken to the chief constable, First Minister and Deputy First Minister this morning, and they were united in saying that we should all be calling for calm. The police are on the frontline, and it is our duty as politicians to call for calm. Nobody who is a politician should be whipping up division and hatred.

Q3. [900333] Lauren Edwards (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): Flexible and co-working spaces play an important role in regenerating town centres such as mine in Rochester and Strood. They bring more people to our high streets to spend money in our local shops and support our local economies. But recent case law has put that under threat, with Valuation Office Agency assessments now treating many as single, larger businesses. Because of that, many small businesses face not only losing their small business rate relief but potentially receiving backdated bills of up to three years, in some cases costing hundreds of thousands of pounds. Will the Prime Minister please ensure that an urgent political solution is found to this problem?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely recognise the important role that flexible working spaces play in regenerating our high streets. Where the law requires a property to be treated as a single unit, the business rates are paid by the operator, not the individual business. I cannot speak for every case, but I will ensure that a Treasury Minister picks up this issue with my hon. Friend as quickly as possible.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): May I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister in relation to the tragic helicopter crash last week?

Yesterday I shared my concern that community cohesion stood on a precipice. The north Belfast attack on Monday was medieval and sadistic, and it has sadly been viewed by millions in this country. As reprehensible as it was, the outrageous violence, intimidation and community damage carried out last night in my constituency and other parts of Northern Ireland require the strongest condemnation. It is impossible to share concerns about damage to our British values and then act in a way that tarnishes the very thing we should want to protect.

The Government's job—our collective job—is to act to protect our country and defend our borders. The Prime Minister knows that the man who has been charged entered our country illegally. He passed through two safe countries and attained asylum in record time. Will the Prime Minister meet me urgently to discuss the steps that he and his Government will take to ensure that our values are enforced, that the rule of law in this country sustains, and that he protects and closes the open, porous border between our country and the Irish Republic?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Member for his question. I also particularly thank him and all leaders in Northern Ireland who have urged calm, particularly before what happened last night. Standing together with that common message was very powerful. I am very happy to meet the right hon. Member and other MPs from Northern Ireland, as he requests, and I think that a slot has been identified after Prime Minister's questions. It is important that we meet at the first opportunity.

We are all sickened by this attack, but we need to be clear that the scenes of violence and disorder have no justification. Of course there are questions that need to be answered, but destroying communities, destroying homes and driving people out of their homes is not, and will never be, the right way to respond to such an attack. I look forward to working with the right hon. Member and others to ensure a calm response and that the police are given the space that they need to deliver justice.

Q4. [900334] Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Stepney) (Lab): I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about the horrific situation in Northern Ireland.

The Mildmay hospital in my constituency, established in 1877, has been a pioneer for HIV and AIDs care since the 1980s. Diana, Princess of Wales made 17 visits to this unique charitable hospital, breaking through the stigma surrounding HIV and AIDS. Today, Mildmay also provides care for patients with other complex needs, relieving pressure on the NHS, yet it is at risk of closure because of commissioning issues in the NHS. Ahead of the 30th anniversary of Princess Diana's death next year, will the Prime Minister lend his support to this iconic hospital, which was so close to her heart, so that it can survive and thrive?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the Mildmay hospital, which is synonymous with extraordinary care and compassion as she describes. I will ensure that she meets the relevant Health Minister to discuss the concerns I know she has in relation to it.

Q5. [900335] Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I am sure hon. Members will agree that I, as a person of colour in this House, cannot be held accountable for the vile acts of individuals who share my complexion or heritage. However, there are some in this Chamber who seek division to further their political ambitions—individuals who are fuelling hate against citizens of our own nation and causing hard-working, upstanding people to be afraid for their safety because of the colour of their skin. Teachers, doctors and nurses are afraid to go to work. Words have consequences, and with the eyes of the nation on us in this moment, what pure, cold actions will the Prime Minister take against those inciting and perpetrating violence and, more importantly, to support the victims following the brutal attack in Belfast?

The Prime Minister: All those involved in the violence will face the full force of the law, and quite rightly so. The hon. Member is right to describe, as he does, the fear that this instils in some of our communities. That is a very real fear, and it is being felt today, this hour, in Northern Ireland by families who are too scared to go about their lawful work, to go to school and to go about their business. That is exactly what it does, which is why we must all condemn it.

Q6. [900336] Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): The British Standards Institution is 125 years old this year. I am proud to have been working closely with it to produce and publish BS 30480: the world's first free standard on suicide and the workplace. The standard has now been downloaded more than 12,500 times. As we all work towards reducing the number of people

who die by suicide, will the Prime Minister support more workplace adoption of the standard and work with the BSI and me to achieve that?

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who has been an outstanding advocate on this issue. I congratulate the BSI on 125 years of vital work. The guidance reminds us that every part of society has a role to play in suicide prevention, and it is positive that so many businesses are putting it into practice. I am pleased to raise awareness of it and to encourage others who have not seen it yet to look closely at it and follow it.

Q7. [900337] Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

We all condemn, of course, the appalling violence in Belfast last night after the horrific attack on Monday. But this Prime Minister is in denial of the rising despair across the country over his failure to stop the boats and related criminality, his failure to recognise two-tier policing, his failures over Mandelson and his failures over the scourge of antisemitism. He has lost the confidence of the country, his own trade union members and his own, very quiet, Back Benchers. When will he do the right thing? When will this Prime Minister resign?

The Prime Minister: Last week we had the terrible case of Henry Nowak, which Reform Members sought to exploit. Now we have a very difficult situation in Northern Ireland where families and communities are extremely frightened. What do they do? They try to whip up fear and division, because that is all they have got. The hon. Member talks about stopping the boats. When we passed legislation to help stop the boats, what did they do? They voted against it.

To take those measures, you need money, and the hon. Member has still not properly addressed why his companies have not just aggressively avoided tax but failed to pay the tax they legally owed. His investment company then gave huge donations to Reform. If he paid his taxes, we would have more money to deal with these issues.

Q8. [900338] David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): Happy birthday, Mr Speaker.

Last summer, my constituent Ryan Long went to Ibiza on his first lads' holiday. On his first night, he made what turned out to be a fatal decision when he took an ecstasy pill, and after falling into a coma, he sadly passed away at the age of 18. Since his death, his mum Angie, working with local charity Open Road, has ploughed her grief into campaigning, fundraising and raising awareness of the dangers of drug use, so that no other family has to go through the pain hers has suffered. She joins us in the Public Gallery today. Will the Prime Minister join me in thanking Angie for her dedicated work, and will he meet her to discuss ways in which we can, in Ryan's name, further raise awareness of the danger of drugs?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising Ryan's case, the details of which, as he outlined, are very hard to hear. As the father of a 17-year-old boy, I find that particularly hard to hear. No one—no mother—should have to experience what Angie has. I know that she is here with us today, and I very much hope that I can meet her immediately after PMQs.

Q9. [900339] James McMurdock (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Ind): If any member of the public wishes to visit a major sporting or music event, they can expect to be searched on the way in. If they bring a bottle of water, the lid will be taken. If they order a drink from the bar, it will be served in a plastic cup. That is done for security reasons, yet because of exemptions in the Offensive Weapons Act 2019, those same events permit the carrying of blades up to 5 inches long. Does the Prime Minister recognise the dangers and risks associated with that, and that what a solicitor might call “an exception”, our voters would call “two-tier justice”?

The Prime Minister: Let me be very clear: any blade that is used to threaten or to harm others is illegal by law—any blade. We will work with the Sikh community, knife crime campaigners and the police to learn the right lessons. That is the responsible thing to do. We all have a responsibility and a duty as politicians to respond to the case that we were discussing last week and to the events in Northern Ireland that we are discussing today with the calmness that leadership requires.

Q10. [900340] Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): Maternity care in north Oxfordshire declined under the previous Government, with the loss of consultant-led services at the Horton hospital—where I was born—and serious failings by the trust, which is now part of Baroness Amos's inquiry. However, last week, the Care Quality Commission upgraded the Horton maternity unit to good. Will the Prime Minister visit the Horton hospital in Banbury to see the change that this Government's £3.3 million investment has delivered since July 2024?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that my hon. Friend's local maternity services are seeing improvements. We now have a record number of midwives working in the NHS, and we are investing over £150 million to address critical safety risks. There is much more that we need to do so that every mother is listened to and receives outstanding care. The recommendations of the Amos inquiry will be published shortly, and we will act to deliver lasting change.

Q11. [900341] Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): Earlier this year, I found myself in hospital as a result of a flare-up from living with ulcerative colitis. I was bowled over by the support of local constituents and people who live with inflammatory bowel disease across the country when they got in touch. For people with IBD, however, care often falls far short of the mark. It can take ages to get a diagnosis—for me, it took the best part of a decade—and then when someone manages to get one, care can become a postcode lottery. Living with a fluctuating and non-visible condition is already hard enough before having to navigate those systems. IBD UK Alliance set out what good care looks like with the IBD standards. Will the Prime Minister meet me and clinicians to discuss IBD standards, and will he consider appointing a national clinical lead to drive improvement when it comes to IBD care?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for sharing his personal experience and, notwithstanding that, congratulate him on his achievements at the London marathon. I agree with him that patients should receive

high-quality, consistent care, wherever they live. Through national improvement programmes such as Getting It Right First Time, we are making sure that best practice is shared to drive up standards, and I am happy for Ministers to give him the details.

Q15. [900345] **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Many happy returns to you, Mr Speaker.

It is Carers Week, so I take this opportunity to thank all the young carers and young adult carers in my constituency of Harlow for all that they do, all year round.

As a former teacher, I spend a lot of time talking to students, parents and teachers in Harlow about the dangers of social media. They are very concerned that the big tech companies are not taking their responsibilities seriously, so can I ask the Prime Minister what he is doing to hold big tech firms to account, to ensure that our young people are safe online?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his great work supporting young carers for decades. We have given tech companies a deadline: introduce the device-level controls that already exist to prevent children from sending and receiving sexually explicit images or we will change the law, with fines for companies or even criminal liability for bosses who fail to comply. When it comes to the safety of our children, standing by is not an option, and further steps will follow.

Q12. [900342] **Adrian Ramsay** (Waveney Valley) (Green): A suppressed Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs report has concluded that without transformational change, our food and water systems are at risk of catastrophic failure from 2030. Another suppressed Joint Intelligence Committee report concluded that there is a “high likelihood” of ecosystem collapse, putting food production at risk. Does the Prime Minister recognise that many of us across this House are ready to work collaboratively to address these urgent challenges, and will he commit to publishing those two reports in full?

The Prime Minister: I agree that we must act to protect ecosystems that underpin our food supply and our way of life, and I am really proud that, under this Government, the UK is back playing a leading part on climate change and restoring nature.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): Peter Murrell pleaded guilty to embezzling over £400,000 of Scottish National party members’ funds. Thousands of pounds were spent on luxury items ranging from a salt and pepper grinder to a new Jaguar and a luxury motorhome. When party figures raised concerns, and even resigned, they were silenced and ostracised by those at the very top of the SNP. Does my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agree that a full investigation into this national scandal needs to be held as a matter of urgency?

The Prime Minister: These are clearly serious legitimate questions that deserve answers and scrutiny—answers and scrutiny that they are not getting. I do think the Scottish Parliament should look at them closely, and I hope that it will listen to the concerns of this House.

Q13. [900343] **Hannah Spencer** (Gorton and Denton) (Green): Running a business as a plumber, I was well used to dealing with dirty grubbiness, and there is still plenty of that dirty grubbiness behind me. Running a business is tough, so will the Prime Minister join me in backing the “VAT’s the Problem” campaign to cut VAT rates in hospitality? He did not answer the question last week, so will he tell us today: yes or no?

The Prime Minister: I am very glad that we are cutting VAT over the summer with our summer savings programme, which I hope the hon. Lady will support. I note that we have not heard much from the Green party leader after he admitted he had not paid his council tax. Perhaps he has traded his houseboat for a submarine.

Mr Paul Foster (South Ribble) (Lab): Mr Speaker, integrated care boards have a statutory obligation to fully fund all essential medicines and pharmacy provision for the delivery of specialist end-of-life and palliative care at our wonderful hospices, such as St Catherine’s and Derian House, serving our respective constituencies of South Ribble and Chorley. However, this is not happening, with ICBs claiming that the costs are covered by the hospices’ core grant. Will the Prime Minister support my private Member’s Bill—St Catherine’s law—which seeks to place an explicit obligation on every ICB to fund all essential medicine and pharmacy provision for all our hospices, separately from any core grant they receive from the NHS?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this. As he knows, integrated care boards are responsible for commissioning palliative care and end-of-life services, including hospices, to meet the needs of their area, and that includes decisions on how services are funded, including medicines and pharmacy provision. I am happy to talk to him further about it.

Q14. [900344] **Freddie van Mierlo** (Henley and Thame) (LD): Every time there is heavy rain, Judy Washington’s driveway and garden are flooded with raw sewage. The same happens to her neighbour, and it happened again last week. Thames Water told my office that it will not even look at the situation until the end of winter 2027. It is unacceptable that a lady in her retirement is shovelling sewage from her drive and waiting for human waste to decompose in her garden. Will the Prime Minister write to Thames Water on behalf of Judy and her neighbour to compel it to sort this out?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising this case—it is obviously awful. If he shares further details with my office, I will ensure that the Water Minister picks it up and acts as quickly as possible.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): Last week, the Prime Minister warned that NATO needs to be ready for an attack from Russia by 2030. Indeed, we have an increasingly belligerent, expansionist and imperialist Russian leadership to our east and a Donald Trump US leadership to our west, for whom Ukraine and European security are not a priority, so we need to meet the moment. To his credit, the Prime Minister has increased defence spending since taking power, but the House of Commons Defence Committee is adamant that we need to spend 3% of GDP on defence. When the Prime

Minister signs off on decisions in the defence investment plan, which I hope—touch wood—will be published imminently, will he agree to that 3% GDP spend on defence?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to raise the concerns that we have. We have increased defence spending, and the defence investment plan is going to be set out very soon and before the NATO summit, which is in just a few weeks' time.

Mr Speaker: For the final question, I call Alicia Kearns.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Lindsay Foreman and her husband Craig have not eaten in 32 and 23 days respectively. They are being held hostage

by the terrorist Government of Iran, but this Government's weak words have abandoned them, so will the Prime Minister stop raising their case and start fighting for them? He can do that by declaring today in this House that they are being arbitrarily detained—something he has refused to do—and by referring their case to the International Court of Justice, so we get them home.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Member for raising this important case and give her and the House the assurance that this is raised regularly by us. The Foreign Secretary has raised it very recently. We raise it every time we can; we do everything we can in relation to this case. We are doing everything that we can, as she would expect and as the Conservatives would have done in office, but she is right to raise the case.

Belfast: Violent Disorder

12.42 pm

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on the violent disorder that took place last night in Belfast.

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this question, which I am answering on behalf of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who this morning met the Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland to receive an update on the situation.

Let me start by saying that my thoughts, as I am sure the thoughts of the whole House, remain with the victim of the horrifying knife attack in north Belfast earlier this week and with his family. The House will be aware that a man has been charged in relation to that incident, and I can confirm that he is a 30-year-old Sudanese national who received refugee status in 2023 and was granted five years' leave to remain. We must now allow justice to take its course.

The attack on Monday evening has understandably caused anger and profound concern. However, there is a line between concern and disorder, and we must never allow it to be crossed. Let me be absolutely clear: there is no excuse for the disgraceful scenes of violence and disorder that occurred in Northern Ireland last night. Houses and vehicles were set on fire, placing lives at risk, terrifying law-abiding citizens and forcing residents to flee their homes. Reports that ethnic minorities were targeted are sickening.

I wish to pay tribute to the police and the other emergency services for their work last night. Faced with an extraordinarily challenging situation, they responded with great courage and they are owed our thanks.

Our message to those responsible for last night's disorder is altogether different. To them we say this: you will be caught and you will face the consequences of your actions. As of this morning there had been three arrests, but more will surely follow. To those considering joining further disorder, my message is clear: do not do it—you will be held accountable for your actions, and you will feel the full force of the law.

As hon. Members are aware, policing is a devolved matter, but the Home Office is of course monitoring the situation closely, and we are working with operational partners to understand and act on any implications for public order across the United Kingdom.

Finally, I recognise that tensions are running high. At times like this, there is an even greater onus on us all, as the custodians of our democracy, to respond with unity, to choose our words and actions with care, and to uphold the first duty of the state, which is to maintain order on the streets and to keep the public safe, because the shameful scenes that we saw last night are not who we are, and they never will be.

Claire Hanna: It has been a shocking two days in Northern Ireland. The horrific knife attack in north Belfast has left a man fighting for his life, and an entire community distressed by what they have seen. Justice must of course take its course and deliver for that victim, whose family have asked for calm.

Last night brought further outrage. Children in my constituency, and in others, were lifted out of their beds as their homes burned. Masked men roamed the streets, going from door to door, menacing and setting fire to cars, buses and homes, terrorising people on the basis of the colour of their skin or the sound of their voice—people from Sudan, people from India, people from Ukraine, and people from Belfast. Today, businesses are shuttered, medical appointments are cancelled, and schools are being closed for fear of getting young people home. So many people are frightened to walk the streets and to be in their own homes tonight. And when all the online agitators who stoke this stuff move on to their next target, we will be the ones left to pick up the pieces.

People are of course entitled to their views on immigration, and of course Government policy is not perfect, but this has not been a debate or conversation. There have not been proposals, and there has not been honesty about the trade-offs. There has been mob justice, and some of the same-old, same-old proposals for a hardened border on the island of Ireland. Political leaders have a duty to lead, not to lean into people's worst fears and anxieties. That video of the awful crime in north Belfast was unusual in its brutality, but the cycle of deflection and disorder has not been unusual. We have seen this movie too many times before.

In Belfast we know all about blaming an entire community for the actions of others, we know all about scapegoating and tit-for-tat violence, and we know all about street justice. Violence creates division. It is affecting our economy, and undermining the vast majority of people in Northern Ireland who want to work together to build a better future. What support will the Government provide to those who have been harmed by this awful violence? Will they ensure swift justice for all the perpetrators of the last few days, and what will they do to bring to heel the online platforms that drive this madness?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Lady describes with great clarity the impact of the scenes that we have seen in Northern Ireland over the past number of hours. Let me be absolutely clear: the scenes of disorder that we witnessed in parts of Northern Ireland last night are not only damaging communities, but literally putting lives at risk. Like her, I utterly condemn the attacks on property and vehicles, and the other related violence that we have seen. There is no justification at all for that type of thuggery, and no place for it in Northern Ireland or anywhere else.

The hon. Lady will agree that it is now vital that the Police Service of Northern Ireland is given the time, space and full support that it needs to continue with its investigation. The rule of law must, and will, prevail; justice must, and will, be served.

Violence is never a justified response, and this disorder only causes pain and suffering for those living in the area, as the hon. Lady eloquently described. Those involved need to take a step back and consider the consequences of their actions. I strongly urge anyone who has information, no matter how small it might seem, to come forward and contact the PSNI urgently in order to assist it with its inquiries.

The hon. Lady specifically asked what support is being offered. She will understand that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is in Belfast today, and

[Dan Jarvis]

I know that he will be working with colleagues there to ensure that they have the support and resources they need to deal with this very troubling situation.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Monday night's attack was disgusting and barbaric. The victim suffered serious injuries to his neck and lost an eye. I am sure that the thoughts of the whole House are with him. I thank the police and emergency services for responding and pay tribute to the members of the public who so bravely intervened. I commend the police for confirming the suspect's identity swiftly, because full transparency is vital in these cases. Will the Minister confirm that the PSNI will have all the resources needed to deal with these issues?

We have all seen the footage of the appalling attack, featuring a Sudanese illegal immigrant, but let me be clear: violence of any kind in protest is never justified. Innocent people should never be targeted and nobody should ever set fire to houses or cars. Speaking as a father, no one should ever feel unsafe in their homes. I hope that the police will bring the perpetrators swiftly to justice.

I do understand, though, why people are angry. The suspect came into the UK illegally—he should never have been here in the first place. Mainstream politicians must now understand how angry the public are about mass illegal immigration. If mainstream politics does not stop this, the public will turn elsewhere.

Since the election, 73,000 people have entered the country illegally via small boat, mostly young men, and many have committed serious crimes. I recently met the mother of Rhiannon Whyte, a young woman brutally murdered by a Sudanese small-boat migrant. There have been multiple rapes and sexual assaults, with victims as young as just 13. Over time, I have come to realise that there is ultimately only one way to end illegal immigration: by leaving the European convention on human rights so that we can deport all illegal migrants upon arrival. Illegal migration will then stop, and these appalling crimes with it.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the shadow Home Secretary for the points that he has raised and, in particular, for the clarity with which he made the point about violence never being justified. He is absolutely right, and I hope that we can speak with a strong sense of unity about that. He specifically asked about ensuring that the PSNI has the resources it needs to do the difficult work being asked of it at this moment. I know that he understands that policing is devolved, but as I have said, the Secretary of State is in Northern Ireland this morning to work out what more we can do to provide support and to ensure that the PSNI has the resources it needs.

The shadow Home Secretary spoke about the anger that people feel, and that is absolutely understood. I am sure that all right hon. and hon. Members will have seen the footage that is circulating online. While clearly I have to be incredibly careful not to get in the way of a live investigation, it is understandable why people will feel extremely angry at what they have seen, but it is important that that anger does not tip over into criminality and the kind of thuggish behaviour that we have seen.

The shadow Home Secretary rightly raised concerns about the importance of making sure that this Government, as with any Government, have the right framework in place to deport those foreign national offenders who come here and engage in criminality. I think he is aware of the figures: there have been 67,000 deportations and removals under this Government, which marks a significant increase. I hope that he and the House recognise the seriousness and the urgency with which we take these matters. They need to be dealt with calmly and effectively, but this Government will do everything in our power—and if further powers are required, we will ensure that we have them—to deport and remove those people who present a threat to the public.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) on securing the urgent question. I pay tribute to the Chief Constable, the PSNI and the emergency services for their work and their bravery, which continues to be unstinted. Does the Minister agree that the events we witnessed last night demonstrate the importance of political leaders speaking with one voice in condemning violence, rejecting extremism and supporting those working to build a shared and prosperous future for all communities and the people in Northern Ireland?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend, who has a long-standing interest in Northern Ireland, is absolutely right to highlight the bravery of the police. I have spent a lot of time in Northern Ireland over the years and have something of a sense of the importance of the work that they do and the risk that they carry. Looking at the scenes that unfolded last night, it is impossible not to conclude that the police did an incredibly good job under very difficult circumstances. I pay tribute to them, their service and their families, who would have been at home, sick to death with worry at the kind of risk and threat that their loved ones were having to deal with.

My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of responsibility. As political leaders, and as Members of this House and further afield, we should all understand that words have consequences. While I understand the temptation for some to score cheap political points, at moments like this the public expect all of us to rise above that and think about how we can stand together to address the problems that we undoubtedly face.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): My thoughts and those of the whole House are with Stephen Ogilvie, who suffered truly horrific injuries on Monday night, and with the residents of Belfast who were forced to flee by rioters who do not speak for any legitimate community grievance. The knife attack was repugnant, but so too were the scenes that followed. This is the second consecutive summer of racially motivated disorder in Northern Ireland that the PSNI has faced while understaffed and underfunded. The Minister rightly says that the PSNI should be given time and space, but will he confirm what additional financial support the Government will provide for the PSNI, because it needs it?

Although the alleged attacker had leave to remain, concerns about irregular migration across the Northern Ireland border are being exploited by right-wing extremists to foment hatred and division. Given the importance of accurate information, will the Minister confirm whether the Government will begin collecting data on such crossings, as officials were unable to provide it when I recently raised the issue as a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the sensible way in which he has brought his points forward. He is right to raise the resourcing of the PSNI. The Government recognise the financial pressures that the PSNI faces. As he will understand, policing is largely a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, but in recognition of the security situation in Northern Ireland, the Government are providing the PSNI with £37.8 million in additional security funding for each financial year until 2028-29. As I have said, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is in Northern Ireland with Chief Constable Jon Boucher this morning, and I am certain that they will be having conversations about whether we can provide any further support.

The hon. Gentleman made some entirely reasonable points, which I agree with, including around transparency. It is important that there is always transparency in this case and in all cases, but I know that he will understand that I am very limited in what more I can say because of the ongoing live police investigation.

Adam Jooe (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) for securing the urgent question and the Minister for his answers. Of course, my thoughts are with the victim of the grotesque knife attack earlier this week. Northern Ireland is a wonderful place with wonderful people. The scenes on the streets of Belfast were utterly disgraceful and do not reflect the Northern Ireland that I know and love, and that many of my family live in. I am concerned about the young people who have had to bear witness to the violence and disorder, as generations of young people in Northern Ireland have had to do. What support will be given to the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that the young people of Northern Ireland are protected, supported and shielded from the disgraceful impacts of the criminality seen in Belfast last night?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important wider point. Many hon. Members who do not represent constituencies in Northern Ireland will have a long-standing affection for and knowledge of the place. I first went there in 1998 and have been a regular visitor ever since. It is an extraordinary part of the United Kingdom. It is a place that has been on something of a journey over the years. When I was in Northern Ireland recently, I was incredibly impressed with that journey and the progress that has been made in recent times. We have a shared endeavour across Government and across this House to ensure that that journey continues in a positive direction. Key to that is the point that he made about young people in Northern Ireland. We have a shared responsibility to them to ensure that they can enjoy the brightest possible future, and that will be a priority for the Secretary of State and colleagues across Government.

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

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I join others in paying tribute to the Police Service of Northern Ireland, which has once again acted without fear or favour and walked bravely into some of the most dangerous situations.

To follow on from the previous question, I was struck by just how many young people were involved in the disorder yesterday, incited not only by what they have seen on social media but by gangmasters who have groomed them into committing violence day in, day out across Northern Ireland. Will the Home Office look into a review of the treatment of young people in Northern Ireland and how so many of them have been groomed? In effect, it is modern slavery.

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Lady makes a really important point. I absolutely give her a commitment that, working with colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office, we will do that. Like her, I was struck by the presence of young people taking part in the criminality in Northern Ireland. We have seen it before, in the bad old days of the troubles, and we must never go back to that. We are looking at specific points around the extent to which any of the criminality and disorder has been directed by paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, but I am not yet in a position to say more about that.

The right hon. Lady may be aware that the UK Government provide 50% of the funding for a programme specifically designed to tackle paramilitary activity and organised crime, and £8 million of investment currently goes into that. I absolutely accept and agree with her key point: we have to make sure that young people in Northern Ireland are diverted from paths of criminality. I will take up that matter with colleagues in the Home Office and with the Secretary of State.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) for her urgent question. People in this House and beyond, including from Moscow, are whipping up hate and disorder in our country, and what happened last night in Northern Ireland was a sickening example of that. Children nearly died.

All of us in this House agree that we must secure our borders. Does the Minister agree with my proposal that the sight of people arriving here by boat or by crossing from Ireland could be ended by processing asylum claims at the nearest point of safety? That would be thousands of miles away, thus bringing an end to the people-smuggling trade.

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right in her first point, in the sense that, very concerningly, there will always be malign actors seeking to whip up community tensions through the use of misinformation and disinformation. We are acutely alive to that and will work with partners and law enforcement to make sure we are on top of all that.

On my hon. Friend's second point, I am joined on the Front Bench by a ministerial colleague from the Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Dover and Deal (Mike Tapp), who I know will have listened carefully to what she said. I am sure she understands the determination that exists in the Department and right across Government to tackle the small boat crossings, and we are working at pace to address that issue.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Minister is right that those who engaged in the violence last night should face the full weight of the law, because legally, morally and politically they were wrong. However, if the law is going to apply to those who protested, it should also apply to those who have broken into our country illegally, broken our immigration laws and become the source of many of the problems we face. Instead of that, they are taken by the hand—they have state resources spent on them and accommodation made available to them, and they are then given the right to stay here, even though they have come in illegally.

If this issue is to be addressed, the Government must change their attitude. Those who come into our country illegally should be told, “You will never get asylum.” The Irish Government should be spoken to as well, so that the Irish Republic does not become the conduit for illegal immigration, as the route used by the person who has been accused of this crime.

Dan Jarvis: The law should, of course, always be applied without fear or favour. While I acknowledge the right hon. Gentleman’s points, I hope he understands the Government’s determination to address the issues he raised. The Government have been crystal clear about our commitment to reduce to zero the number of hotels being used to accommodate asylum seekers, and there is a commitment to carry out that process in a different way through the use of larger sites. The right hon. Gentleman will have heard the remarks I made earlier about the increase in the removal of foreign national offenders. This issue is a priority for the Government and for the Home Secretary, and we are working at pace to address the issues he raised.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The attack in Belfast on Monday night was horrific, and the scenes last night were terrifying. It is understandable that people are seeking answers, and that yet another horrific crime is facing public scrutiny and political debate. One of the challenges is that, right now, people are finding those answers online and in the toxic world of social media. We can either feed the tension that is creating, or we can dispel it by standing together against those who wish to target entire communities, and by being committed to replacing the fictions with fact.

I know the Home Secretary and the Minister have been looking at this issue, but what more can we do to help people to have access to trusted sources of information when it comes to difficult issues like this, so that we can challenge people who spread hatred? How can we lead from this place and deliver to the affected communities the information they need to be able to heal themselves and deal with the trauma of what they have seen?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend raises a very important point. There will be agreement and recognition that activity online can provide extraordinary opportunities and benefits, but clearly it can also provide a toxic environment that drives the kind of criminality we have seen in recent times.

I hope my hon. Friend will understand that we are working at pace across Government through the defending democracy taskforce, and working with colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and

right across law enforcement, as well as with operational partners, to make sure that activity online is monitored in a way that will best enable us to reduce and eliminate the kind of activity she referred to. She will understand that that is not an easy thing to do. We are constantly looking for the social media companies and the tech companies to exercise greater responsibility, but I assure her of the importance we attach to these matters. I have had meetings recently with ministerial colleagues to look at what more we can do, and I assure my hon. Friend that we are looking into that carefully.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does the Minister share my concern that, irrespective of the personal motivation of the perpetrator, the circumstances by which he came into this country send a signal to those ideological movements abroad that wish us harm that there is a very easy back door by which they can infiltrate this country? If an operation of that sort is mounted in the future, what sort of violent response will there be to a spectacular terrorist attack that could and should have been prevented by secure borders?

Dan Jarvis: As always, the right hon. Gentleman raises a very thoughtful series of questions. I know he will understand that I am not going to get into the detail of the potential motivations of the alleged offender in the particular circumstances, but his general challenge is the right one. It is the job of this Government, and of any Government, to ensure that the United Kingdom is the hardest possible target for our adversaries and for those who would do us harm.

The right hon. Gentleman knows, from his previous service on the Intelligence and Security Committee, a lot about the nature and range of threats that we face as a country. I hope he also knows that this Government, like the last Government, do everything they possibly can to make sure that where there are particular points of vulnerability, we are bearing down on them, and that we have in place the right capabilities and resources to keep the public safe. There is no more important duty of any Government than being able to do that, and that is what I as the Security Minister and my colleagues across Government spend each hour of every day making sure that we do.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): The crime committed was horrific, and the violence in response has been appalling. Many of my constituents are deeply concerned at seeing what look like racially motivated attacks on families, and people in my community are feeling more scared. I seek reassurances from the Minister that we will continue to stand together to reject extremism and violence and to support those who work together to maintain a safe, tolerant and united community, both in Northern Ireland and across the United Kingdom.

Dan Jarvis: I absolutely can provide those assurances, and my hon. Friend is right to make her points in the way that she does. It is at moments like this that we are collectively tested. The test is whether we are prepared to stand together against the kind of horrific violence we have seen—in both the initial attack and the response to it—and reject extremism. That is not about seeking in any way to minimise the horror of the scenes we have seen, but the job of the Government is to provide a

grown-up, balanced response that seeks to bring communities together, not drive them apart. That will always be the response of this Government.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Happy birthday to you, Mr Speaker.

The Minister said to criminals—who are criminals, Minister, not thugs—“Do not do it.” With respect, that will not cut it. It suggests that the Government are simply a passive, pearl-clutching observer rather than an active participant. I accept that operational matters are for the PSNI, not the Minister, but will he say what the Government are doing to try to fix the fundamentals that underpin the dreadful situation in Belfast?

Dan Jarvis: I have a huge amount of respect for the right hon. Gentleman, but his characterisation of the words I used in my opening remarks is unfair, not least because I was seeking to provide a degree of clarity to those in Northern Ireland who might find themselves swept along by some of the violence we have seen in recent times. It is entirely reasonable that there is clarity about the message that I, as a Government Minister, send to those people, which is that they should not do it, and that if they decide they want to do it, they have to be prepared to face the full consequences of their criminality. With great respect to the right hon. Gentleman, I do not think that is an unreasonable point to make.

The right hon. Gentleman’s second point was a wider, systemic one. He will understand that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is an extraordinarily seasoned political operator who dedicates his service in this House to serving the people of Northern Ireland as the Secretary of State, and Members right across the House will understand how seriously he takes these matters. But the right hon. Gentleman is also right to infer that this is a shared endeavour across Government, which is why we will look carefully at what has happened in Northern Ireland and ensure that our collective response is proportionate.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I commend the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) for her words in this place. My constituents will have been horrified by last night’s scenes in Belfast, just as they were horrified by the attacks on police in Southampton. Both followed horrifying individual incidents that were subsequently exploited for extremist political ends, including online, as the hon. Lady said. The only difference between shouting something through a megaphone and posting it on social media is that the latter might reach millions, so what consequences will be faced by those who meet the threshold for encouraging acts of criminality, including online?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right to raise concerns about the disturbances and disorder we saw in Southampton recently. The scenes in Southampton and Belfast—of course, we have also seen them in other parts of the United Kingdom—are utterly abhorrent, and it is ridiculous for the people who participate in that kind of criminality to sometimes describe themselves as patriots. They are not patriots. They do not believe in our country; they want to undermine our country. The real patriots are the people in the police force who are dealing with the disorder and criminality. On my hon. Friend’s second

point, I give him an absolute assurance that those who decide that they want to engage in violent criminal disorder will face the full weight of the law.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am extremely grateful to Mr Speaker, to the Minister for his condemnation, and to the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) for securing another opportunity to raise these important issues. The condemnation has been strong, and the condemnation from the Minister has been appropriate. He is also right to highlight that you cannot protect British values while tarnishing them and trampling on them, destroying the rule of law, and intimidating members of our community—putting them out of their homes and destroying their lives. That is not British, and that is not what we need in our country.

As Security Minister, he has a number of responsibilities, and I urge him to look at the swift processes for asylum applications that were deployed three years ago. I understand that the individual in question regarding what happened on Monday was most likely not even interviewed as part of the asylum process, given the constrained timescales. I also understand that individuals just give a name and a date of birth, and that there is no database to confirm whether that name and date of birth are true. Without making any comment on the individual in question, that is a huge loophole in the security of our nation. There is a need to engage with the Government of the Republic of Ireland and ensure we have uniformity, including in the protection of our borders, and I ask the Minister to commit to doing so.

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman made an excellent point at the beginning of his remarks about the activities we have seen not being British. I completely agree with his analysis of the situation, and I hope he acknowledges my very long-standing interest in, and affection for, his part of the United Kingdom. Lots of right hon. and hon. Members feel a huge sense of determination to support him and his colleagues in the important work they are doing.

The right hon. Gentleman raised a number of other points, and he will understand that I am joined on the Front Bench by the Minister for Migration and Citizenship, who was also listening very carefully. Of course, when a situation such as the one we have seen in recent days occurs, the Department will want to look very carefully at the circumstances of that case. In general terms, some of the metrics relating to some of the right hon. Gentleman’s points are heading in the right direction, not least initial decisions on asylum being up by 71%. The Government are determined to make sure we are processing claims much more quickly and effectively than was the case previously. However, we will give further consideration to his points and should he wish to discuss them, I would be very happy to do so.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I echo the statement from the Minister and the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna), who spoke so well and with such clarity. This was a horrific attack, and I join others in extending my sympathies to the victim. I also commend the bravery of Maitiu Mág Tighearnán and those who ran towards danger to disarm the attacker, and the PSNI and emergency

[Liam Conlon]

services for their swift response. However, it was disappointing—but not surprising—to see the usual suspects using this as an opportunity to divide, point-score and help whip up violence and disorder online, which then played out on the streets of Belfast. Will the Minister join me in condemning those who have done so, and does he agree that it demonstrates the need for urgent action against the online platforms that facilitate and spread this hate?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, not least because I know that he also has a very long-standing affection for Northern Ireland, and I join him in praising the bravery of all those involved in the actions we saw a couple of nights ago. He is also right to raise significant concerns, which link to the point I made earlier about words having consequences. While the usual suspects, as he describes them, will come forward to try to derive some kind of political advantage from circumstances such as these, I genuinely believe that the majority of the public expect us to act in a sensible, consensual way—to address the problems about which people are rightly angry, but to do so in a way that brings people together rather than driving them apart.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): In my 25 years as a Member of Parliament, I never thought I would see a situation where masked men would go from door to door, seeking to drive families from ethnic minorities out of their homes. What happened on Monday was truly barbaric, but nothing in the world could ever justify that type of behaviour. I and others in this House have been warning about the rise of the far right and those pernicious people who would influence this type of behaviour on our streets. Will the Minister now acknowledge that we have a new, emerging problem with elements of the far right, and will he commit to ensuring that we tackle it effectively?

Dan Jarvis: I agree with the hon. Member that the scenes he describes were utterly abhorrent and not something that any right-minded person would ever want to see, whether in Belfast, the United Kingdom or anywhere else. I hope that there is shared agreement about that. On his second point, I acknowledge as the Security Minister that to keep our country safe we have to deal with a range of different threats that sit across the spectrum. That includes extreme right-wing activity, as well as a range of other specific threats. In truth, my approach is always to be ideologically agnostic, in the sense that it does not make a difference to me what the particular motivation or ideology is of those who would do us harm. I will make sure that we have the defences to stand against those threats, regardless of where they come from.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): First, I take the opportunity to condemn the appalling assault on the gentleman on Monday night and to praise the members of the public, the PSNI and emergency services who stepped in to try to help that individual. I also put on the record that I condemn the violence that took place last night. There is no place for violence in our society—no matter the issue, it is just wrong.

However, I have some concerns. We have raised issues about resources for the PSNI. It is not that the PSNI might need resources; it urgently needs help and support. We are more than a thousand police officers down in Northern Ireland, and I urge the Minister to send support as quickly as possible.

As the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) mentioned, we also have the problem of an open border, which is a back door for illegal immigration into Northern Ireland. Can the Minister provide us with figures for how many people are using that back door? What plans do the Government have to close it? Finally, many decent, law-abiding people have genuine concerns about illegal immigration, and they feel that this Government and politicians are letting them down. What can the Minister and the Government do to try to assure those people that their genuine concerns are being taken seriously and will be resolved?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his condemnation of the violence and the words he said in praise of those who acted with great courage. I understand his points about PSNI resources. I have discussed those matters twice previously with the Chief Constable in Northern Ireland, and I am certain that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland will be having further conversations with the Chief Constable today and on an ongoing basis. I recognise the concerns that the hon. Member has raised, and the Secretary of State and colleagues across Government will want to reflect on them further in the light of recent events.

The hon. Member also made an important point about the common travel area. As he will know, it is without border controls, and that has been the case for many years. Currently, that data cannot be collected. However, we have immigration enforcement teams who conduct intelligence-led raids, and we have a new data-sharing agreement among the UK Government, local authorities and the PSNI to protect the CTA from abuse. We will look carefully at the points he has raised, and there will be further conversations with ministerial colleagues about them.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): Rioting is utterly wrong, and the scenes we saw in Belfast yesterday deserve our total condemnation, but law-abiding people across the country are rightly furious about the Government's failure to stop dangerous and violent men entering our country illegally. One reason that they enter is the pull factor of our asylum and welfare system, and another is the open border with the Republic. I stood on that border last week. Nobody wants to see physical infrastructure erected there, but what conversations is the Minister having with the Irish Government to get them to do more to stop illegal migrants travelling north into the UK?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful for the condemnation of the violent behaviour that we saw. It is right that we all do that and do not allow any ambiguity in the words we use in that regard. The hon. Member will understand that I do not share the particular critique that he has offered of the Government in recent times, not least because the number of foreign national offenders who have been deported is up by 36%. That is more than 10,000 people who have been deported since this Government came to office. He raises specific concerns

about the common travel area. We work closely with the Irish Government to protect the integrity and security of the common travel area, while at the same time preserving the rights of British and Irish citizens. Where there is a requirement for us to do more, we will have to look at that.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): In January, I wrote to the Home Secretary because a whistleblower suggested that Border Force lacked sufficient personnel to cover night sailings from Belfast and Larne to Cairnryan, the main port in my constituency of Dumfries and Galloway. We have heard today that much more focus is also needed on the clearly unlocked back door to the United Kingdom between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. What can the Government do to address that and in turn prevent the North channel between Scotland and Northern Ireland becoming a conduit for illegals and for other contraband?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Member, because he makes an important point. I met officials this morning specifically to discuss the points that he raises. We will use all the tools at our disposal, including intelligence-led operations, to address those points. We look closely at these things, and where there is a requirement for us to do more, we will do so.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) for securing this urgent question, and I thank the Security Minister for his characteristically serious and thoughtful responses. It strikes me that there are three lines of investigation: first, into the abhorrent act on Monday night, and we have a suspect; secondly, into the disorder that we saw last night, and I heard the Minister say that three people have been arrested as suspects; and thirdly, into those who seek to incite violence. Can the Minister confirm that there is that third strand of active investigation—that we are seeking to find the people who incited the violence last week and last night, and who continue to do so?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Member makes an important point, and I agree with his characterisation. He is right to reference the attack and the subsequent disorder, but also to reference concerns about those who would seek to initiate violent criminality under these particular circumstances. I give him an absolute assurance that we will take these matters incredibly seriously, as I am sure will the police.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Rightly, there has been unanimous condemnation of the violence last night in Belfast, as there was of the incident that occurred in north Belfast that precipitated the protests last night. Does the Minister agree that two years ago, following the Southport attacks, similar violence to last night appeared in Northern Ireland? We all condemned that too, and I asked the Deputy First Minister to accompany me on a visit to our local hospital to reassure ethnic minority workers there that we not just condemned the violence against them, but stood shoulder to shoulder with them in opposition to it. However, we need more than just words and people standing shoulder to shoulder. We hope that there will never be a repeat of last night's violence, but if the

Government do not deal with the fundamental underlying problem of the previous night, we will have more nights like that one.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, not least because he provides me with the opportunity to make a point that I know he will agree with: Belfast is a truly great city. It is a place with incredible history and extraordinary character, and I believe it is a place of great potential and possibilities with a bright future ahead. That is why it is so tragic to see the kind of criminal disorder that all of us hoped had been consigned to the past. I understand the passion with which he speaks, but I hope he will also understand this Government's commitment to dealing with what he describes as the fundamental underlying problems. He is right to raise them. Nobody is remotely blind to them, and we completely understand the anger. That is why we are working in the Home Office, and with colleagues right across law enforcement and Government, to ensure that we are making progress on the areas that he references.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): All that the perpetrators of last night's dreadful violence did was terrorise the innocent, inflict harm on their own communities, and distract from the awfulness of the north Belfast attack—and, indeed, distract from the many peaceful protests that took place in my constituency and elsewhere. On all these issues, the law must take its full course against all illegality, wheresoever it comes from.

However, the deadly impact of the continuing open border with the Republic of Ireland for illegal migrants still stands. This Government preside over a situation in which it is illegal to bring a garden plant from Great Britain into Northern Ireland, yet we have an open border with the Irish Republic, which gentlemen like this Sudanese man—an illegal immigrant—can cross unhindered into the United Kingdom. Does the Minister not see the problem?

Dan Jarvis: I certainly agree with the framing of the hon. and learned Gentleman's question, and with the point that he made about peaceful protest. I know he will understand that my remarks referred only to those engaging in criminal disorder. I have heard the points that he made about what he describes as an open border, and he will have heard the comments that I have made previously, including the point about the very close co-operation that takes place between the Irish police, the PSNI and other police services to ensure that there is the most joined-up and effective response. However, I accept the challenge he has issued, and I accept that this is something that the Government will need to continue to look at.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Ind): The House owes a big debt of thanks to the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) for raising this question today. Last night the scenes of racist violence on the streets of Belfast, with gangs going from door to door looking for "foreigners", and the racist abuse being thrown at any minority ethnic person on the streets of Belfast, were utterly disgusting, as were last night's attempts by people in Glasgow and Liverpool to emulate that and do exactly the same.

[Jeremy Corbyn]

What message does the Minister have for the far-right racists who are encouraged by parties represented in this House to make it clear that they will not be allowed to assemble in the next few days and over the weekend to promote the same kind of racist language and violence against minorities within our society? None of this racist stuff builds a house, feeds a child, or educates anybody. Surely what we need to do is unite people against racism in any form in our society.

Dan Jarvis: I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman, who has made his point very powerfully. To those who would consider any kind of racist activity or any further criminality or disorder, my message is very simple: break the law, and get ready to face the full consequences of the law.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his thoughtful answers, which are helpful to those of us asking questions.

I totally condemn the violence that took place in Belfast. Yesterday I stood in this place and spoke about people's right to protest peacefully and to have their Government take account of their fears and their views. As the Member of Parliament for Strangford, I can say that not one stone was thrown by the hundreds and hundreds of people who stood by the cenotaph in Newtownards last night. Women with zimmer frames, young mothers with children and families stood in companionable silence, and the PSNI has confirmed that no thuggery whatsoever took place.

Those people did what they needed to do to have their voice heard. Now it is time for the Government to do what they need to do, and listen to and act for those decent and reasonable people who are not thugs and who have valid fears. Will the Minister confirm that the views of the reasonable thousands throughout the Province who quietly asked for their voice to be heard will not be ignored as a result of the loud actions of some terrible thugs?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman makes his points powerfully, and with huge experience of these matters. I completely agree with his central point that we must not allow the violent criminality and disorder that we have seen to drown out the important but peaceful voices of those who, entirely understandably, have concerns and express anger about the situation. He was right to make that point, and I can give him an absolute assurance of the seriousness with which we take it.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): May I wish you a happy birthday, Mr Speaker? I forgot to do that during Prime Minister's Question Time. Let me also thank the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) for her very balanced question.

Of course we recognise and commend the efforts of the individuals who intervened on Monday to help the victim and of those in the emergency services, who were no doubt confronted with very challenging scenes last night. My question is very simple: will the Minister be considering the use of special courts to expedite matters by giving rioters harsh sentences to act as a deterrent?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. I think he will understand that his question does not sit within my area of ministerial responsibility, but I know that colleagues elsewhere in the Government will have heard it, and I will ensure that they respond to it.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The victim, Stephen Ogilvie, is a health service worker, a radiographer. Our health service across the United Kingdom, but especially in Northern Ireland, depends on many workers with many nationalities and from many communities. It was therefore abhorrent to see some of those health service workers being attacked last night by those contemplating and delivering violence.

What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that all authorities in Northern Ireland have the full support of this Government for any action that needs to be taken not only against those who are perpetrating the violence, but against those who are acting online to spread the hatred and the violence that we are now seeing? This morning the leader of my party spoke to the father of the victim, who has made a direct appeal to those who are spreading disinformation online to stop—and that includes the disinformation that his son has died. What steps can the Government take to support the family, including the father, in their asks?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman is right to raise concerns—which I am sure will be shared throughout the House—about the attacks on health service workers, to whom we owe a huge debt of gratitude for their incredible work. He is also right to raise concerns about activity taking place online. As I said in an earlier response, we take that very seriously and work on it across Government.

I think it important to reiterate that both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick), are in Northern Ireland today. I know that they will be talking to colleagues, I know that they will be consulting widely across this place to ensure that the support we provide is proportionate, and I know that when there is more that we need to do to help, the Government's door will be open.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): The pogroms that we witnessed last night should shock the nation. They were horrific in every sense, and are bound to have left minority communities across the country terrified. We saw widespread scenes of violent disorder, with homes ablaze, and there were reports of people's cars being stopped and checked on the basis of their race. The depraved scenes of violence that triggered the eruptions last night were also horrific, and understandably provoked anger.

These are scenes more reminiscent of the darkest chapters of history than of modern Britain. We must be honest: something is profoundly wrong. Why is it that isolated incidents are repeatedly followed by such extreme and widespread eruptions of violence? What failures of policy and governance over the decades have brought us to this point, where anger and vulnerability have become so dangerously heightened and so easily exploited?

Dan Jarvis: I listened carefully to the points that the hon. Gentleman made, but there were a number of them. Let me reflect on them, and then I shall be happy to discuss them with him further.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Having seen violence in my constituency last night, I want to say clearly that violence is never the answer, that it is wrong, and that those engaged in it should face the full force of the law. Despite what Sinn Féin tells us, there is always an alternative to violence. We do not want attacks on people—including the police—on homes or on businesses. We do not want families to feel unsafe. We do not want little children from different ethnic backgrounds to feel afraid or fearful even to go to school.

However, the many people who are angry and scared because of uncontrolled immigration, and because of the barbaric act just two nights ago and the footage of the incident that has been displayed, want to see politics and democracy fill the space. There is significant concern in Northern Ireland about open borders. Will the Minister release the numbers on those who have crossed into the United Kingdom via the border with the Republic of Ireland, and will he commit himself to at least starting to replicate the Republic of Ireland's system of checking people who travel from the United Kingdom—from Northern Ireland—to the Republic of Ireland? People need to see this Government take action.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her condemnation of the violence. The Government absolutely understand the concerns and are working to address the underlying issues that underpin those concerns. It is important to make the point that, on top of increased deportations and removals, we are seeking to remove the pull factors that bring people here in the first place. Illegal work arrests are up by 60%, hotel use is down by 63% since its peak, and asylum claims are down by 12%. Much has been done, and there is much more to do, but we absolutely understand the concerns.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I join the House in thanking the hon. Member for Belfast South and Mid Down (Claire Hanna) for this urgent question and for her remarks. I associate myself with the House's condemnation of the abhorrent attack on Monday evening and the scenes that we witnessed yesterday.

A pastor at the scene in north Belfast, where multiple houses were on fire, said that people were being put out of houses "because they're black". According to media reports, even a two-month-old baby had to be evacuated to safety by the police last night, amid mob violence and rioting in Belfast. That is the reality of what this violence represents—not legitimate protest, but the terrorising of innocent families. This is where far-right rhetoric takes us: to pogroms that force the police to

escort children from their homes. We know from history where this road leads: to a path of destruction and division. Can the Minister tell the House what the Government are doing to counter the spread of racism and to ensure that one individual's actions are not used to stigmatise entire communities?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that the scenes that we saw were appalling and unacceptable, and were in no way legitimate protest. I hope that I was crystal clear in my opening remarks about my message to those who may be considering, or who have been involved in, this kind of violent criminality and disorder. I was crystal clear about the fact that they should not do that, and that anybody who considers doing it needs to be prepared to face the full weight of the law. I am confident that the police are working at pace to address the scenes that we have seen in recent times. Arrests have already been made, and I have no doubt that we will see further arrests in the very near future. This kind of criminality and disorder is utterly unacceptable.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): We all condemn the actions on Monday night, and we look with concern at the subsequent rioting, but my concern is about those who make it possible for such actions to happen—those who politicise and weaponise. When I was younger, in the 1970s, if somebody was going to attack me for racial reasons, which did happen, I could spot them from a mile away. Now, those who instigate racial hatred wear smart suits, speak the King's English, and occupy every radio wave and television channel to instigate hate. We seem to be repeating the same situation—Southport, the Liverpool fans who were run over, and the Huntingdon train stabbing. People are looking at crime through a lens of racialisation, but many in this Chamber have spoken in unity today. This week, we commemorate 10 years since the death of Jo Cox, who spoke about what unites us rather than divides us. May I ask the Minister to consider setting up a cross-party taskforce to tackle this issue, which is going to affect every single member of our communities?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to the hon. Member, who makes some very important points in a considered and constructive way. He is right to make the point that words have consequences. Where people stoke the fire and seek to incite violent criminality, they should take responsibility and be held responsible for their actions. We have had a very constructive and reasonable debate in the House today, but it is for those online to think carefully about the words that they use and the messages they deploy. All of us who serve in public life have an absolute responsibility to do the right thing, to ensure that people act within the law and to work to bring people together, not drive them apart.

Defence Investment Plan

Mr Speaker: We are going to come to the statement, but I have a concern. There are strong rumours that the Government are going to produce their defence investment plan on Friday. That would be an utter disgrace and an utter kick in the face to Members of this House. I say to Downing Street that, under the ministerial code, it is the Government's responsibility to ensure that major announcements are made here. This may be speculation, and I am sure it will be corrected, but I will be appalled if it is done on a Friday, given that Members have been waiting so long.

This affects all parties who have a great interest in the defence investment plan, including Members on the Government Benches. We all have jobs, and we all have people who serve in the armed forces. We must end the speculation and treat this House with the respect that elected Members deserve. Once again, it seems to me that we are becoming second-class citizens under this Government. I do not want that to be the case, and I hope that I am going to be proved wrong.

1.46 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the defence investment plan.

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): As the Prime Minister set out today at Prime Minister's questions, and as the Defence Secretary outlined just last week, we will publish the defence investment plan ahead of the NATO summit in just a few weeks' time. The Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and the entire Defence team are determined to get the DIP right to ensure that we deliver the best equipment and technology into the hands of our frontline forces, while investing in and growing the UK economy. We are determined to make the right choices for the country to ensure that the UK is secure at home and strong abroad.

Even as we finalise the DIP, we continue to back British jobs, British businesses and British innovation. Since July 2024, the Government have signed 1,400ysv major contracts, with 94% of that spend going to UK-based firms. In just the past four weeks, we have announced a £115 million hybrid Navy package for the UK-led mission in the strait of Hormuz; a £1 billion contract for new mobile artillery for the British Army; rapidly procured new weapons for our Typhoons, which have already been deployed to shoot down drones at low cost; 13 new contracts, worth up to £4 million each, with small, home-grown British businesses to foster growth and innovation, and to find the next billion-pound UK defence unicorn; and a pay award of 3.6%, so most armed forces personnel have received a cumulative pay award of 14.1% since this Labour Government were formed.

Let us not forget that the Conservatives left the defence programme overcommitted, underfunded and unsuited to the threats we now face. In their first year in government, they cut defence spending by £2 billion. In their first five years in government, they cut it by £12 billion. This Labour Government are rearming and renewing our armed forces, and ending the Tory hollowing-out, by spending over £11 billion more on defence this

year than was spent in the last year of the Conservative Government. Our defence investment plan, which will deliver our strategic defence review, will put that right. Backed by our commitment to the largest sustained increase in defence spending since the cold war, and by the most ambitious programme of defence reform in 50 years, we will deliver for Britain and for defence.

James Cartlidge: I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting this urgent question. Before I begin, may I pay tribute to the three Royal Navy personnel who tragically died in a helicopter crash last week? We offer our heartfelt condolences to their families from this side of the House.

After months of delay, there has been considerable speculation that the defence investment plan will finally be delivered this week. Is that the case? Specifically, and to echo what Mr Speaker just said, there has been considerable speculation that the DIP may be published on Friday. As Mr Speaker said, this House is not sitting on Friday. Let us be clear: with a war on two fronts, this is not just another Government publication, but, given the context, a vital moment for our country and for this Parliament. Does the Minister understand that it would be totally unacceptable to all Members if the defence investment plan was published on a day when the House is not sitting? Can he explicitly confirm, when he gets up, that the defence investment plan will be published when the House is sitting?

You need no reminding, Madam Deputy Speaker, of the total shambles in this Chamber last June when Labour published its strategic defence review and gave advance sight of that market sensitive document to the defence industry from 8 am that morning, while I, as shadow Defence Secretary, never got to see a copy before responding from this Dispatch Box. So will the Minister also give an absolute assurance that, whenever the DIP is published, first sight—before the document is shared with any other external stakeholders—will be reserved for Members of this House?

There is a reason the DIP has been delayed so long, which is that Labour still has not worked out how to pay for it, but former Labour Defence Secretary George Robertson and former Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair both know the answer: the Government should cut welfare to fund defence. If the Minister disagrees and believes the welfare budget should not be touched to fund defence, will he at least tell us whether the defence investment plan will set out a fully funded path to 3% of GDP, and, crucially, whether the Treasury has signed off the defence investment plan yet?

Last week the Secretary of State said at Defence oral questions that

“the Prime Minister is determined that we publish the defence investment plan before the NATO summit.”—[*Official Report*, 1 June 2026; Vol. 786, c. 840.]

That begs the question: which NATO summit and which Prime Minister?

Luke Pollard: I join the hon. Gentleman in passing on my personal condolences in relation to the helicopter crash in Devon, which, as a Devon MP, I know has hit the military city I represent very hard. I come from a Royal Navy family and know many people who fly similar helicopters, and I welcome the cross-party support for the families of the victims.

The hon. Gentleman asked when the DIP will be published. As the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary have said, it will be published before the NATO summit in only a few weeks' time. The "few weeks' time" should have answered his final question, but I understand he wanted to get that in for a social media clip. Instead of wanting to know the answer, he would already have known it.

The hon. Gentleman would also have known that the SDR was not market sensitive, so what he said was not correct. We are, however, very clear that we are investing more in defence. We are ending the hollowing out and underfunding that his Government presided over. We are very clear that the DIP will be published before the NATO summit. *[Interruption.]* He can keep chuntering, but I am trying to answer his questions. He had an opportunity to ask them; let me have a go at answering them. *[Interruption.]* He is choosing not to do that. Spending decisions are made by the Prime Minister—*[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman is still chuntering, which is not good. Spending decisions will be made by the Prime Minister and the Chancellor in the usual way, as applies to any Department, including the Ministry of Defence, and we will publish the defence investment plan before the NATO summit.

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

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments of the Minister and the shadow Defence Secretary, and my heartfelt condolences and sympathies are with the families of our brave service personnel who, sadly, have perished.

The strategic defence review set the ambition, but the defence investment plan is supposed to say what will be funded, when and with what trade-offs. Will the Minister confirm that, when the defence investment plan is finally announced, it will be announced in this Chamber to enable proper parliamentary scrutiny? Will he also confirm that it will contain all the details that hon. Members, British taxpayers and industry expect from an investment plan, rather than just a headline figure, some headline commitments and a few aspirations?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for the work he does for defence and the work he does on the Defence Committee. He knows that the commitment the Defence Secretary made from this Dispatch Box to publish the plan before the NATO summit will be honoured. When it comes to the details, we have committed to go beyond the equipment programmes we inherited. The equipment plans published by the last Government dealt only with equipment, and as my hon. Friend will know, 47 of the 49 major defence programmes we inherited were delayed and over budget at the general election. He will also know that 30% or so of the equipment plans were unfunded, and many of them were unsuitable for the threats we are facing. That is why the defence investment plan will go beyond just equipment and deal with people, estates and infrastructure, as well as dealing with this reform. I am certain that he will have heard the commitments given by the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary, and I look forward to debates in this House on the defence investment plan, when it is published.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I associate myself and my hon. Friends with the condolences paid to the families of the crew who died in the tragic helicopter crash last week.

The defence investment plan is still not published, and after nine months, industry waits for certainty, our allies for clarity and our armed forces for the investment they were promised. At a time of acute threat, defence cannot be switched on overnight. We cannot rebuild industrial capacity, train personnel, modernise equipment or restore deterrence through vague promises about working at pace. Small and medium-sized enterprises are clear that investment decisions are delayed, expansion is on hold and our contracts are being lost overseas. British firms stand ready to grow and hire, but this delay is freezing procurement, paralysing the supply chain and creating doubt about Britain's commitment to rearmament.

Will the Secretary of State confirm whether he has assessed the economic damage caused to British businesses by the delayed defence investment plan? Given the apparent deadlock between the Treasury and the MOD, will he seriously consider our proposal to issue £20 billion of defence bonds?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Member for his questions, and for the condolences on behalf of his party. It was polite of him to promote me in his question; I will ensure that the Secretary of State has heard what he had to say.

It is important to set out that we have not waited for the defence investment plan to deliver the new capabilities, the new contracts and the new investment. The hon. Member mentioned small businesses, and earlier this year we stood up the Defence Office for Small Business Growth to create a single doorway for small businesses to access defence. We have supported more small businesses, and we have increased the target for direct spend by the Ministry of Defence by 50%, which is an extra £2.5 billion of direct spend going into small businesses.

We will continue to support SMEs. The 1,400 major contracts I mentioned in my response to the initial question support not only companies such as BAE Systems, Babcock and Thales—the very large defence primes—but the entire supply chain, with many of those contracts going to small businesses. We want to see the innovation, job creation, energy and dynamism of small businesses have a bigger role in defence, and that is especially true in areas such as autonomy, in which many of the companies from which we are buying capabilities are small businesses with huge growth potential. When the defence investment plan is published, the hon. Member will see that we are backing those innovative companies and SMEs.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the decision taken early in this Parliament to halve the overseas aid budget and put that into defence shows that this Labour Government are prepared to take the tough political decisions needed to fund rearming this country, unlike the Conservatives, who had 14 years to invest in the armed forces, but instead left them and their equipment in the parlous state in which we found them in 2024?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the difficult decision made to move 0.2% of GNI spent on international aid to defence spending was an important

[Luke Pollard]

one. It showed that, in this new era of hard power, we need to increase spending on defence and to increase capabilities, which is precisely the decision taken in the past. We are very proud to be increasing defence funding. Compared with the Conservatives, who cut defence spending in their first Budget, we increased defence spending in the first Labour Budget.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): It is pretty extraordinary to see the partisan way in which the Minister has approached every single question. He has been completely incapable of giving this House, or indeed Mr Speaker, the assurance asked for on multiple occasions, and that only leads us to assume that he is hiding the untruth, which he wishes he did not have to say: he will not be bringing the defence investment plan to this House.

That is pretty extraordinary, and it is not just one year, but 14 years. This Government claim we had 14 years in which we made errors, and they may be right about many of them—in fact, I have criticised some of them myself—but they had 14 years to plan and have now had two years in government, and we are nowhere. We are still seeing defence capability fall. In fact, NATO puts us at No. 31 out of 32 of those that have failed to meet their capability targets, and last is Iceland, which does not even have a military.

Luke Pollard: I have a lot of time for the right hon. Gentleman, and I enjoy listening to his clips on social media, on which I am sure this will appear very shortly. [Interruption.] I have to say to him politely—[Interruption.] I have to say to him politely—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I do not need such loud chuntering from the Opposition Front Bench.

Luke Pollard: I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman, politely, that when we have military families living in housing with black mould in bedrooms, broken boilers and leaky roofs, the investment we are making in defence housing is absolutely vital. He says that there may have been errors—there certainly were. Defence matters to me, as someone who comes from a military family and represents a military constituency. We will publish the defence investment plan shortly. What it will show is a Labour Government increasing defence spending, ending the hollowing out and underfunding that his Government, in which he was a Minister, presided over: new capabilities for our armed forces and a stronger Britain in a more dangerous world. [Interruption.] I look forward to seeing the entire answer on his social media, not just his clip. [Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Tugendhat, you had the luxury of coming in early on this urgent question. Other colleagues would like to be heard as well. Minister, have you finished?

Luke Pollard indicated assent.

Michelle Scrogg (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): I think everybody will know—I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), the Chair of the Defence Committee—that the Defence Committee has been calling

for the DIP to be delivered for quite some time. The businesses in our patches, including small and medium-sized enterprises, need urgent clarity on where they go and where they invest. That is vital.

I say kindly to those on the Opposition Benches who have been yelling from sedentary positions that they should not be proud of what they delivered in 14 years. I gently say that what the Government inherited on defence was an absolute bin fire, and the Opposition should be ashamed of the mess they left us. Does the Minister agree that it is absolutely right the DIP is presented accurately and for the situation in which we find ourselves today, not three years ago when the world was a different place?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for how she presented it. She is absolutely right that we need to increase investment. Barrow in her constituency is a really good example of that. There has been a massive increase in employment, with people working in the BAE Systems facilities building the latest generation of nuclear submarines. The commitment is for up to 12 SSNAs to be built in Barrow. That huge investment, not just in our nuclear deterrent but our hunter-killer fleet, shows that when we get defence spending right and we put the effort into skills and communities, defence really is an engine for growth. She will see that writ large when the DIP is published.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): We already know that the Defence Secretary is going to make an announcement in Swindon on Friday morning. Given that the Japanese Prime Minister is going to turn up on Saturday, I suggest that some of that announcement will probably relate to global combat air programme funding, given that the Defence Secretary is under significant pressure to guarantee that the funding in the international contract will be signed immediately. The issue here is that the announcement will not be the DIP, which is desperately needed. The Minister will know that I speak to defence companies all the time. Over the course of this week, I have been made well aware that the Government have cancelled tens of millions of pounds-worth of contracts in the past few weeks. He talks about signing 1,400 contracts. Will he explain how many of those contracts have either timed out or been cancelled since 1 April?

Luke Pollard: The hon. Gentleman asks a number of questions, which are typically sensible. I look forward to when he sits on the Opposition Front Bench as the shadow Defence Secretary, if the rumours are true.

We have made very clear our commitment to the global combat air programme. The Secretary of State discussed it with our GCAP partners—our Italian and Japanese counterparts—when he was in Singapore only a couple of weekends ago at the Shangri-La Dialogue conference. We are committed to the GCAP programme. We have signed the first international contract for that. To deliver that, we will continue to work with our GCAP partners. I do not have the precise answers to his questions off the top of my head, but I will be sure to write to him.

Mr Paul Foster (South Ribble) (Lab): It is critical to point out that this debate is not just about funding, but the programmes being funded. We must get those programmes right and fit for future needs. In my

constituency, many thousands are employed at BAE Systems in Warton and Samlesbury. They are working diligently to ensure the Typhoon jet remains fit for the future, and the collaborative combat aircraft—also known as the autonomous jets programme—will secure thousands of jobs in the future and keep our country safe. Does the Minister agree that we must ensure the DIP is right, not rushed?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I have seen for myself the skill and experience of the workers at Samlesbury and Warton in supporting our Typhoon operations and building parts for the F-35 programme. One lesson we can take from the war in Ukraine—a key learning recommended in the strategic defence review—is that we look at the growth of autonomy in particular. We can see that already in how drones have massively changed the frontline, the fighting doctrine and the force structure required to deter and fight in the 21st century. That is true on land, in the maritime domain and in the air domain. A key part of the DIP will be to provide the latest technology for our forces, and to support our industrial base to not only build more of those capabilities in Britain, but ensure we can export them to our allies, too.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I would just like to add my view that releasing the DIP when the House is not sitting is totally unacceptable, as my colleague the Chair of the Defence Committee and Mr Speaker said. I think the whole House agrees with that. As well as ruling out publishing the DIP on Friday, will the Minister rule out publishing it next week? After the shambles of the SDR release, the Defence Committee was promised early access to the DIP—the DIP was specifically mentioned. The Defence Committee is unavailable next week, so judging what was said then by the Secretary of State, they will not be able to release it next week. The Defence Committee is unavailable, so can the Minister confirm that the DIP will not be coming out next week?

Luke Pollard: I am not sure the hon. Gentleman is suggesting we delay the DIP further, but I understand his argument. We will publish the DIP before the NATO summit. That commitment has been made by the Prime Minister and the Defence Secretary, and we will do that.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I welcome the £2.8 million Bournemouth University has received to develop cyber-defence, intelligence and autonomous system courses. They are due to start in September and will equip the next generation with the technical skills they need to contribute to the UK's defence capabilities, and ensure that we lead on the development of new technologies. In that context, can the Minister confirm that an increase in defence spending will be spent not just on kit, but on skills, and that universities such as mine will continue to be part of our strategy to address the challenges the nation faces?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is a real champion for defence businesses in and around Bournemouth. I am really pleased that we were able to announce yesterday the universities and colleges across the country that will receive the uplift in student places, with the supplementary places grant that will enhance the skills provision. We have already enhanced the provision of skills for further

education, with the announcement of five defence technical excellence colleges in England, hopefully two in Scotland if the Scottish Government will support a second one, and one in Wales. We need to go further with more higher education places in defence and defence-adjacent courses. The money announced yesterday, not just for Bournemouth but for universities and colleges nationwide, will help to support the next generation of talent to work in defence—good, well-paid, decent jobs.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I just cannot understand how it is that the Government still have no idea how they are going to pay for the DIP. According to media reports this morning, the DIP is likely to be half the bare minimum the defence sector says it needs and even defence chiefs still have not seen it. I wonder if the Minister could comment on those media reports. That is against the backdrop of every corner of our armed forces currently being asked to find cuts right now. The pips are squeaking in our armed forces, and defence employers in my constituency are still in a state of limbo and uncertainty about the future. I have enormous respect for the Minister, as he knows, but even he must see that this feels like chaos.

Luke Pollard: I equally have enormous respect for the hon. Lady, which is why I will say politely that I disagree with her characterisation. I will also politely say to her, as someone who reads the media speculation on what is in the DIP and what discussions have taken place, to not always believe what is written down online.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The defence investment plan is to be welcomed, and I appreciate that it covers more than just equipment—it talks about our people and the built estate. I have made representations before, so the Minister will know that since local armed forces recruitment centres in towns such as Oldham have closed, I am concerned that the recruitment of local young people has fallen through the floor. In fact, in Oldham, the MOD does not bother to record the numbers because they are now in single digits. However, the types of jobs that are being created—skilled, well-paid, proud jobs—should not be distant for young people growing up in Oldham.

My second point is on the fact that the DIP covers procurement, but not disposal. For every vehicle, pump, generator and bit of kit that the armed forces do not need, our friends in Ukraine should surely get first refusal.

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is certainly right that recruitment matters, and that this Government inherited a retention and recruitment crisis from the Conservatives. I am pleased to report to the House that inflow to our armed forces is now up 11.6% in the last year, outflow is down 8.9%, and morale is up three points in the last year alone. My hon. Friend make a good point about recruitment, and I would be pleased to arrange a meeting between him and the Minister for Veterans and People, who looks after recruitment.

My hon. Friend is also right about disposals. We work closely with our friends in Ukraine to provide them with kit and equipment direct from British industry, supporting procurement with our allies as well. Also,

[*Luke Pollard*]

when we retire UK kit, we look at whether there is a Ukrainian need for it, so I assure him that that is a process that is under way. I continue to speak to my Ukrainian counterpart about the additional support we can provide not just for the fight tonight, but for the deterrence that Ukraine will need in the future, when peace has hopefully arrived, to prevent Putin from ever invading again.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): We have had some huge wins for defence firms in Yeovil, such as Leonardo and Honeywell, but lots of other small and medium-sized enterprises doing cutting-edge defence work in Yeovil tell me that they cannot properly plan without the DIP. What reassurance can the Minister give Yeovil's defence SMEs that the limbo will end so that they can plan investment and provide quality jobs? Will he meet with them to discuss that further?

Luke Pollard: The hon. Gentleman knows very well that this Labour Government have been delivering for Yeovil quite considerably, with a £1 billion new medium helicopter contract for Leonardo, support for Gripen exports, supporting a number of firms in his constituency, the defence technical excellence college we funded in Yeovil, and the announcement yesterday of the additional places for Yeovil College. There will be more places for Yeovil College, more opportunities for young people to study, and a growing defence sector in Yeovil that I am happy to continue to support. I look forward to making further announcements, for not just the hon. Gentleman and Yeovil but the rest of the country, in due course.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): As a Navy mum, I associate myself with the Minister's condolences on the three tragic deaths of our Navy personnel. While I understand the frustration with the DIP delay, 14 years of Tory under-investment left our armed forces short of people, resources and morale. Does the Minister agree that the defence investment plan must now deliver for the long term and continue to invest in our personnel and bases, including Portsmouth Royal Navy base?

Luke Pollard: As Devonport's MP, I say to my Portsmouth colleagues that after many years under the Conservatives where Devonport, Portsmouth and Faslane were pitched against each other, it is welcome that under a Labour Government we can confidently say that there is work and resources for all three. After much delay by the last Government, we will see a multibillion-pound investment across our naval bases, and the defence investment plan will lay out some of that. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend and her Portsmouth colleagues to say how we are investing in the kit and capabilities that our Royal Navy needs, as well as in military houses, skills and support for veterans and cadets across the country, which will improve our warfighting readiness, ensuring we have the ability to deter aggression—and to defeat it if necessary.

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

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): The Minister will be aware that on Sunday we published a report—I have it here—that is highly critical of the delay in the defence investment plan. The most important duty of a Government is to defend the nation, as is stated in article 3 of the NATO treaty. Our constituents want to know whether they are going to be properly defended, the armed forces need to know whether they are going to be properly defended and, above all, our allies need to know when they are going to be properly defended. Why has the Minister been dragged to this House unable to tell us when the DIP will be published? When will it be published?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The hon. Member, who is far more experienced than I am, should know that we do not hold up booklets or magazines as props when speaking in the Chamber.

Luke Pollard: Madam Deputy Speaker, it is indeed a prop, but I have read it and welcome the hon. Gentleman's contribution, because I want to see more scrutiny of defence and ensure that we can answer that. The issue he raised on article 3, which concerns homeland defence, is important. That is one of the reasons why I said in my opening remarks that the equipment plan we inherited was unsuited to defence. It also had gaps in our defence. What the hon. Gentleman and others will see when the defence investment plan is published is how we are supporting not only our warfighting ability and the defence of NATO allies, but homeland defence. Let me be clear that homeland defence means the entirety of the United Kingdom and our overseas territories.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. I am proud to have hundreds of constituents working in the defence sector in Edinburgh South West, and they tell me that they have never been busier. The DIP will provide them with security, so that they know they can pay their mortgages and plan for their kids to go to university. I welcome that the DIP will be published soon. People want to know that if we publish it now, we are taking onboard everything we have learnt from Ukraine and, more importantly, Iran—there are real lessons to be learned from that conflict. The Minister also mentioned that on the watch of the previous procurement Minister, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), 47 of 49 projects were neither on time nor on budget. Does he know what happened to that Minister?

Luke Pollard: I sit in his chair now, so that explains what happened with the previous Minister and the voters. To be fair, the hon. Member for South Suffolk was one of the few Defence Ministers re-elected as an MP at the last election, with many others not returned to the House. My hon. Friend is right about the importance of long-term security, which is why we are setting out the investment in our kit and capabilities, effectively replacing the equipment plans that were published previously, and looking at our personnel, skills and infrastructure. One of the areas that was hollowed out and consistently underfunded as capital was taken from those budgets was our defence estate. We know the scandal of the armed forces housing that many of our constituents were asked to live in, which is something we are addressing with a £9 billion programme. We have to look at lessons to improve our personnel and experience.

We are in regular dialogue with our friends in Ukraine, learning lessons on kit and capability, how Russia fights, how we deter Russian aggression against NATO allies, and how we invest in the capabilities that Ukraine needs. Programmes such as Brakestop, as a low-cost cruise missile informed by the work of our friends in Ukraine, deliver that. The lesson I take from Ukraine and Iran is that we will need more autonomy, drones and understanding about mass as well as exquisite high-end capabilities. Expect to see more of that in the defence investment plan when it is published.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): The extraordinary delays to the defence investment plan have left our armed forces, defence industry and allies in limbo. Only in April the Government warned that they had shown “corrosive complacency” towards defence, leaving our national security “in peril”. Does the Minister recognise that the DIP delays are illustrative of that complacency and have given our adversaries the time and opportunity to explore and exploit our weaknesses? The failure to agree and fully fund our defence requirements is jeopardising the safety of our citizens.

Luke Pollard: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman, but I appreciate the way in which he asked the question. Scotland is an integral part of our national security apparatus. From the aviators who fly from RAF Lossiemouth in the north of Scotland, to the submariners who serve from Faslane, as well as the extraordinary number of defence companies, large and small, across Scotland—not just in the central belt—there are huge opportunities.

I hope that the hon. Gentleman will continue to pass on to the Scottish Government the importance of signing up for the second defence technical excellence college. I am still waiting for a reply to the letter that the Scottish Secretary and I wrote to the Scottish Government. We will fund one DTEC in Scotland, and if the Scottish Government can support the initiative with a second, we can have one in both the east and the west of Scotland, supporting the hugely important defence industry there. I hope that is a point on which we can find consistent cross-party support. If we are looking for more cross-party support, I encourage the hon. Gentleman and his party to back the brilliant submariners who support our independent nuclear deterrent, which sails from Faslane. The independent nuclear deterrent is the foundation of our national security, and something that we will continue to support in the defence investment plan.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Teesside airport is benefiting from a £173 million MOD contract for Draken. Looking at that contract and at the others the Minister has set out, I think it is fair to say that the Department is not waiting for the defence investment plan to get moving, although we do, of course, need to see it very soon. The elephant in the room is what we are seeing in Ukraine, where capabilities are advancing and becoming obsolete in a matter of weeks—it is happening extremely quickly. What assurance can the Minister give that the DIP, when it arrives, will be flexible enough to deal with the changing nature of warfare in the months and years to come?

Luke Pollard: I congratulate Teesside on winning additional student places in the announcement that the Defence Secretary made yesterday. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the fast pace of change means that

we need to look again at some of the technologies that we are investing in. I have already described the equipment plan that we inherited from the Conservatives as unsuited to many of the threats we face. We do need to learn the right lessons from Ukraine; the strategic defence review certainly set out a number of them. The fast-paced iteration of drones in particular, and the complexity of a GPS or electronic warfare-denied environment along the frontline has fundamentally changed the way that the British Army will need to fight in the future. Some of that change has already been announced by the Chief of the General Staff, and we will see further capability announcements in the defence investment plan. I can reassure my hon. Friend and the House that we have taken on the lessons from Ukraine and other conflicts around the world seriously, because the pace of change in defence is real, and we need our procurement system and fighting doctrine to reflect that pace of change in new technologies.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): On defence procurement more widely, may I turn the Minister’s attention to the land mobility programme, and in particular the light mobility vehicle contract? He will know that the Land Rover is retiring after 70 years of faithful service, and that defence engineers in Shropshire are currently building the Boxer and the Challenger 3 tank. When that contract is looked at, would he come to Shropshire, meet RBSL and, most importantly, sign the contract in Shropshire?

Luke Pollard: I will take that as good lobbying for one of those contracts. The right hon. Gentleman is certainly right that the Land Rover has given many decades of faithful service to the UK armed forces, but it is no longer suitable for the needs of our military and it is right that we now replace it. I announced the beginning of that contract procurement only a few months ago. I have been to RBSL and seen the skills they have there. I am expecting this to be a well-competed contract. As the Defence Secretary has set out, we want to see more of our rising defence budget spent with UK-based firms. I am certain that anyone procuring any contracts for the Ministry of Defence in the future will have one eye on that.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): First of all, I would like to say what a great honour it was to attend Windsor castle on Friday to see the presentation of the new colours to the Royal Marines. It was an absolutely superb event and carried out to extreme precision.

It has been reported that the Ministry of Defence is considering delaying or scrapping plans for the Type 83 destroyer, the long-term replacement for the Type 45, due in the 2030s. If that is the case, will the Minister confirm what alternative the Government will review to ensure the future of the Royal Marines’ anti-aircraft and anti-missile defence?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for mentioning the new colours awarded to the Royal Marines. My colleague the Minister for the Armed Forces was there with the King for that ceremony, which reflects the continuing relevance and importance of the Royal Marines, which will be shown clearly in the defence investment plan.

[*Luke Pollard*]

The hon. Gentleman asks me about a specific capability proposed by the previous Government that may be included in the defence investment plan. I hope he will understand that I will not be able to go into that line item description today. However, on the broader point about ensuring the air defence of our naval assets, we have seen from Ukraine that there are new capabilities that can provide elements of that. We have also seen from the UK response to the Iranian drone threat to our sovereign base areas and our friends in the Republic of Cyprus how we can create a truly layered air defence, which is an important lesson we have learned from Ukraine. We have applied that not just to our sovereign base areas, but to our naval assets and our friends in the middle east.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I offer some advice to Defence Ministers in their bare-knuckle fight with the Treasury for adequate defence funding? They really should move away from this glib spin doctor's line about defence expenditure rising faster now than at any time since the end of the cold war. The situation we are in now is as dangerous as any that took place not at the end of the cold war, when defence expenditure was declining, but at its height, when Conservative Governments—with, I think, Opposition approval—regularly spent between 4.5% and 5% of GDP on defence. Please, Minister, do not parrot a line that goes way below what we need in the circumstances that we face today.

Luke Pollard: I have a lot of time for the right hon. Gentleman, with whom I have spent many hours discussing defence spending. I am certainly very aware of the danger we now face—it is one of the reasons why the Government have decided to declassify a number of the threats facing the United Kingdom. When the Defence Secretary declassified the activities of the Russian spy ship Yantar over our undersea cables, for example, it was both to explain the threats that we are now facing as a nation and to send a clear signal to Putin that we see what he is doing. Deterrence takes a number of forms; there are certainly our capabilities, but the ability to call out and, in doing so, to restrict the ability of Russia to threaten the UK and our allies is also important. I understand what he says, however, and take it seriously.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): People are suffering due to the cost of living crisis, and taxes are at an all-time high. The delayed investment decisions are paralysing planning for defence businesses, which are stuck in limbo. Could the Minister explain what he is doing to use innovative mechanisms such as defence bonds and the rearmament bank to support the defence sector without placing additional burdens on the taxpayer?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for her continued interest in defence, even with her new role in the Liberal Democrats. We are continuing to place contracts with British industry—1,400 since the general election, announcing a number of those in just the past few weeks—which is seeing jobs growth and both capital investment in infrastructure and investment in people and the skills that are required. The hon. Lady refers to innovative finance. We will set out the spending in the defence investment plan. As the hon. Lady will

know, we are increasing defence spending, and I welcome a debate about innovation and how we can get more value out of the pounds we spend. Under the Labour Government, fewer contracts will be sent abroad—something that was commonplace under the Conservatives. I want to see the activation of more private capital to look at how we can support not just the supply chain, but, potentially, defence capabilities. We have committed to doing that with the development of a defence finance and investment strategy, which we are working on currently.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): At a recent defence industry dinner, the Minister informed diners that the definition of “British” for the purposes of assigning support from the Government to the British defence industry would be an address in the British Isles, which of course is a complete nonsense. Will the upcoming—and much-awaited and much-anticipated—defence investment plan clarify what is meant by a “British firm” for the purposes of Government support and advantaging British defence industry?

Luke Pollard: For a moment, I thought that the right hon. Gentleman had been listening to my speeches at defence dinners, which I was really pleased about. Unfortunately, he misheard me, or has not quite got that right. Let me be very clear: UK-based firms that hire people in Britain, pay their taxes and invest in skills in Britain are the ones that we are backing in the defence investment plan. I am not interested in brass plaques. Where we have to send contracts abroad, either to buy the technologies that we do not make in the UK or for the exquisite capabilities that we buy from single sources—he can probably think of a few examples from his time as a Defence Minister—we are also introducing an offsets regime, which will ensure that British companies benefit in that way as well. It is a model that has worked well in Australia, Norway and a number of other countries. We have announced progress on that and consulted on that, too. Not only are we investing in British-based firms, but we are ensuring that when we do buy from abroad, there is a benefit for UK industry as well.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): As Mr Speaker noted earlier, the mood of the House is very much that the long-awaited defence investment plan must not be produced this Friday, yet the Minister is still unable to provide that confirmation. Through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I ask Mr Speaker whether he would consider an emergency sitting of Parliament on Friday if it is produced then.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): These questions are supposed to be to the Minister, not to the Chair, but no doubt Mr Speaker will have heard that one. He has made his views very clear, as has the Chamber. Was there actually a question in there, Mr Tice? Would you like to have another attempt at a question?

Richard Tice: Can the Minister confirm whether the plan will be produced on Friday—yes or no?

Luke Pollard: I say to the hon. Gentleman very clearly that we will publish the defence investment plan before the NATO summit. He has written to me a number of times when he has not liked my answers from the Dispatch Box. I really do hope that Reform

can take defence more seriously and not try to dodge the important connections that we now know exist between senior Reform figures and Russia because of the bribes that the Welsh leader of Reform took from Russia. It is really important that we expose that in the public domain, because no UK party should ever be in hock to Russia.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The defence investment plan is urgently needed to provide our armed forces with the resources they need to defend our nation. Does the Minister accept that when the Government show themselves capable of publishing their welfare spending until 2031 but continually delay the publication of the defence investment plan, that sends a message to our adversaries about where the Government's priorities lie?

Luke Pollard: No, but I understand entirely the Conservatives' partisan attack line on this one—and it is good to see the hon. Gentleman joining in. Let me be very clear: we have increased defence spending. We did so from the very first Budget that the Chancellor delivered at this Dispatch Box, and we are continuing to do that. Defence spending is £11 billion more per year today than under the last year of the Conservative Government, and we are directing more of that money at British-based firms.

We are fixing military accommodation, which is in such a state. The first 1,200 of the worst military homes have now been refurbished, and we will continue that work until nine in 10 military homes are refurbished. We have given our armed forces the biggest pay rise in 20 years—a 14.1% cumulative pay rise under this Labour Government compared with the pay freezes that many of them endured under the Conservative Government. We are rearming and backing Britain, and when the defence investment plan is published very shortly, the hon. Gentleman will be able to see that.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Following the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance), I want to welcome the Gripen contract, which benefits my constituency. Others have mentioned the fast-paced development of uncrewed weapons, but I am concerned about the domestic attacks the UK might see on our cyber, energy and food security. Can the Minister assure the House that the DIP will address that risk and fund public awareness of the threats to our home security and the role we must all play in the defence of the realm?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and for championing the defence firms that she has around her constituency. They are a really important in making the case that defence is an engine for growth.

The hon. Lady is right that the threats we face as a nation are more complex than they have been for a very long time. They are not just military threats. The United Kingdom is under constant cyber-attack from our adversaries; that is one of the reasons why we have invested so much in our cyber defences and will continue to do so.

The hon. Lady also hits on the really important point that defending our nation is not just a job for the Ministry of Defence: it is part of a cross-Government effort that must include securing our food—because

food security is national security—and our energy supply. That is one of the reasons why we are investing so much in our clean power mission to generate more of our energy in the United Kingdom. By investing in renewables, we can have good clean green jobs for the UK while also reducing our reliance on energy from further afield. Iran's reckless actions in the middle east have shown to everyone in the House why investing in our energy security is so important. It is about home-grown energy, not relying on imports from abroad.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): The No. 1 priority for me and my Liberal Democrat colleagues during the passage of the Renters' Rights Act 2025 was a decent homes standard for military families, and I was delighted that the Government subsequently enacted that provision. We also welcome the £9 billion for service family and military accommodation that the Minister has referred to. Does the Minister agree that a poorly housed and unhealthy fighting force is not what this country needs and, similarly, that an unhealthy and poorly housed population is not what we need in this country? Can he confirm that the DIP will not be funded by raiding either the military housing budget or the affordable homes budget?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for talking about military housing, which is not just for our armed forces personnel but, importantly, for their families. As someone who represents a military area in Plymouth, I know that when our forces are deployed abroad, if their families back home are living with black mould in their kids' bedrooms, leaky roofs or broken boilers, it affects their ability to do the job we have asked them to do—on the frontline or wherever it may be. That is why in opposition we committed to making defence housing a priority.

In government, we have announced the defence housing strategy to improve, rebuild or refurbish nine in 10 military homes—along with our substantial commitment of £9 billion—and we have already made substantial progress on the 1,200 worst family homes. We are looking at what we can do not only with service family accommodation, but single living accommodation, because those who live on bases should also be reassured that we value their service and want them to live in decent accommodation, whichever service they may be in and wherever they may be deployed.

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): My constituency is home to the Sennybridge training area, an area of vital national importance that borders Merthyr Cynog. The military training area exists only because local farmers surrendered their farms for the national interest. However, the Minister's Department is now raising concerns about foreign investment in the area—notably that from Bute Energy, which plans to build wind farms that could create a physical obstruction to air traffic movements and military operations. Will the Minister outline what he is doing to support defence investment in Wales at sites like Sennybridge? Will he agree to meet me and Merthyr Cynog community council to discuss Bute Energy's plans for the area?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his interest. Every single nation in the United Kingdom will benefit from the defence investment plan. Wales is

[*Luke Pollard*]

already the recipient of one of the five defence growth deals that we announced, with new capabilities and new investment in skills. We look forward to speaking with the new Welsh Government in due course about how we operationalise that. The MOD's main objection to the development of wind farms predominantly relates to the impact on air defence radars. I would be very happy for the hon. Gentleman to send me some details in advance of us meeting.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): As somebody who represents Devon as well as Somerset, may I share the Minister's sentiments about the very tragic loss of lives in west Devon last week?

I am glad that the Minister has acknowledged that the Ankara summit is imminent, but is he not deeply concerned that the Government's dither and delay in publishing the defence investment plan is seriously undermining our credibility with our friends in the world and sending a signal of immense weakness to our foes, and furthermore that at a time when we should be showing leadership the Government are showing lethargy?

Luke Pollard: I do not quite agree with the hon. Lady's assessment, and she need only look at the announcements that we have made on defence in only the past few months: the standing up of the coalition of the willing with our friends in France, which is a multinational effort to support Ukraine; our continued support for Ukraine by providing kit, equipment and training; our forward land forces in Estonia being equipped with the latest drone technology; and the work we are doing with the UK-led mission in the strait of Hormuz, deploying brand-new autonomous capabilities as part of a hybrid Navy to deal with Iranian mines. We can see that the UK is stepping up.

Over my two years as a defence Minister, I have seen our international friends in government—be they parties of the left or right—making the case that Britain is back on the world stage and that UK leadership matters. When it comes to the changing geopolitical system, which we can all see around the world, UK leadership in the Euro-Atlantic is especially welcome and desired from our allies, who want to work with us on capabilities

and deployment. The hon. Lady and the whole House will see more of that when the defence investment plan is published shortly.

James Cartlidge: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Before you took the Chair, you will have heard the very strong statement from Mr Speaker about the prospect of the defence investment plan being delivered when the House is not sitting. His words were that it would be “an utter kick in the face” to Parliament if that were to happen. I have raised this directly with the Minister, and colleagues from three different Opposition parties have asked the explicit and specific question as to whether it is going to be delivered when the House is sitting. Surely, given that this is such a significant plan in the context that we face internationally, we should be entitled to confirmation from the Minister that it will be not be delivered when the House is not sitting.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. The Speaker made it abundantly clear at the start of the statement just how important it is that the defence investment plan is presented first to Parliament, and that Members of this House have the opportunity to ask questions about it as soon as the plan is published. As the Speaker said, I hope that speculation that the plan will be published on a non-sitting day is proven wrong. The House comes first.

Of course, the Government could table a motion to enable the House to sit on a non-sitting Friday, if those were the circumstances. If the hon. Member wishes to have further advice on parliamentary procedure, he can get that from the Clerks in the Table Office. Mr Speaker made his views abundantly clear. Does the Minister wish to respond?

Luke Pollard *indicated dissent.*

RAILWAYS BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

King's recommendation signified.

Resolved,

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Railways Bill, it is expedient to authorise the making of provision about income tax, corporation tax, capital gains tax, value added tax, stamp duty, stamp duty reserve tax and stamp duty land tax.—(*Shaun Davies.*)

Question agreed to.

Railways Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Public Bill Committee

[Relevant documents: Eighth Report of the Transport Committee of Session 2024-26, Railways Bill, HC 1472, and the Government response, HC 1836.]

New Clause 48

TAX CONSEQUENCES OF TRANSFER SCHEMES

“(1) The Treasury may by regulations make provision for varying the way in which a relevant tax has effect in relation to—

- (a) anything transferred under a scheme made under section 86, 87, 88 or 90, or
- (b) anything done for the purposes of, or in relation to, such a transfer.

(2) The provision that may be made under subsection (1)(a) includes, in particular, provision for—

- (a) a tax provision not to apply, or to apply with modifications, in relation to anything transferred;
- (b) anything transferred to be treated in a specified way for the purposes of a tax provision;
- (c) the Secretary of State, the Welsh Ministers or the Scottish Ministers to be required or permitted, with the consent of the Treasury, to determine, or to specify the method for determining, anything which needs to be determined for the purposes of any tax provision so far as relating to anything transferred.

(3) The provision that may be made under subsection (1)(b) includes, in particular, provision for—

- (a) a tax provision not to apply, or to apply with modifications, in relation to anything done for the purposes of or in relation to the transfer;
- (b) anything done for the purposes of, or in relation to, the transfer to have or not to have a specified consequence or to be treated in a specified way;
- (c) the Secretary of State, the Welsh Ministers or the Scottish Ministers to be required or permitted, with the consent of the Treasury, to determine, or to specify the method for determining, anything which needs to be determined for the purposes of any tax provision so far as relating to anything done for the purposes of, or in relation to, the transfer.

(4) In this section—

‘relevant tax’ means income tax, corporation tax, capital gains tax, value added tax, stamp duty, stamp duty reserve tax or stamp duty land tax;

‘tax provision’ means provision about a relevant tax made by or under an Act.

(5) References in this section to things transferred under a scheme include references to—

- (a) the creation of interests, rights or liabilities under the scheme, and
- (b) the modification of interests, rights or liabilities under the scheme,

and ‘transferred’ is to be read accordingly.”—(*Keir Mather.*)

This new clause allows the Treasury to make provision about the tax consequences of transfers under clauses 86 to 88 and 90.

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Government new clauses 49 and 50.

New clause 1—*Passengers’ Charter*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months beginning on the day on which this Act is passed, lay before Parliament a Passengers’ Charter.

(2) A Passengers’ Charter must include—

- (a) a guarantee about value for money, quality of service, and provision of adequate seating for any single part of a journey taken by rail for a duration greater than thirty minutes;
- (b) targets for reliability of services;
- (c) a timetable for implementing improvements to passenger accommodation on train services, including in relation to—
 - (i) seat design,
 - (ii) availability of high-speed WiFi and reliable cellular network service,
 - (iii) provision of power outlets,
 - (iv) storage for luggage, bicycles, pushchairs and prams,
 - (v) provision of toilets, including standards of cleanliness and accessibility, and
 - (vi) provision of on-board catering on any train service with a total duration of at least two hours;
- (d) a guarantee relating to improving the accessibility of trains, stations, areas immediately surrounding stations and interfaces with connecting transport modes, and replacement road services, for passengers with disabilities;
- (e) extension of the principles behind Delay Repay compensation to include a framework of compensation for failures to comply with the Passengers’ Charter for lack of specified on-board amenities;
- (f) a commitment that Great British Railways will take all reasonable steps to ensure that systems for compensating passengers for delays or disruption—
 - (i) are digital by default;
 - (ii) minimise any administrative burden on passengers when applying for compensation;
 - (iii) allow, where practicable, for compensation to be issued automatically based on information attainable by Great British Railways from about a customer’s journey or from a ticketing account.”

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to lay a Passengers’ Charter and sets out what the charter should contain, including provision relating to customer amenities, value for money, accessibility and compensation.

New clause 2—Report on the potential merits of customer loyalty programmes—

“(1) Within twelve months beginning on the day on which this Act is passed, the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report on the potential merits of customer loyalty programmes for rail passengers (‘rail miles programmes’).

(2) A review under this section must consider any beneficial effect on the growth of rail passenger numbers of introducing rail miles programmes.”

This new clause would ensure the Secretary of State conducts a report into potential benefits of a “rail miles” programme for passenger numbers.

New clause 3—Fund for future railway improvements—

“(1) The Secretary of State must establish a fund for the purpose of providing improvements to the railway in the long term, including investment in new or reopened railway lines and stations.

(2) The fund under this section is to be called the Tomorrow's Railway Fund ('the fund').

(3) The Secretary of State may by regulations made by statutory instrument provide for monies to be allocated to the fund for each funding period.

(4) Local and regional transport authorities may apply to the Secretary of State to receive a grant of monies from the fund, for the purpose of enabling construction of new railway stations and associated infrastructure.

(5) A purpose enabling construction under subsection (4) includes a feasibility study for any station or associated infrastructure.

(6) In this section 'funding period' has the meaning given in Paragraph 1(9) of Schedule 2 to this Act."

This new clause would establish a new funding mechanism for local authorities to bid to central government for funding for feasibility studies on, or construction of, new stations, railways, or other enhancements.

New clause 4—*Restoring Your Railway fund: review—*

"(1) Within twelve months beginning on the day on which this Act is passed, the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report containing a review of the Restoring Your Railway Fund.

(2) The review under subsection (1) must consider the effect of the fund on the reopening of railway lines and stations."

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to review the Restoring Your Railway Fund, announced by the previous Government in February 2020.

New clause 5—*Rails to Trails Programme—*

"(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of the passing of this Act, establish a programme to facilitate the conversion of disused railway lines, sidings and associated land into active travel routes for—

- (a) walkers,
- (b) wheelers,
- (c) cyclists, and
- (d) horse riders.

(2) The programme must include—

- (a) a national statutory framework to support community groups and local authorities to acquire and convert the land set out in subsection (1),
- (b) a long-term fund to provide financial incentives and resources for local authorities and public bodies to convert the land for such use;
- (c) mechanisms to ensure landowners are fairly compensated for any land that is acquired or converted.

(3) The programme under this section is to be referred to as the 'Rails to Trails Programme'."

This new clause would require the Government to turn disused railways into active travel paths.

New clause 6—*Report on Great British Railways' ticketing function—*

"(1) Great British Railways must prepare and publish a report on how it will exercise its function under section 3(1)(d) of this Act (the 'ticketing function').

(2) A report under this section must include plans for Great British Railways to—

- (a) introduce a cap on fare increases not exceeding the rate of inflation, applicable to and reviewed as part of each 5-year funding settlement for the railway,
- (b) extend, and where not currently provided for provide, a 50% discount on all train fares for passengers aged under 18 years,
- (c) offer discounted fares for passengers who are UK armed forces veterans,
- (d) establish a tap-in tap-out method of ticketing across England, Wales and Scotland,

(e) guarantee that any fare offered to passengers for purchase via any means is the best value fare, and that there is no inequality in fare for the same ticket when purchased via different means,

(f) introduce a National Railcard across England, Wales and Scotland,

(g) enable open-source access to Great British Railways' ticketing systems and rates databases for third-party retailers,

(h) collaborate with local and regional transport authorities to enable multimodal ticketing between railway passenger services and local bus, light rail and other public transport networks, and

(i) take all reasonable steps to simplify fares and remove barriers to travel where a single journey undertaken by a passenger involves travel on—

- (i) multiple rail services, or
- (ii) at least one rail service and at least one additional form of public transport.

(3) For the purposes of this section the rate of inflation is calculated in accordance with any increase in the Retail Price Index."

This new clause would require GBR to report on how it will undertake its ticketing function. It requires GBR to set out how it would cap fare increases; extend children's and veterans' discounts; provide that a single best price is available across ticketing mediums; and provide access to systems for third-party retailers.

New clause 7—*Rail climate resilience and decarbonisation framework—*

"(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months beginning on the day on which this Act is passed, publish a framework that seeks to meet the following objectives—

- (a) reduce the carbon footprint of the rail network;
- (b) identify sections of the network vulnerable to climatic risks including drought, soil moisture deficit, flooding, heat and cold.

(2) The framework must include a schedule of required infrastructure improvements to the sections of network identified under subsection (1)(b).

(3) Great British Railways must publish a report on the progress of the objectives set out in subsection (1) every two years beginning on the date on which the framework is published.

(4) The Secretary of State must lay before Parliament each report as set out in subsection (3)."

This new clause establishes a statutory climate resilience and decarbonisation framework and requires regular reporting on progress made against the objectives set out in the framework.

New clause 8—*Great British Railways: environmental targets—*

"(1) In the exercise of any of its functions, Great British Railways must take all reasonable steps to contribute to—

- (a) the achievement of targets in sections 1 to 3 of the Environment Act 2021,
- (b) the achievement of targets set under Part 1 of the Climate Change Act 2008,
- (c) the programme for adaptation to climate change under section 58 of the Climate Change Act 2008, and
- (d) the achievement of targets set under the Air Quality Standards Regulations 2010."

This new clause requires Great British Railways to take steps to contribute to meeting targets set out in existing legislation on climate change.

New clause 9—*Great British Railways Board—*

"(1) The Secretary of State must appoint a Board to review decisions taken in respect of Great British Railways ('the Board').

(2) The Secretary of State must appoint to the Board persons who are employees of, or otherwise represent—

- (a) Great British Railways,
- (b) open access passenger operators,
- (c) freight operators,
- (d) The Office for Rail and Road,
- (e) The Passengers' Council, and
- (f) an organisation or campaign group representing passengers with accessibility requirements.

(3) The Board must comprise at least six members and no more than half of its membership may be employed by, or otherwise represent, Great British Railways.

(4) Great British Railways must determine the frequency of board meetings in any year.

(5) Any—

- (a) decision by the Secretary of State concerning, or
- (b) direction given by the Secretary of State to

Great British Railways must be notified to the Board prior to the making of the decision or issuing of the direction, and such decision or direction may only be made if a majority of the Board approves of it being made.

(6) The Board must publish any decision or direction it considers, and whether it has approved any such decision or direction.

(7) Where the Board has not approved a decision taken by, or direction given by, the Secretary of State to Great British Railways—

- (a) the Board must notify the Secretary of State that it has not approved the decision or direction, and its reasons for not doing so;
- (b) the Secretary of State may proceed to make any such direction or decision provided that, in their opinion, it is necessary to do so.

(8) Where subsection (7)(b) applies, the Secretary of State must publish a statement setting out reasons for proceeding with the direction or decision.”

This new clause would require the creation of a GBR Board, constituted of relevant internal and external stakeholders and regulatory bodies, which the Secretary of State would have to consult on major decisions and changes.

New clause 10—*Devolution of rail to Wales*—

“(1) Schedule 7A of the Government of Wales Act 2006 is amended according to subsection (2).

(2) In section E2 (Rail Transport), omit paragraph 117.

(3) Before the end of the period specified in subsection (5), the Secretary of State must by regulations provide for the transfer of functions relating to rail in Wales to Welsh Ministers.

(4) The functions transferred under subsection (3) must include, but are not limited to—

- (a) the management of rail infrastructure;
- (b) the operation and funding of rail infrastructure;
- (c) the planning, funding and management of maintenance, enhancement and renewal of rail infrastructure;
- (d) the regulation of capacity, access, charging and performance arrangements of rail infrastructure; and
- (e) the integration of passenger services with rail infrastructure.

(5) Regulations under subsection (3) must come into force—

- (a) on a date no later than three years after the passing of this Act, or
- (b) on a date agreed between the Secretary of State and the Welsh Ministers,

whichever is the earlier.

(6) Regulations under this section must make provision about funding for the Welsh Ministers relating to the functions transferred to them under subsection (4).

(7) Within one year of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report setting out the level of funding to be provided under subsection (6).

(8) Regulations in this section are subject to the affirmative resolution procedure.”

This new clause devolves rail in Wales to the Welsh Government and makes provision about the devolution of commensurate funding.

New clause 11—*Safe bicycle storage at railway stations*—

“(1) Great British Railways and all passenger railway service operators have a duty to provide sufficient safe bicycle storage facilities at all stations that they operate.

(2) In this section ‘safe bicycle storage’ means cycle lockers or cycle hangers.

(3) For the purposes of this section, safe bicycle storage is sufficient if each railway station has—

- (a) at least one safe bicycle storage facility on or adjacent to its premises, and
- (b) at least one additional safe bicycle storage facility for every 30 vehicle parking spaces at the station.”

This new clause would require every station to have safe bike storage in place for passengers.

New clause 12—*Welsh rail funding report and strategy*—

“(1) Within one year of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report setting out—

- (a) an estimate of the cost of unfulfilled rail infrastructure enhancement and renewal need in Wales since 1 April 2000;
- (b) a strategy to fulfil any need identified under paragraph (a).

(2) A report under subsection (1) must include a definition of “unfulfilled rail infrastructure enhancement and renewal”.”

This new clause requires a review of funding, including as needed to make up for rail infrastructure not developed since 2000.

New clause 13—*Investment in rural areas in Wales*—

“(1) Within six months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must prepare and publish a strategy (‘the strategy’) to increase levels of investment in railway infrastructure enhancement in rural areas in Wales.

(2) The Secretary of State may revise or replace the strategy.

(3) The Secretary of State must consult the Welsh Ministers when preparing the strategy.

(4) The Secretary of State must receive the consent of the Welsh Ministers before publishing, revising or replacing the strategy.”

This New Clause would require the Secretary of State to publish a strategy on improving railway infrastructure enhancement investment in rural areas of Wales.

New clause 14—*Passenger growth target*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must set and publish a target to increase passenger numbers in Great Britain.

(2) The Secretary of State—

- (a) must keep the target under review, and
- (b) may revise or replace it.

(3) If the Secretary of State revises or replaces the target, the Secretary of State must publish the revised or replacement target.

(4) Great British Railways must, when exercising its statutory functions, have regard to—

- (a) the target set by the Secretary of State under this section, and
- (b) any strategy or policy of the Scottish Ministers relating to the growth of passenger numbers in Scotland.”

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to set a passenger growth target.

New clause 15—*Travel facilities for rail staff*—

“(1) Great British Railways must, following consultation with such trade unions as the Secretary of State may specify, provide free and discounted travel to persons who are—

- (a) employed by GBR;
- (b) employed by a subsidiary of GBR;
- (c) employed by a company owned by GBR;

- (d) employed by a company contracted to provide a service to GBR;
- (e) employed by a company licensed to operate railway services on GBR infrastructure;
- (f) employed by a railway services company owned by Scottish Ministers, Welsh Ministers or a devolved transport authority;
- (g) employed by a company that is subcontracted to provide rail services to a rail company owned by Scottish Ministers, Welsh Ministers or a devolved transport authority; or
- (h) any other person as the Secretary of State considers appropriate.”

This new clause would require the creation of an industry wide concessionary travel scheme for rail staff, and a requirement for that scheme to be consulted with the trade unions.

New clause 16—Reopening of services to underserved areas—

“(1) Great British Railways must establish a department for the purpose of identifying areas underserved and unserved by railway services.

- (2) In meeting its purpose, the department must consider—
 - (a) options to restore and reopen any lines closed after March 1963, and
 - (b) the potential to add stations onto existing lines.
- (3) The department must cooperate with relevant transport authorities.
- (4) In subsection (3), relevant transport authorities means—
 - (a) Scottish Ministers;
 - (b) Welsh Ministers;
 - (c) in England—
 - (i) any—
 - (a) mayoral strategic authority,
 - (b) combined authority, or
 - (c) combined county authority
 - with responsibility for rail transport or integration of services with rail transport, and
 - (ii) in relation to Greater London, the Mayor of London.”

This new clause would require GBR to establish a department to look at options to reopen closed lines, or add new stations to existing lines, to increase service to underserved and unserved places.

New clause 17—Duty to consult certain Members of Parliament—

“(1) Great British Railways must consult certain Members of Parliament before making a decision within subsection (2).

- (2) A decision is within this subsection if—
 - (a) it relates to railway passenger services or railway infrastructure, and
 - (b) in the opinion of Great British Railways, making that decision would have a significant effect on the economy of any area or on persons living, working or travelling in that area.

(3) In this section ‘certain Members of Parliament’ means any Member of the House of Commons who represents a parliamentary constituency that includes any part of an area as described in subsection (2)(b).”

This new clause would require Great British Railways (GBR) to consult MPs whose constituencies include areas likely to be affected by decisions made by GBR relating to passenger services or railway infrastructure.

New clause 18—Railway services: safeguarding accreditation scheme—

“(1) The Secretary of State must by regulations ensure that all operators of passenger railway services participate in a recognised safeguarding accreditation scheme.

- (2) Any scheme under subsection (1) must be recognised by—
 - (a) the British Transport Police, or
 - (b) any other authority determined as suitable by the Secretary of State.

(3) Regulations under this section are subject to the affirmative procedure.”

This new clause requires all rail service operators to engage with a nationally recognised safeguarding scheme.

New clause 19—Railway workforce: dispute resolution—

“(1) The Secretary of State must by regulations make provision about railway workforce terms and conditions and dispute resolution.

(2) Regulations under this section may designate which terms and conditions for staff working on the railways require—

- (a) consultation prior to agreement, or
- (b) can be imposed without consultation.

(3) Any industrial disputes about arrangements under subsection (2) must be referred to a dispute resolution process.

(4) Any findings of a dispute resolution process under subsection (3) must be accepted and actioned in full including—

- (a) any enforcement action to be taken;
- (b) any award of the dispute resolution by all parties.

(5) Regulations under this section are subject to the affirmative procedure.”

This new clause would allow the Secretary of State to define which railway workforce terms and conditions can be imposed, and which must be agreed, and for any that must be agreed, to refer disputes to binding dispute resolution.

New clause 20—Duty to integrate across modes of transport—

“In exercising any of their functions under this Act, the Secretary of State and Great British Railways must seek to promote the integration of railway passenger services with—

- (a) bus and coach services,
- (b) tram and light rail, and
- (c) micromobility.”

This new clause puts a duty on Great British Railways and the Secretary of State to promote the multimodal transport integration with rail.

New clause 21—Transfer schemes relating to open access operators—

“(1) The Secretary of State must make one or more schemes under which persons who are employees of open access operators (‘open access employees’) may become employees of GBR.

- (2) Any scheme under this section must—
 - (a) include provision that is the same as, or similar to, provision made by the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 (S.I. 2006/246);
 - (b) provide that open access employees may become employees of GBR in the event that their employer ceases to operate.

(3) Paragraph 2(b) applies regardless of whether GBR has taken over operation of any services previously run by the employer of those open access employees.”

This new clause would enable employees of open access operators to transfer to GBR under TUPE should those operators cease to run services.

New clause 22—Duty to provide step-free access—

“(1) Within six months beginning on the day on which this Act is passed, the Secretary of State has a duty to approve such works as are necessary to enable step-free access to all platforms at qualifying stations served by any GBR passenger service.

- (2) In this section, a station is a qualifying station if—

- (a) in any given year, at least one million passengers—
 - (i) start a rail journey,
 - (ii) end a rail journey, or
 - (iii) transfer between passenger train services at the station; and
- (b) on the day on which this Act is passed, there is not step-free access to all platforms at the station.”

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to approve work on ensuring stations serving more than one million passengers a year are step-free.

New clause 23—Accessibility strategy for the railway network—

“(1) Within one year beginning on the day on which this Act is passed, the Secretary of State must publish and lay before Parliament an accessibility strategy for the railway network (‘the strategy’).

(2) The purpose of the strategy is to describe how the railway will be made accessible for all passengers by the end of the period of ten years beginning on the day on which the strategy is published, having particular regard to disabled persons.

(3) The strategy must include—

- (a) a timetable and programme of works for delivering permanent step-free access at all stations and to all platforms;
- (b) measures for ensuring accessible rolling stock, interchange, and station facilities;
- (c) an assessment of costs and funding requirements to meet the purposes of paragraphs (a) and (b);
- (d) a plan for monitoring progress against any goals set in the strategy, including through annual reporting to Parliament; and
- (e) arrangements for consultation with such disabled persons’ organisations and other persons as the Secretary of State may designate.

(4) The strategy must not consider any reasonable adjustment for disabled persons as a substitute for the provision of permanent step-free access at all stations and to all platforms.

(5) Arrangements under paragraph (3)(e) must include consultation throughout the development, implementation, and review of the strategy, including involvement in design and delivery of any activity proposed by the strategy.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to prepare a ten-year railway accessibility strategy, within one year of the passage of the Bill.

New clause 24—Regional railway services passenger organisations—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, by regulations, establish a passenger organisation for each region in which Great British Railways operates (‘GBR regions’).

(2) Any user of railway services who is resident in, or who regularly uses services within, a region may join the regional passenger organisation established under subsection (1) for that region.

(3) The purpose of each regional passenger organisation is to represent passenger interests, including representation of passengers’ expertise to management boards of GBR regions.

(4) Regulations under this section must provide for the governance of each regional passenger organisation, including that members of each organisation must elect a chair and officers, under arrangements made by the Secretary of State.

(5) The Secretary of State must take all reasonable steps to ensure that officers elected under subsection (4) include a proportionate representation of groups protected under the Equality Act 2010.

(6) The Secretary of State must assess and publish an annual report on any steps taken under subsection (5).

(7) No less than one-third of any regional board established to govern or oversee Great British Railways must comprise representatives of regional passenger organisations, including a proportionate representation of disabled passengers.

(8) Any representative to which subsection (7) applies—

- (a) must be elected to that post by a basic majority of members of the organisation, and
- (b) may vote on any decision made by that board.

(9) Regulations under this section must create a disabled people’s committee as part of each regional passenger organisation, with a majority of disabled people, to serve in an expert advisory and supervisory capacity to the regional passengers organisation and the GBR regions.

(10) Regulations under this section are subject to the affirmative procedure.”

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to establish regional passengers groups in each region in which GBR operates, with the purpose of representing passengers’ interests and putting forward passengers’ expertise.

New clause 25—National passengers group—

“(1) The Secretary of State must, by regulations, establish a national passengers group (‘the group’), comprising representatives of each regional passenger organisation under section [Regional railway services passenger organisations].

(2) The purposes of the group under subsection (1) are to—

- (a) facilitate engagement with regional passenger organisations on national rail proposals,
- (b) act as a body that the Secretary of State and GBR must consult on national rail proposals, and
- (c) provide oversight and scrutiny to the regulatory work of the Passengers’ Council.

(3) Regulations under this section must provide for the governance of the group, including that members of the group must elect a chair and officers, under arrangements made by the Secretary of State.

(4) The Secretary of State must take all reasonable steps to ensure that officers elected under subsection (3) include a proportionate representation of groups protected under the Equality Act 2010.

(5) The Secretary of State must assess and publish an annual report on any steps taken under subsection (4).

(6) Any national board established to govern or oversee Great British Railways must comprise at least one-third representatives of this national passenger organisation, including a proportionate representation of disabled passengers.

(7) Any representative of the group to which subsection (6) applies—

- (a) must be elected to that post by a basic majority of members of the group, and
- (b) may vote on any decision made by that board.

(8) Regulations under this section must create a National Accessibility Panel as part of the national passengers’ organisation, with a majority of disabled people, to serve in an expert advisory and supervisory capacity to the national passengers group and the national GBR board.

(9) Regulations under this section are subject to the affirmative procedure.”

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to establish a new national passengers group made up of representatives of regional passenger organisations and requires that the group is represented on a GBR national board.

New clause 26—Transfer of employees to GBR—

“(1) For the purpose of meeting GBR’s function in section 3(1)(i) of this Act, the Secretary of State must make one or more schemes under which persons who hold employment for—

- (a) Network Rail,
 - (b) any franchise operated by DfT Operated Ltd, or
 - (c) any franchise operated by a rail company under a contract with the Department for Transport,
- become employees of GBR.

(2) A scheme made under this section must in particular include provision that is the same as, or similar to, the provision made by the Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) Regulations 2006 (S.I. 2006/246)."

This new clause is consequential on Amendment 64 and enables for the transfer of employees to GBR from Network Rail and DfT-operated franchises.

New clause 27—*Pension schemes*—

"(1) Within three months of this Act receiving Royal Assent, the Secretary of State must make regulations relating to active members of the Railway Pension Scheme who joined the scheme after 4 November 1993.

(2) Regulations made under subsection (1) must—

(a) provide that any person who—

- (i) is an active Member of the Railway Pension Scheme,
- (ii) joined that section of the Railways Pension Scheme after 4 November 1993, and
- (iii) becomes an employee of GBR through arrangements made under this Act,

remains a member of the Railway Pension Scheme under terms and benefits that are no less favourable than those terms and benefits received by the person prior to the passing of this Act;

(b) provide that persons employed by GBR are eligible to join either—

- (i) the Railway Pension Scheme, or
- (ii) any other scheme, provided that the terms and benefits of that scheme are equivalent to the Railway Pension Scheme.

(3) Regulations under this section are subject to the affirmative resolution procedure."

This new clause would provide that employees of GBR, or those transferred into GBR, can continue to access the Railways Pension Scheme or a pension scheme providing equivalent benefit.

New clause 28—*Season ticket discount*—

"(1) Great British Railways must provide a scheme enabling persons who are—

- (a) under the age of 25, and
- (b) enrolled in full-time education at a recognised educational institution

to access a discounted season ticket for travel on railway passenger services provided by participants in the scheme.

(2) A discounted season ticket under this section—

- (a) must cost no less than a third of the price of the full-price season ticket provided by Great British Railways, and
- (b) may be limited to allow travel only between the holder of the season ticket's residence and recognised educational institution.

(3) 'recognised educational institution' means any body under the Education (Recognised Bodies) (England) Order 2020."

New clause 29—*Duty to co-operate*—

"(1) The Secretary of State may direct Great British Railways to co-operate with transport authorities and other specified persons where such cooperation would—

- (a) reduce transport disruption, and
- (b) ensure the effective operation of transport networks.

(2) Before the end of 12 months of the passing of this Act and every subsequent 12 months, the Secretary of State must lay before both Houses of Parliament an annual report on any direction that has been taken under subsection (1).

(3) The report must include—

- (a) an assessment of expected transport disruption resulting from—
 - (i) maintenance;
 - (ii) construction;

(iii) any other work;

related to railways infrastructure operated by Great British Railways and ancillary services.

(4) The report must be laid before both Houses of Parliament."

This new clause gives the Secretary of State the power to direct GBR to co-operate with transport authorities to ensure the effective operation of transport networks and to reduce disruption.

New clause 30—*Accessible rail strategy*—

"(1) Within 12 months of the passing of this Act and before the end of each subsequent period of 10 years, Great British Railways must publish a strategy on accessible rail.

(2) Each strategy under subsection (1) must set out required services standards for stations operated by Great British Railways.

(3) Services standards under section (2) must include targets for the—

- (a) percentage of stations with step free access,
- (b) number of days per year on which lifts at each station are operational,
- (c) number of stations at which passenger assistance is available.

(4) Before the end of 12 months beginning with the publication of a strategy under subsection (1), and before the end of every subsequent 12 months, Great British Railways must publish a report on performance against the strategy.

(5) Any report under subsection (4) must be laid before both Houses of Parliament."

This new clause mandates that Great British Railways publish an accessibility strategy every ten years to monitor and improve accessibility across the rail network, and that GBR reports annually on its progress against the accessibility strategy.

New clause 31—*Service changes: consultation*—

"(1) Before making any planned changes to passenger services, Great British Railways must—

- (a) publish a statement on the compatibility of the changes with—
 - (i) its functions under Section 1;
 - (ii) its regard to strategies under Section 16;
- (b) publish notice of the impact of the changes on any station or routes;
- (c) make provision for compensation claims for passengers affected by the changes;
- (d) consult—
 - (i) local stakeholders,
 - (ii) passenger groups, and
 - (iii) groups representing those with accessibility requirements
 about those changes.

(2) In this section, 'service changes' has such meaning as the Secretary of State must by regulations specify, provided that it includes changes to rail—

- (a) timetables;
- (b) routes;
- (c) service capacity.

(3) Regulations under this section must specify the framework for any compensation under subsection 1(c).

(4) Regulations under this section are subject to the affirmative resolution procedure."

This new clause sets out requirements for Great British Railways to ensure any planned changes to passenger services are only made with due consideration of its objectives and following communication with stakeholders.

New clause 32—*Nationally significant infrastructure projects*—

“(1) An application for a nationally significant infrastructure project may not be proceeded with unless the Secretary of State has published a report on the impact of the project on rail infrastructure and services.

(2) A report under subsection (1) must consider—

- (a) capacity of the rail network,
- (b) the potential need for new lines or services,
- (c) level crossings, and
- (d) the accessibility of the rail network.

(3) The report must be laid before Parliament prior to a decision being made on the application.

(4) In this section, ‘nationally significant infrastructure project’ has the meaning given in section 14 of the Planning Act 2008.”

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to review provision of rail infrastructure and services before an application for a nationally significant infrastructure project can be approved, to ensure the rail network remains able to meet the needs of passengers.

New clause 33—*Rail devolution: Wales*—

“(1) Schedule 7A of the Government of Wales Act 2006 is amended as follows.

(2) In Section E2 (Rail Transport), omit paragraph 117.

(3) Within two years of this Act receiving Royal Assent, the Secretary of State must lay before both Houses of Parliament regulations providing for the transfer of functions relating to rail services in Wales to Welsh Ministers.

(4) The functions transferred under subsection (3) must include, but are not limited to, responsibility for—

- (a) railway infrastructure in Wales;
- (b) the specification, provision and regulation of railway passenger services in Wales;
- (c) the development, publication and implementation of a Welsh Rail Strategy;
- (d) the funding, planning, delivery and maintenance of rail enhancement and renewal projects in Wales; and
- (e) the regulation of access, capacity, charging and performance arrangements for rail infrastructure in Wales.

(5) No regulations may be made by the Secretary of State under this section unless they have been laid in draft before, and approved by, both Houses of Parliament.

(6) On the same day that the regulations specified in subsection (3) are laid before Parliament, the Secretary of State must also publish a statement of rail funding detailing the additional funding to the Welsh Consolidated Fund that will be made by His Majesty’s Government as a result of rail devolution.

(7) This section comes into force on the day this Act receives Royal Assent.”

New clause 34—*Mutual and co-operative structures*—

“(1) Great British Railways must publish a report on the potential benefits to passenger railways services of mutual and co-operative corporate structures.

(2) The report under subsection (1) must consider the impact of mutual and co-operative corporate structures on employee engagement and governance.

(3) The report must be laid before each House of Parliament within six months of this Act being passed.”

This new clause requires GBR to explore and consider mutual and cooperative corporate structures with regards to employee engagement and governance.

New clause 35—*Duty to consider capacity at Ely Junction*—

“(1) In exercising functions under section 17 (rail freight target) and section 15 (rail strategy), the Secretary of State must have regard to the need to increase capacity at Ely Junction.

(2) The rail strategy prepared under section 15 must—

- (a) identify Ely Junction as a capacity constraint of national strategic importance for freight and passenger services, and
- (b) set out how the Secretary of State will work with Great British Railways and other relevant bodies to address that constraint.

(3) Within twelve months beginning on the day on which this Act is passed, the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a report on progress towards resolving capacity constraints at Ely Junction.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State, when setting the rail freight target and preparing the statutory rail strategy, to treat Ely Junction as a nationally significant capacity constraint and to report to Parliament on progress in addressing it.

New clause 36—*Remembrance Sunday ticket fare exemption*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must make regulations which require Great British Railways to provide a scheme enabling persons under subsection (2) to travel for free on railway passenger services to and from events that commemorate Remembrance Sunday.

(2) Regulations under this section must include a person who—

- (a) is a member of the armed forces;
- (b) has been a member of the armed forces; or
- (c) is a widow, widower, or one direct family member of any member of the armed forces who has died in the course of their service.

(3) Regulations under this section must apply the provision of paragraph (2)(c) in such a way that one person is entitled to free travel for each member of the armed forces to which that paragraph applies.

(4) ‘armed forces’ as set out in subsection (2) means any of His Majesty’s forces (within the meaning of the Armed Forces Act 2006).”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to make a travel fee exemption for journeys to and from Remembrance Sunday events for armed forces personnel, armed forces veterans and one representative of a deceased armed forces member across all Great British Railways passenger services.

New clause 37—*Train frequency duty*—

“(1) The Secretary of State must undertake a public consultation on the frequency of Great British Rail services.

(2) The consultation under subsection (1) must consider the appropriate frequency of train services to ensure services meet local need.

(3) The Secretary of State must publish a report on the outcome of the consultation under subsection (1) within one year beginning on the day on which this Act is passed.

(4) The report under subsection (3) must—

- (a) propose a frequency of rail services that will meet local need;
- (b) include proposals for continuous engagement with local communities about the frequency of rail services for those communities.

(5) Before the end of the period of six months beginning on the day on which a report under subsection (3) is published, the Secretary of State must by regulations provide for a duty on Great British Railways to provide the frequency of train services as set out in that report (‘the duty’).

(6) Within one year following the making of regulations under subsection (5), and once per year thereafter, the Secretary of State must publish a report on—

- (a) the extent to which Great British Rail has met the duty under such regulations;
- (b) where the duty is not being met, any proposed changes to Great British Rail services to better allow the duty to be met.

(7) Regulations under this section are subject to the affirmative resolution procedure.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to undertake a public consultation and the regular reporting and monitoring of train frequency to ensure timetabling reflects the needs of local communities.

New clause 38—*Accessible ticket machines—*

“(1) The Secretary of State must by regulations make provision about the accessibility of ticket machines in all stations used by Great British Railways passenger services.

(2) Regulations made under this section must provide that all stations used by Great British Railways passenger services have at least one ticket machine that meets necessary accessibility requirements for wheelchair users.

(3) Regulations made under this section must provide that all ticket machines—

- (a) offer all ticket types available across all Great British Railways passenger services;
- (b) have the same user interface;
- (c) include accessibility options for passengers with sight or hearing loss; and
- (d) include the same language options as ticket machines operated by Transport for London.

(4) Regulations under this section are subject to the affirmative resolution procedure.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to mandate the use of the same ticketing machine across all Great British Railways passenger service stations, introduce a minimum number of accessible ticket machines per station and offer the same ticketing options across the network for passengers and tourists.

New clause 39—*Passengers’ Council Board—*

“(1) The Secretary of State must appoint a board of the Passengers’ Council.

(2) The persons appointed to the board by the Secretary of State must include a minimum of two disabled persons.”

This new clause would ensure representation of disabled people on the Board of the Passengers’ Council.

New clause 40—*Population change: railway services—*

“(1) Great British Railways and the Secretary of State have a duty to provide railway services for an area or at a station proportionate to any increase in population of the area served by that station.

(2) For the purposes of this section, a population increase includes any change in residency of an area that is either—

- (a) permanent, or
- (b) seasonal.

(3) In this section ‘seasonal’ means any period, or periods, of at least seven days where in the opinion of Great British Railways it is reasonably predictable that the population of an area will increase relative to the population during any time that is not the period in question.

(4) Great British Railways and the Secretary of State must consider provision of—

- (a) infrastructure,
- (b) rolling stock
- (c) services, and
- (d) any further investment necessary

for the purpose of meeting the duty under this section.”

This new clause would put a duty on GBR and the Secretary of State to ensure that rail services respond proportionately to any permanent or seasonal increases in population in areas.

New clause 41—*Contribution of rail to environmental targets: report—*

“(1) Within twelve months beginning on the day on which this Act is passed, and before the end of each period of twelve months thereafter, the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a

Report on the contribution of rail and rail travel in the UK to the reduction of global greenhouse gas emissions to net zero at a rate consistent with—

- (a) meeting the UK carbon account target for 2050, as provided for in section 1 of the Climate Change Act 2008;
- (b) limiting the global mean temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius compared to pre-industrial levels, as defined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate change.

(2) A report under this section must include recommendations to Great British Railways for any actions to increase the contribution of rail to the goals in paragraphs (1)(a) and (1)(b).”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament annually on the contribution of UK rail to net zero and climate change goals.

New clause 42—*Assessment of passing loop at Tisbury—*

“(1) The Secretary of State must undertake an assessment of the potential benefits of constructing a passing loop at Tisbury on the West of England line.

- (2) The assessment must consider the potential benefits to—
 - (a) reliability of services on, and
 - (b) capacity of

West of England line railway services that pass through Tisbury.

(3) The Secretary of State must publish a report containing an assessment under this section within 12 months beginning on the day on which this Act is passed.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to undertake an assessment of the potential benefits of constructing a new passing loop at Tisbury.

New clause 43—*Provision of food and drink—*

“(1) Great British Railways has a duty to provide food and drink on all qualifying GBR services.

(2) A GBR service is a qualifying service if it has a journey time of at least one hour from the station from which the service first departs to the station at which it terminates.

(3) In meeting the duty under this section, Great British Railways may provide food and drink through such means as it considers appropriate.”

New clause 44—*Great British Railways: cyber security and technology strategy—*

“(1) Great British Railways must publish a cyber security and technology strategy (‘the strategy’).

(2) The strategy must set out how Great British Railways will—

- (a) use emerging technologies, including artificial intelligence, to innovate in respect of its operations and services,
- (b) develop resilience for rolling stock and critical systems in line with industry and international standards, and
- (c) increase the use of technology to improve passenger experience and services including—
 - (i) WiFi access,
 - (ii) digital ticketing,
 - (iii) real time information systems, and
 - (iv) accessibility for passengers with sight or hearing loss.

(3) Great British Railways must publish an annual report describing progress that has been made against the strategy and any challenges that have arisen in delivering the strategy.”

This new clause would require GBR to publish a cyber security and technology strategy, as well as an annual report on progress.

New clause 45—*Great British Railways Governance—*

“(1) This section applies to a person who—

- (a) works for, or
- (b) has a financial interest in

a private company involved in the railway sector.

(2) A person under subsection (1) is ineligible for appointment to positions within the governance structures of Great British Railways, including—

- (a) any Board of GBR,
- (b) any regional Boards that oversee GBR at a regional level,
- (c) Passengers' Council, and
- (d) Office of Rail and Road."

This new clause requires that people who work for private companies involved in the railway sector or who hold a financial interest in the railway sector are ineligible for participation in the governance of GBR, including on the board of national GBR and in regional GBR boards.

New clause 46—Review of passenger safety—

"(1) Within six months beginning on the day on which this Act is passed, the Secretary of State must undertake a comprehensive review of passenger safety.

(2) A review under this section must in particular have regard to the safety of women and disabled people.

(3) The review must consider—

- (a) staffing levels at railway stations and on board trains, including for late-night services and other services which in the opinion of the Secretary of State give rise to a higher risk to passenger safety;
- (b) lighting in waiting areas;
- (c) opening hours and accessibility of help points;
- (d) CCTV coverage at stations and on trains;
- (e) the potential merits of introducing real-time reporting applications for incidents where a passenger is harassed or otherwise is unsafe, and an associated rapid response protocol following a notification being made to an appropriate authority via such an application;
- (f) public awareness of methods to report concerns about safety, including the British Transport Police text facility;
- (g) the potential merits of providing a dedicated phone number that allows passengers to directly contact the next station on the line to report incidents or safety concerns;
- (h) coordination of travel connections from stations at night, including between rail operators, local public transport and licensed taxi services;
- (i) the potential merits of increasing, where it is practicable, patrols of trains and stations by train managers, guards or other appropriate persons for the purposes of identifying incidents, supporting accessibility, and promoting passenger safety.

(4) Where the review recommends any action to improve passenger safety, the Secretary of State and Great British Railways must make all reasonable efforts to implement that action.

(5) In this section, 'appropriate persons' has such meaning as the Secretary of State may specify, provided that it may have different meanings for different purposes."

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to review ways to improve passenger safety. It sets out the content of such a review, and requires the Secretary of State and GBR to take reasonable steps to implement the review's recommendations.

New clause 47—Free train travel for 16 to 18-year olds in education or training—

"(1) Great British Railways must provide for a scheme enabling persons who are—

- (a) aged 16, 17 or 18, and
- (b) either—
 - (i) enrolled in full-time education or training at a recognised educational institution, or
 - (ii) undertaking an apprenticeship

to travel for free on railway passenger services subject to the condition in subsection (2).

(2) The condition is that the travel undertaken must be between a person's residence and either—

- (a) in the case of paragraph (1)(b)(i), the recognised educational institution at which the person is enrolled, or
- (b) in the case of paragraph (1)(b)(ii), any place at which the person is employed, or undertakes any training relating to that employment.

(3) In this section 'recognised educational institution' means any body under the Education (Recognised Bodies) (England) Order 2020."

New clause 51—Long-term freight access agreements—

"(1) Great British Railways may enter into long-term access agreements with—

- (a) Freight operating companies, and
- (b) Persons developing, owning or operating rail-connected logistics facilities.

(2) An agreement under this section may be granted for a period exceeding 5 years where the ORR is satisfied that the agreement—

- (a) Supports the rail freight target set under section 17, and
- (b) Does not unduly restrict network capacity for other users."

This amendment would allow GBR to enter into long-term access arrangements for freight.

New clause 52—Purpose of Great British Railways—

"(1) The purpose of Great British Railways is defined by the following objectives—

- (a) prioritising the needs of Great British Railways passengers in decision-making,
- (b) delivering reliable, safe and accessible railway passenger services,
- (c) providing value for money for passengers and taxpayers, including consideration of the affordability of fare prices,
- (d) increasing passenger numbers and growing usage of the network year-on-year,
- (e) expanding and improving the network, including services, connectivity, and restoring or adding routes,
- (f) modernising working practices and innovating to improve productivity, efficiency, and passenger experience,
- (g) supporting economic growth, national productivity and improving connections between towns, cities and employment centres,
- (h) improving the experience of disabled and vulnerable passengers and ensuring consistent access to assistance,
- (i) ensuring fair and transparent treatment of open access, freight and devolved operators when allocating access and charges,
- (j) growing rail freight, including supporting delivery of the national freight growth target,
- (k) strengthening the financial sustainability of the railways, reducing reliance on operating subsidy over time,
- (l) integrating track and train, simplifying structures, and avoiding duplication, and
- (m) supporting multimodal integration with buses, trams and local transport networks.

(2) The Secretary of State and Great British Railways must have regard to the purpose set out in subsection (1) in exercising their functions under this Act."

This new clause defines Great British Railways' purpose.

New clause 53—Great British Railways: Key Performance Indicators—

"(1) Within six months beginning on the day on which this Act is passed, the Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a framework of key performance indicators for Great British Railways (the 'framework').

(2) The framework must include targets for each of the following key performance indicators—

- (a) reliability, including punctuality, cancellations, short-forming, delays and the reliability of key connections,
- (b) safety and security, including safety incidents, security incidents affecting passengers, staff presence, and delivery of safety-critical maintenance,
- (c) comfort and on-board experience, including cleanliness, functioning of heating, air-conditioning, and lighting, overcrowding, availability and performance of an internet connection, power sockets and toilet facilities,
- (d) affordability and value for money, including the level of fares, availability of discounted fares, availability of flexible fares, transparency of information about fares, and passenger perception of value for money,
- (e) passenger growth and network expansion including growth in passenger numbers, number of communities served, service frequency, and provision of new or restored services,
- (f) financial sustainability, efficiency and productivity including operating subsidy levels, productivity improvements, delivery of projects on time and on budget, simplification of processes, including an explicit savings target set by the Secretary of State, and
- (g) freight growth and performance including rail freight volumes, punctuality, reliability, allocation of freight paths and capacity at pinch points.

(3) Within three months of the end of each financial year, Great British Railways must publish a report on its performance against each part of the framework under subsection (2) during the previous financial year.

(4) The Secretary of State must lay any report required by subsection (3) before Parliament.”

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to set a statutory KPI framework for Great British Railways.

New clause 54—Working Practices and Productivity Modernisation Framework—

“(1) Within 12 months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must publish a Working Practices and Modernisation Framework (‘the Framework’).

(2) The Framework must include measures to—

- (a) enable all passenger routes to be planned and delivered as a seven-day service, within the pay and conditions for standard working hours;
- (b) enable drivers to operate train doors without additional payments in locations where this is not yet standard practice;
- (c) require Great British Railways to establish a train driving school with updated training methods, with the purposes of reducing route-knowledge training times and increasing driver availability;
- (d) end practices including—
 - (i) short-notice holiday approvals;
 - (ii) dependency on overtime to compensate for sickness absence or annual leave;
 - (iii) the prohibition on driving more than one journey over the same rails;
- (e) introduce multi-disciplinary and flexible maintenance teams in GBR;
- (f) support the adaptation of drone-based and digital inspection of railway infrastructure;
- (g) prohibit unnecessary delays in introducing new rolling stock arising from route-learning requirements or working practices that exceed what is reasonably required for the safe operation of the railway, ensuring new fleets can deploy when manufactured;
- (h) permit driver managers to drive trains when required;
- (i) require maintenance and operational teams based in specified areas to assist teams in neighbouring areas;

- (j) prevent the Secretary of State from awarding general pay rises to any area of the rail workforce where—
 - (i) workforce productivity has fallen, or
 - (ii) where actions required in the Framework have not been implemented.

(3) Great British Railways has a duty to secure compliance with the Framework.

(4) Where the duty on Great British Railways under subsection (3) applies in respect of services which are run by any person other than Great British Railways, Great British Railways must fulfil the duty via access agreements with the person running those services.

(5) Within 12 months of this Act coming into force and within every subsequent 12 months, Great British Railways must publish an annual report on the measures in the Framework.

(6) Any report produced under subsection (5) must include—

- (a) a summary of measures taken to reform the rail workforce as a result of provisions of the Framework;
- (b) data on—
 - (i) workforce productivity,
 - (ii) cost savings,
 - (iii) changes in overtime expenditure, and
 - (iv) reasons for any delays in implementation of the provisions of the Framework.

(7) The Secretary of State must lay before Parliament a copy of any report produced under subsection (5).

(8) The Secretary of State may issue directions to Great British Railways under section 7 of this Act where, in the opinion of the Secretary of State, it has not met its duty under subsection (3).”

This new clause makes provision for a Working Practices and Productivity Modernisation Framework.

New clause 56—Anti-social noise—

“(1) Within six months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must by regulations make provision to prohibit any individual on passenger rail services from purposefully playing content with audio from personal electronic devices without the use of headphones in such a way that causes a disturbance to other passengers.

(2) The regulations must ensure that any person that contravenes the prohibition set out under subsection (1) is liable to a fine not exceeding level 3 on the standard scale set out in Section 122 of the Sentencing Act 2020.

(3) Regulations under this section are subject to the affirmative resolution procedure.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to introduce statutory regulations on the use of electronic audio devices on rail services.

New clause 57—Ticketing and Settlement Agreement—

“(1) Within six months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must by regulations establish a Ticketing and Settlement Agreement (‘the agreement’).

(2) The agreement must set out the—

- (a) opening hours, and
- (b) range of products sold,

at any ticket office operated by Great British Railways or the Department for Transport Operator.

(3) The agreement must include all measures set out in Schedule 17 of any Ticketing and Settlement Agreement in place on the day on which this Act is passed.

(4) Changes may only be made to the agreement regarding opening hours or the range of products sold if—

- (a) an equality impact assessment, and
- (b) consultation process

has been undertaken by the relevant passenger body.

(5) Regulations under this section must establish a process for challenging any changes proposed under subsection (4).

(6) The Secretary of State must decide on any challenge made under subsection (5).”

New clause 58—*Metroisation*—

“(1) Within six months beginning on the day on which this Act is passed, the Secretary of State must prepare, publish and lay before Parliament a rail metroisation strategy.

(2) The purposes of a strategy under this section must include increasing the proportion and number of passenger journeys under 10 kilometres undertaken using metropolitan rail services.

(3) The strategy under this section must—

(a) include proposals—

- (i) for cooperation between Great British Rail, the Secretary of State, local planning authorities and mayors for the purpose of developing and delivering metropolitan rail services;
- (ii) for the funding of those services;
- (iii) for the development of local metroisation area plans by local planning authorities and mayoral authorities;
- (iv) for provision of multimodal ticketing across transport within the area served by any metropolitan rail services;

(b) specify the governance arrangements for metropolitan rail services provided for by a corporation under subparagraph (a)(i).

(4) For the purpose of this section—

‘local metroisation area plan’ means a plan for the delivery of rail services and ancillary services to an area served by metropolitan rail provision, including—

- (a) the intended outcome of the provision of such services;
- (b) station access and interchange arrangements;
- (c) the funding model for those services;
- (d) a projection of CO2 emissions per passenger kilometre travelled using the relevant metropolitan rail provision;

‘mayoral authorities’ means—

- (a) a mayoral combined authority within the meaning given by section 107A(8) of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009, or
- (b) a mayoral combined county authority within the meaning given by section 27(8) of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023;

‘metropolitan rail services’ means rail services that start and end within an area with a radius of 25 km from a designated point within a local authority or mayoral authority area.”

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to produce a strategy for rail metroisation, including cooperation with mayoral authorities to deliver that metroisation.

New clause 59—*GBR contribution to town growth*—

“Great British Railways may enter into a joint venture or partnership vehicle with a mayoral development corporation for the purpose of delivering rail infrastructure and services to town growth zones, station investment zones, or new green towns promoted by, or otherwise connected with, that mayoral development corporation.”

This new clause would enable GBR to enter into agreements with mayoral development corporations to deliver rail to areas of new local growth.

Government amendments 92 and 93.

Amendment 50, in clause 3, page 2, line 19, at end insert

“on an equal basis via any means of sale, including online and at station ticket offices,”.

This amendment would give GBR a statutory function to ensure that passenger fares must be sold at ticket offices on the same basis as online.

Amendment 1, page 2, line 26, at end insert—

“(h) complying with the provisions of the Passengers’ Charter laid under section [Passengers’ Charter]”.

This amendment is consequential on NC1.

Amendment 56, page 2, line 26, at end insert—

“(h) ensuring the safety, including safety from assault, of all GBR and non-GBR employees that facilitate railway services, and

(i) ensuring that there are safe staffing levels to facilitate railway services.”

Amendment 64, page 2, line 26, at end insert—

“(h) acting as the single employer of all persons currently employed by—

- (i) Network Rail,
- (ii) franchises operated by DfT Operator Limited,
- (iii) franchises operated by rail companies under contracts for passenger rail services between those companies and the Department for Transport, and

(iv) such other companies operating or facilitating rail services as the Secretary of State may specify, provided that any such specification is made following consultation with and with the agreement of relevant trade unions.”

This amendment would add to GBR’s statutory functions a duty to act as a single employer for all rail workers transferring into it from Network Rail and DfT franchises, and for persons employed by rail companies wholly owned by Scottish and Welsh Ministers to be transferred into GBR subject to the agreement of those ministers.

Amendment 2, page 2, line 31, at end insert—

“(2A) Great British Railways’ function under subsection (1)(d) must be exercised in accordance with the findings of the report published under section [Report on Great British Railways’ ticketing function].”

This amendment is related to NC6 and requires that GBR exercises its ticketing function in accordance with the findings of the report detailed in that new clause.

Amendment 5, page 3, line 4, at end insert—

“(4A) Great British Railways must, when exercising its statutory functions, seek to increase passenger traffic on railways.

(4B) Great British Railways must set and publish targets in relation to subsection (4A).”

This amendment would require Great British Railways to exercise its statutory functions with a view to increasing passenger numbers.

Amendment 89, in clause 5, page 4, line 2, at end insert—

“(a) Where no arrangement between Great British Railways and a relevant local authority exists, the relevant local authority may appeal under Section 67 a decision made by Great British Railways affecting passenger rail services within its boundary.”

Amendment 166, page 4, line 15, at end insert—

“(d) a regional railway undertaking that is nominated by any other body that is a relevant local government body for the purposes of this subsection.

(6) For the purposes of this section, a ‘regional railway undertaking’ means a company that is—

- (a) wholly owned by a relevant local government body, or
- (b) limited by guarantee.”

This amendment would ensure that a devolution agreement could be reached with a devolved railway body whose geographic coverage may vary from current mayoral area boundaries.

Government amendments 94 and 95.

Amendment 150, in clause 7, page 5, line 4, at end insert—

- “(1A) A direction under this section may only be given as a last resort, and only if the executive head of Great British Railways has had to be removed because Great British Railways is failing to comply with its key performance indicators as set out in section [Great British Railways: Key Performance Indicators].”

This amendment limits the Secretary of State's power to give directions to Great British Railways to a last resort.

Amendment 46, page 5, line 27, at end insert—

- “(5A) The Secretary of State must provide a copy of a direction, variation or revocation published in accordance with subsection (5) to the Transport Select Committee of the House of Commons.

(5B) References in this section to the Transport Committee of the House of Commons—

- (a) if the name of that Committee changes, are references to that Committee by its new name, and
- (b) if the functions of that Committee (or substantially corresponding functions) become functions of a different Committee of the House of Commons, are to be treated as references to the Committee by which the functions are exercisable.”

This amendment would require that any published direction, or variation or revocation of a direction, issued to Great British Railways by the Secretary of State is provided to the Transport Committee of the House of Commons.

Amendment 151, in clause 9, page 6, line 35, at end insert—

- “(1A) The Secretary of State may only give guidance under this section if—

- (a) the Secretary of State has drawn to Great British Railways' attention that Great British Railways is not meeting a key performance indicator set out in section [Great British Railways: Key Performance Indicators], and
- (b) Great British Railways has not, in the opinion of the Secretary of State, taken action to remedy this failing within the period of two months.”

This amendment would restrict the Secretary of State's ability to issue guidance to GBR to circumstances where GBR was failing to meet a key performance indicator as specified in NC53.

Amendment 152, in clause 10, page 7, line 8, at end insert—

- “(1A) The Scottish Ministers may only give guidance under this section if—

- (a) Scottish Ministers have drawn to Great British Railways' attention that Great British Railways is not meeting a key performance indicator set out in section [Great British Railways: Key Performance Indicators], and
- (b) Great British Railways has not taken action to remedy this failing within the period of two months.”

This amendment would restrict Scottish Ministers' ability to issue guidance to Great British Railways to circumstances where Great British Railways was failing to meet a key performance indicator as specified in NC53.

Amendment 28, in clause 13, page 7, line 27, at end insert

“, including the levying of charges on providers of railway rolling stock.”

This amendment ensures that the charges GBR may impose include possible levies on rolling stock companies.

Amendment 37, in clause 15, page 8, line 22, after “publish” insert “lay before Parliament”.

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to lay the Rail Strategy before Parliament.

Amendment 4, page 8, line 23, at end insert

“for the next 30 years for”.

This amendment would ensure that the rail strategy set out in Clause 15 must cover a 30-year period.

Amendment 55, page 8, line 26, at end insert—

- “(c) the expansion of the railway network to rural population settlements that are currently not served by the railway, and
- (d) co-operation between GBR and relevant local and regional transport authorities, for the purpose of integrating railways with bus services and active travel options including cycling routes and walking routes.”

This amendment would require that the rail strategy to include measures to support rail travel in rural areas, and measures to better integrate rail travel with other travel options, including active travel.

Amendment 68, page 8, line 26, at end insert—

- “(c) resolving key capacity constraints of national strategic importance, including Ely Junction.”

This amendment is related to NC35. It would require that the Rail Strategy includes consideration of key capacity constraints, and include Ely Junction as such a constraint.

Amendment 72, page 8, line 26, at end insert—

- “(c) the provision of rail services to areas experiencing permanent or seasonal population change within the meaning of section (Population change: railway services).”

Amendment 65, page 8, line 28, at end insert—

- “(2A) The rail strategy must include a strategy for level crossings (“the level crossings strategy”).

(2B) The level crossing strategy must set out an assessment of the impact of level crossings on the economy and community of the area in which the level crossing is situated, for the purpose of reducing disruption caused by level crossings.”

Amendment 66, page 8, line 28, at end insert—

- “(2A) The rail strategy must include an assessment the ability of passengers to change between—

- (a) main line rail services and branch line rail services, and
- (b) rail services and other modes of public transport.

(2B) An assessment under subsection (2A) must consider how to reduce delays and disruption to end-to-end journeys involving a change between rail services, or between rail services and other modes of public transport.”

Amendment 85, page 8, line 28, at end insert—

- “(2A) The rail strategy must include Key Performance Indicators for GBR, including—

- (a) for operating a safe railway,
- (b) for promoting the interests of users and potential users of railway passenger services including, in particular, the needs of disabled persons,
- (c) for promoting the use of the railway network in Great Britain for the carriage of goods,
- (d) for increasing the number of passenger journeys in absolute terms and as a percentage of passenger journeys by mode of transport,
- (e) for promoting high levels of passenger satisfaction as monitored by The Passengers Council,
- (f) for minimising the number of services delayed or cancelled,
- (g) for delivering value for money, taking into account the costs that will need to be met from public funds and the need to make efficient use of those funds,
- (h) for improving efficiency and productivity in the delivery of railway services.

(2B) The rail strategy may not be brought into force unless a draft has been laid before and approved by resolution of each House of Parliament.”

Amendment 38, page 8, line 33, at end insert—

“(4A) When the strategy is revised or replaced [in accordance with subsection (4)(b)], the Secretary must lay before Parliament the revised or replaced strategy, subject to subsection (4B).

(4B) The duty under subsection (4A) does not apply where the Secretary of State considers that all revisions made to the strategy are non-substantive.”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to lay before Parliament any replacement, or substantively revised, rail strategy.

Amendment 86, page 8, line 34, leave out

“the Secretary of State must publish the revised or replacement strategy”

and insert

“the revised or replacement strategy may not be brought into force unless a draft has been laid before and approved by resolution of each House of Parliament.”

Amendment 170, page 8, line 35, at end insert—

“(5A) When preparing the rail strategy, the Secretary of State must ensure that it aligns with the ten-year strategy for UK Infrastructure, CP 1344.”

This amendment would require the rail strategy to align with the Government’s ten-year infrastructure strategy, laid before Parliament in June 2025, CP 1344.

Amendment 90, page 9, line 2, after “Ministers” insert

“, Scottish Ministers, the Mayor of London, Mayors of Mayoral Combined Authorities or Mayoral Combined County Authorities.”.

Amendment 171, in clause 16, page 9, line 21, at end insert—

“(d) the ten-year strategy for UK infrastructure, CP 1344.”

This amendment would require GBR and the ORR to have regard to the Government’s ten-year infrastructure strategy, laid before Parliament in June 2025, CP 1344.

Amendment 87, page 9, line 26, at end insert—

“(4) Great British Railways must prepare an annual report to be laid before Parliament detailing its performance in meeting, and its forward plan to meet, its statutory duties.”

Amendment 67, in clause 17, page 9, line 29, at end insert—

“(1A) Any proposals by the Secretary of State and Great British Railways about how they intend to meet the target under this section must include an assessment of the impact of those proposals on level crossings.”

Amendment 29, in clause 18, page 10, line 16, leave out subsection (a) and insert—

“(a) so as to protect and promote the rights and interests of users and potential users of railway passenger services, including in particular the rights and interests of disabled persons.”

This amendment replaces the requirement to consider the interests of users of the railway and needs of disabled users of the railway with a requirement to protect and promote the rights of those persons.

Amendment 70, page 10, line 17, after “particular,” insert

“in the manner best calculated to make improvements for”.

This amendment would require the duty-holders to exercise their functions in a way that improves accessibility of the rail network rather than only promoting the interests of disabled persons.

Amendment 53, page 10, line 26, at end insert

“including the value of public investments”.

This amendment adds a requirement to consider the value of public investments as part of the general duty on cost-efficiency in relation to public funds.

Amendment 30, page 10, line 26, at end insert—

“(g) so as to maximise, so far as practicable within the resources available, the social and economic benefits resulting from the operation of the railway network in Great Britain,

(h) having regard to the effect the provision of railway services has on the environment,

(i) so as to increase the use of railways relative to other modes of transport,

(j) so as to achieve targets towards the full accessibility of the rail network,

(k) so as to secure the affordability of fares,

(l) so as to improve connectivity between rail and other forms of transport.”

This amendment gives Great British Railways additional duties to maximise social and economic benefits, achieve targets for modal shift and accessibility, secure the affordability of fares and improve connectivity between rail and other forms of transport.

Amendment 35, page 10, line 26, at end insert—

“(g) in the manner best calculated to promote the transfer into direct employment by GBR of non-GBR employees who facilitate railway services.”

This amendment ensures that Great British Railways performs its duties in a way that ensures the maximum possible insourcing and integration of the rail workforce.

Amendment 48, page 10, line 26, at end insert—

“(g) acting in a fair, transparent and non-discriminatory manner,”.

This amendment would place a requirement on Ministers, Great British Railways and the ORR to exercise their functions in a fair and non-discriminatory manner.

Amendment 49, page 10, line 26, at end insert—

“(g) in the manner best calculated to increase the overall distance travelled by passengers—

(i) by rail,

(ii) by rail relative to private car use and domestic flights, and

(iii) resulting from the integration of rail services with active travel, bus, tram, metro, coach, ferry and any other public transport services.”

Amendment 157, page 10, line 26, at end insert—

“(g) in the manner best calculated to increase the number travelling by railway,

(h) in the manner best calculated to contribute to economic growth,

(i) in the manner best calculated to increase private sector investment and involvement in the railways and railway services,

(j) in the manner best calculated to remove or reduce the need for public subsidy of the railways,

(k) in the manner best calculated to increase levels of passenger satisfaction as monitored by The Passengers’ Council, and

(l) in the manner best calculated to improve efficiency and productivity in the delivery of railway services.”

This amendment gives Great British Railways additional duties to promote passenger growth, economic growth, and increased private sector investment in the railways.

Amendment 59, page 10, line 28, at end insert—

“provided that they must not favour the conditions of paragraph (f) over the conditions of paragraph (a) to the extent that any station may not have step-free access as a result of balancing the requirements.”

Amendment 36, page 10, line 32, at end insert—

“non-GBR employees’ means—

- (a) employees of a company or body contracted to provide services to GBR to facilitate railway services, including cleaning;
- (b) employees of companies granted a licence to operate services on GBR infrastructure;
- (c) such other persons as the Secretary of State considers appropriate following consultation with such trade unions as the Secretary of State may specify.”

See explanatory statement for Amendment 35.

Amendment 158, page 10, line 34, leave out subparagraphs (a) and (b) and insert—

- “(a) reliability, including punctuality, cancellations, short-forming, delays and the reliability of key connections,
- (b) safety and security, including safety incidents, security incidents affecting passengers, staff presence, and the delivery of safety-critical maintenance,
- (c) passenger comfort and on-board experience, including cleanliness, the functioning of heating, air-conditioning and lighting, overcrowding, the availability and performance of any internet connection or power sockets, and toilet facilities,
- (d) affordability and value for money, including levels of fares, the availability of discounted or flexible fares, transparency of fare information, and passenger perception of value for money,
- (e) passenger growth and network expansion, including growth in passenger numbers, the number of communities served, service frequency, and the provision of new or restored services.”

This amendment defines standards of railway performance for the purposes of Great British Railways functions.

Amendment 167, page 10, line 41, at end insert—

“‘rights’ of passengers and disabled passengers includes rights under the Equality Act 2010, data protection legislation (including the UK GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018), and consumer protection legislation (including the Consumer Rights Act 2015), and other legal rights to non-discrimination, accessibility, privacy, fair treatment, information and redress.”

This amendment is consequential upon amendment 29.

Amendment 57, in clause 19, page 11, line 17, at end insert—

- “(3) In meeting the duty under subsection (2), they must—
- (a) take all reasonable steps to prevent and reduce incidents of assault against persons working on the railways, and
- (b) ensure levels of staffing sufficient to meet the duty.”

This amendment would ensure GBR will have a duty to reduce staff assaults and protect safe staffing levels.

Amendment 159, in clause 20, page 11, line 25, leave out paragraph (d).

This amendment requires the ORR to promote competition in its appeals role.

Amendment 160, page 11, line 26, leave out paragraph (e).

This amendment removes the exemption for ORR’s functions under section 55 to 58 of the Railways Act 1993 from its competition duty.

Amendment 31, page 11, line 28, at end insert—

- “(h) its functions as the enforcement body for rail passenger rights and obligations, consumer protection and accessibility, including passenger related licence conditions.”

This amendment means that the ORR’s duty to promote competition does not apply when it conflicts with its passenger rights enforcement duties.

Amendment 54, page 11, line 31, insert—

“provided that such exercise does not adversely affect passenger rights, network integration or unreasonably increase the cost to public funds of providing railway services.”

This amendment means that ORR must exercise its duty to promote competition in a way that does not adversely affect passenger rights, network integration, or unreasonably increase costs to public funds.

Amendment 91, in clause 25, page 14, line 13, at end insert—

“(2A) The Secretary of State may not designate a service currently commissioned by—

- (a) a local government body as defined in Section 5, or
- (b) Transport for London

without obtaining consent from the relevant body.”

Amendment 75, page 14, line 19, at end insert—

“(4A) The Secretary of State may not vary or revoke a designation so as to permit the operation of railway passenger services by any person other than a public sector company.”

This amendment would prevent the Secretary of State from changing any designation of services in such a way that allows operation by a company other than a public sector company.

Amendment 76, in clause 28, page 16, line 2, at end insert—

“(4) Regulations under this section must not provide that railway passenger services are exempt from designation unless those services are to be provided by a public sector company.”

This amendment would prevent the Secretary of State from exempting any passenger service from designation unless it is provided by the public sector.

Amendment 77, in clause 31, page 16, line 31, leave out from “contract” to end of line 37 and insert “to—

- (a) Great British Railways, or
- (b) one or more GBR companies that are public sector companies.”

This amendment would ensure that the Secretary of State’s duty to secure provision of passenger rail services is performed using public sector companies exclusively.

Amendment 88, page 16, line 32, at end insert—

“(a) Great British Railways or a GBR Company may sub-contract a direct award under this section to a private train operating company.”

Amendment 78, page 17, line 5, leave out from “companies” to end of line 6.

This amendment is related to Amendment 77, but for services designated by Scottish Ministers.

Amendment 79, page 17, line 11, leave out from “companies” to end of line 12.

This amendment is related to Amendment 77, but for services designated by Welsh Ministers.

Amendment 80, page 17, line 27, at end insert—

“(7) In this section “direct award” means the award of a public service contract without any competitive tendering procedure.”

Amendment 143, in clause 34, page 18, line 21, after “are” insert—

“UK veterans, members of the UK armed forces and their families, aged 26-30,”.

This amendment, alongside Amendments 144 to 147 would require GBR to continue to offer discounted rail fares for veterans, members of the UK armed forces and their families, or young people aged 26 to 30.

Amendment 32, page 18, line 23, at end insert—

“(1A) Great British Railways must provide a scheme enabling persons who are British residents to travel at discounted fares for an annual fee on railway passenger services provided by all licensed rail operators.”

Amendment 144, page 18, line 30, after “are” insert—

“UK veterans, members of the UK armed forces and their families, aged 26-30,”.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 143.

Amendment 145, page 18, line 33, after “are” insert—

“UK veterans, members of the UK armed forces and their families, aged 26-30,”.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 143.

Amendment 146, page 18, line 37, after “are” insert—

“UK veterans, members of the UK armed forces and their families, aged 26-30,”.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 143.

Amendment 147, page 19, line 4, after “are” insert—

“UK veterans, members of the UK armed forces and their families, aged 26-30,”.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 143.

Amendment 81, in clause 35, page 19, leave out lines 19 to 26 and insert—

“(a) Great British Railways, being a company wholly owned by the Secretary of State,

(b) a GBR company, that is, a company wholly owned (directly or through one or more wholly owned subsidiaries) by Great British Railways,

(c) a company that is wholly owned by the Welsh Ministers or the Scottish Ministers,

(d) a company that is wholly and jointly owned by the Secretary of State and the Welsh Ministers, or

(e) a company that is wholly and jointly owned by the Secretary of State and the Scottish Ministers;”.

This amendment defines GBR and GBR companies in such a way as to ensure that they are always public sector companies.

Amendment 33, in clause 36, page 19, line 35, leave out paragraph (a) and insert—

“(a) must protect and promote the rights and interests of users and potential users of railway passenger services, including in particular the rights and interests of disabled persons.”

This amendment adds the requirement to protect and promote passenger rights and the rights of disabled persons to the duties of the Passengers’ Council.

Amendment 71, page 19, line 35, leave out

“must have particular regard to”

and insert—

“must take all reasonable steps to promote improvements in meeting”

This amendment would require the Passengers’ Council to exercise its functions in a way that promotes improvements in the accessibility of the rail network rather than only having regard to the interests and needs of disabled passengers.

Amendment 60, page 20, line 2, at end insert—

“(2) In taking into account costs under subsection (1)(b), and having regard to its duty under paragraph (1)(a), the Council must not treat the cost of providing step-free access as sufficient reason for preferment of other reasonable adjustments to meet the interests and needs of disabled persons.”

Amendment 47, in clause 42, page 23, line 12, leave out from “must” to the end of line 18, and insert—

“take such action, from the range of enforcement actions open to them, as is necessary to remedy or prevent the contravention, unless there is a legal impediment to so doing or the issue has satisfactorily been remedied.

(4) The ORR must take such enforcement action as required by this section within one month of the matter being referred by the Passengers’ Council.”

This amendment would require the ORR to take enforcement action within one month of an issue being referred to it by the Passengers’ Council.

Amendment 61, in clause 46, page 24, line 29, at end insert—

“including provision of step-free access at stations and on trains”.

Amendment 161, in clause 47, page 25, line 24, leave out from “Council” to the end of line 32 and insert—

“take such action (if any) as it thinks appropriate for the purpose of remedying the contravention, or avoiding it taking place or being repeated.”

This amendment gives the Passengers’ Council the power to enforce improvement plans.

Amendment 39, in clause 48, page 26, line 3, before “a mayoral strategic authority” insert “the mayor of”.

This amendment clarifies that statutory duties to consult apply to the mayor of a mayoral combined authority.

Amendment 51, in clause 49, page 26, line 29, at end insert—

“(fa) any proposed—

(i) closure,

(ii) reduction in provision of, or

(iii) amendment to the operating hours of, ticket offices,”

This amendment would require GBR to consult the Passengers’ Council on closure of, reduction in provision of, or any changes to opening hours of, ticket offices.

Amendment 58, page 26, line 31, at end insert—

“(h) any proposed changes to staffing levels at stations or on trains.

(3) The Passengers’ Council must undertake a public consultation before responding to Great British Railways about any matter under subsections (2)(a) and 2(h).”

This amendment would require any changes to staffing at stations or on trains to be subject to consultation with the Passengers’ Council, and require the Passengers’ Council to consult the public on such changes as well as on changes under subsection (2)(a).

Amendment 62, page 26, line 31, at end insert—

“(h) provision of step-free access at stations and on trains”

Amendment 52, page 26, line 31, at end insert—

“(3) The Passengers’ Council must undertake a public consultation before responding to Great British Railways about any matter under subsection (2)(fa).”

This amendment is consequential on Amendment 51 and requires the Passengers’ Council to consult the public about proposals from GBR to close, or change the opening hours of, ticket offices.

Amendment 63, in clause 53, page 28, line 12, after “persons” insert

“including but not limited to provision of step-free access at stations and on trains”.

Government amendment 96.

Amendment 69, in clause 63, page 35, line 39, after subsection (1) insert—

“(1A) In performing the duty under subsection (1), Great British Railways must have particular regard to increasing capacity at Ely Junction for both freight and passenger services.”

This amendment would require Great British Railways, in performing its capacity duty, to have particular regard to increasing capacity at Ely Junction for the benefit of both freight and passenger services.

Amendment 162, page 36, line 1, leave out from “to” the end of line 4 and insert—

“be satisfied that it retains sufficient capacity across GBR infrastructure to allow for—

(a) the operation of GBR passenger services, passenger services not operated by GBR and services for the carriage of goods by railway, and”.

This amendment aims to reduce the ability of GBR to prioritise its own operations where there are network capacity constraints and create a level playing field.

Amendment 8, page 36, line 4, at end insert—

“(aa) the achievement of the Rail freight target set out in Section 17, and”.

This amendment requires GBR to retain sufficient capacity over GBR infrastructure to allow for the achievement of the rail freight target.

Amendment 9, page 36, line 6, at end insert—

“(3) Where Great British Railways decides not to grant access to persons to a specific part of the network to reserve capacity, Great British Railways must—

(a) publish a statement (a ‘capacity reservation statement’) setting out the evidence relating to the decision;

(b) consult—

(i) the Office for Rail and Road, and

(ii) any other persons who have sought access to that part of the network.

(4) A capacity reservation statement must explain how the decision taken by Great British Railways under subsection (3) reflects the best use of GBR infrastructure for the operation of trains as set out in the infrastructure capacity plan.

(5) The ORR must review a capacity reservation statement.

(6) The ORR may direct Great British Railways to reconsider its assessment if it considers that the exclusion of other operators is not necessary for Great British Railways to retain sufficient capacity over GBR infrastructure.”

This amendment requires Great British Railways to publish a statement explaining any decision not to grant access to a specific part of the network on the basis of network capacity.

Amendment 163, in clause 64, page 36, line 16, leave out subsection (3).

This amendment would prevent GBR charging any sum it likes, rather than what is reasonable.

Amendment 148, in clause 68, page 38, line 16, leave out subsection (1) and insert—

“(1) When determining an appeal under this Chapter, the Office of Rail and Road must decide the matter on its merits, having regard to the objectives set out in this Act.”

This amendment would change the current appeals provision so that appeals can be decided on the merits.

Amendment 26, page 38, line 16, leave out from “must” to the end of line 20 and insert—

“determine the appeal on the facts and the law.”

This amendment would enable the ORR to determine appeals on the merits.

Amendment 27, page 38, line 25, leave out paragraph (a) and paragraph (b) and insert—

“(a) remit all or part of the provision appealed against to Great British Railways for reconsideration, or

(b) quash all or part of the decision appealed against and substitute its own decision, as, at its discretion, it sees fit.”

This amendment would allow the ORR, when agreeing an appeal, to remit all or part of the decision appealed against to GBR for reconsideration, or quash all or part of the decision appealed against, as at its discretion it sees fit.

Government amendments 97 to 106

Amendment 73, in clause 70, page 40, line 36, at end insert—

“a GBR company, or other public sector company.”.

This amendment would change the definition of an infrastructure manager in the relevant 2016 regulations so as to exclude GBR companies and other public sector companies, alongside GBR.

Amendment 74, page 41, line 4, at end insert—

“(4) In regulation 14 (establishing, determining and collecting charges) after paragraph (9) insert—

‘(9A) Paragraph (9) does not apply to GBR.’

(5) In regulation 19 (capacity allocation), after paragraph (4) insert—

‘(4A) Paragraph (4) does not apply to GBR.’”

This amendment exempts GBR from the requirement on infrastructure managers to operate separate accounts for separate functions.

Amendment 164, page 41, line 5, leave out clause 71.

This amendment would prevent the Secretary of State from changing the terms of existing open access contracts.

Government amendment 107.

Amendment 149, in clause 72, page 42, line 27, at end insert—

“(7) Non-GBR infrastructure, facilities and services which are used exclusively for the carriage of goods by rail are excluded from the provisions of this clause.”

This amendment clarifies that privately funded, freight-only facilities are excluded from regulation under clause 72, clarifying that privately funded sidings and terminals are not brought into scope.

Amendment 165, page 42, line 27, at end insert—

“(7) Infrastructure, facilities and services not managed by Great British Railways which are used exclusively for the carriage of goods by rail are excluded from the provisions of this section.”

This amendment clarifies that privately funded, freight-only facilities are excluded from regulation under this section.

Government amendments 108 and 109.

Amendment 41, in clause 81, page 47, line 35, after “must consult” insert “the mayor of”.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 39.

Amendment 40, page 48, line 6, after “must consult” insert “the mayor of”.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 39.

Amendment 42, page 49, line 4, after “must consult” insert “the mayor of”.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 39.

Government amendments 110 to 117.

Amendment 44, page 55, line 38, leave out clause 92.

Amendment 45, in clause 92, page 56, line 24, at end insert—

“(3A) Regulations under this section must—

- (a) make provision for the public ownership of rolling stock by Great British Railways;
- (b) make provision for Great British Railways to buy and own future passenger rolling stock as—
 - (i) current rolling stock contracts end, and
 - (ii) old rolling stock are taken out of commission.”

Government amendments 118 and 119.

Amendment 82, in clause 96, page 58, line 5, after “company” insert “wholly and”.

This amendment seeks to ensure that where a company is jointly owned by GBR and Scottish Ministers, they together own the totality of the stake in that company.

Amendment 83, page 58, line 7, after “company” insert “wholly and”.

This amendment seeks to ensure that where a company is jointly owned by GBR and Welsh Ministers, they together own the totality of the stake in that company.

Amendment 84, page 58, line 32, leave out subsection (3) and insert—

- “(3) In this Act, a company is ‘wholly and jointly owned’ by the Secretary of State, Great British Railways, the Welsh Ministers or the Scottish Ministers if every member of the company is—
- (a) one or more of those persons, or
 - (b) a company that is itself wholly owned by one or more of those persons.”

This amendment defines the terms “wholly and jointly owned” in such a way as to ensure that companies that are wholly or jointly owned by GBR, the Secretary of State, Scottish and Welsh Ministers, are always fully public sector companies.

Amendment 3, page 59, line 15, at end insert—

“, except that section 3(1)(d) may not be commenced until any report under section [Report on Great British Railways’ ticketing function] has been published.”

This amendment is related to NC6 and requires that ticketing functions for GBR may not be commenced until a report under that new clause has been published.

Government amendments 120 to 123.

Amendment 153, in schedule 1, page 63, line 6, at end insert—

“including requirements to promote a fair and competitive retail market that treats all market participants, including Great British Railway’s retailing function, on a fair and equal basis.”

This aims to ensure that the Code of Practice explicitly includes a duty for GBR to safeguard a level playing field for third-party retailers and confirms that GBR Retail must itself comply with the Code.

Government amendments 168 and 169.

Government amendment 124.

Amendment 154, in schedule 2, page 65, line 2, at end insert—

- “(1A) The date specified in sub-paragraph 1(d) must be at least 24 months before the start of the funding period.”

This amendment requires the Secretary of State to notify the ORR and GBR of the amount of financial assistance for the next funding period at least two years before that funding period is due to start.

Amendment 7, page 65, line 39, leave out sub-paragraph (3) and insert—

- “(3) The objectives set out under sub-paragraph (1)(a) must include objectives relating to passenger rail services.

(3A) The objectives set out under sub-paragraph (1)(a) may include, in particular, objectives relating to—

- (a) the carriage of passengers or goods, save as already provided for under sub-paragraph (3);
- (b) the railway network or railway assets (including objectives relating to the provision of the railway network or railway assets after the end of the funding period);
- (c) fares;
- (d) the accessibility of railway services to people with disabilities;
- (e) the protection of persons from dangers arising from the operation of railways.”

This amendment would align funding of designated passenger train services with the five-year funding cycle for infrastructure.

Amendment 43, page 66, line 19, at end insert “mayor”.

See explanatory statement for Amendment 39.

Amendment 155, page 67, line 9, at end insert—

- “(3A) The plan must set out how Great British Railways will ensure its activities minimise costs to the taxpayer.”

This amendment requires GBR to consider how to minimise costs to taxpayers.

Amendment 156, page 67, line 22, at end insert—

- “(c) whether carrying on those activities will be done in such a way as to minimise costs to the taxpayer.”

This amendment requires the ORR to provide an assessment of whether GBR will minimise taxpayer costs before the Secretary of State approves the business plan.

Government amendment 125.

Amendment 6, page 74, line 27, at end insert “including passenger services”.

This amendment, along with Amendment 7, would align funding of designated passenger train services with the five-year funding cycle for infrastructure.

Government amendments 126 to 140.

Amendment 34, in schedule 4, page 92, line 20, at end insert—

“, and any person exercising functions of a public nature on its behalf in connection with rail systems or services for which Great British Railways is responsible.”

This amendment makes any person exercising functions of a public nature on behalf of Great British Railways subject to the public sector equality duty.

Government amendments 141 and 142.

Keir Mather: It is my pleasure to open this debate on the Railways Bill. As we have said before, this landmark piece of legislation will deliver the once-in-a-generation reform that our country’s railways are crying out for. For the first time in 30 years, Britain will finally have a railway owned by the public, for the public—one that puts passengers first, seizes the opportunities of freight, offers a better deal for taxpayers and is greater than the sum of its parts.

On Second Reading, we heard widespread support for reform from across the House. In Committee, we saw agreement across all parties about the need to establish a directing mind for our railways, the need to put passengers first and the need to deliver growth, which we know our railways can deliver when they are at their best. Although there are naturally some disagreements about the details of delivering reform, throughout our debates I have yet to hear any other political party suggest an alternative way forward that meets the scale of the challenge that our railways face.

[*Keir Mather*]

The Government are responding properly to feedback from the House. Following the Transport Committee's report, we have committed to publish a discussion document on the long-term rail strategy. Last week, we published a policy document setting out the emerging proposition for the Great British Railways licence, and just yesterday, recognising the strength of feeling from both the Bill Committee and the Select Committee, we published a document setting out a timeline for the publication of the key documents that will sit alongside the Bill.

Unlike the previous Government, we are getting on with the business of reform, and we are collaborating with the House to do so. I, together with the Minister for Rail in the other place, have engaged extensively on a number of important issues ahead of the debate. I hope to continue that co-operation when I respond to the amendments.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): One concern that has been repeatedly raised during scrutiny is that Great British Railways will both operate services and have significant influence by being the directing mind over access to the network. If a future Hull Trains application were to compete with a GBR-operated service for scarce capacity on the east coast main line—I know that the Minister, like me, uses Hull Trains—who does he believe passengers would trust to make that decision: the independent regulator or GBR itself?

Keir Mather: I am grateful to the right hon. Member for again raising that important point about open access, as he did on Second Reading. I share his passion for Hull Trains—I am surprised we have not met on a Hull train to have a subsequent conversation about open access. GBR needs to be the directing mind for the railway. It needs to take the decisions on what constitutes best use in a way that is fair, providing a role for open access while also being compliant with its duties, especially in respect of the need to grow rail freight on the network. The Secretary of State will also be compelled to set a rail freight growth target. There is nothing precluding open access from playing its full role as part of our railway under GBR; it certainly can, provided that it offers value for money and the great service that both the right hon. Member and I have experienced.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Keir Mather: I would like to make a little bit of progress. [*Interruption.*] I will let the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) make a short intervention.

2.45 pm

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister. Before he moves on, the issue of open access agreements is very important, because there is an inherent conflict in the arrangements in the Bill. I am unclear about whether it is the Transport Secretary or the Office of Rail and Road who will take decisions. The open access bid from Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway would see a direct link from Shropshire to London, with trains stopping in the important market town of Wellington. He talked about economic growth,

and if that direct access were to be allowed, it would give a multimillion-pound boost to the market town of Wellington. Who will make the decision on that?

Keir Mather: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for pushing me further on this issue. It is GBR's responsibility to determine what constitutes best use of the railway in relation to its duties. The role of the ORR in that process is that decisions can be referred to it when it is the view of stakeholders—whether it be an open access operator or anybody else—that GBR has incorrectly applied the framework by which it needs to determine best use on the railway and has made a decision in a way that is irrational or unfair, prejudicing one stakeholder over the other. There are important and robust safeguards for the ORR to be able to determine whether the way in which GBR has determined best use is consistent with the framework that we have provided for it. I hope that provides him with reassurance.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con) *rose*—

Keir Mather: I would like to make some progress; I hope the right hon. Lady will forgive me.

I will use my first speech to speak about the Government amendments tabled in the name of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, which I commend to the House. I look forward to hearing about some of the amendments tabled by other hon. Members; I will respond to them at the conclusion of proceedings.

Let me begin with amendment 92. I believe that in this House we need to be honest: under previous Governments, the British people were promised real change only for it to be abandoned on first contact with political reality. Not this time. Labour promised to nationalise our railways—no ifs, no buts—and today that is exactly what we will do. We are acting in law so that Great British Railways—the people's railway—is owned by the British people and run in their interests, not in the service of private profit. I know that might appal Opposition parties, but they should believe me that ordinary people in Britain will not ask why we are taking this bold step; they will be asking those who had the power to do so, "What took you so very long?"

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab): I very much welcome the Bill. I recently had a productive meeting with the Rail Minister in the other place regarding my amendment to close loopholes that could allow private companies to creep back into operating GBR rail services. He kindly promised to take that on board, and I am pleased to see those issues addressed by Government amendments 92 and 106, as well as the commitment to bring in further changes regarding the Secretary of State having powers of designation to ensure that they cannot be used for back-door privatisation. May I invite the Minister to provide further commentary and reassurance to the House regarding the Government's moves on that issue and the very welcome position they have taken?

Keir Mather: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I hope he sees that the Government have tabled amendments to ensure that Great British Railways cannot be privatised by the back door. Any changes would have to be made through an Act of Parliament, with full consultation

with the House. I am sure that the people who have sent us here would look at any proposition to turn back the clock on the momentous decision we are taking—to go back to a railway that was fractured, in decline and confusing for passengers to use—and encourage every Member of Parliament not to do so. That is the importance of our amendments, and I am glad that my hon. Friends sees that.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): GBR launched in my constituency when South Western Railway came back into public ownership. The engineers at the depot said that bringing rail and the railways together would improve customer experience. Will my hon. Friend expand on that?

Keir Mather: I am glad that my hon. Friend is working so closely with the people who drive our railway and discussing the impact that GBR will have. She is right to say that, by integrating track and train and having a single directing mind for our railway, we can think more holistically about the skills of those we need to drive that change. That is a really exciting possibility to take forward.

Finally on amendment 92, I pay special tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner). It is no exaggeration to say that, without his efforts, this historic provision would not be entering the statute book. I thank him for his work with my officials and the Rail Minister to make that change a reality.

I see that the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) is again attempting through an amendment—we discussed this in Committee—to press the railway back into a mode of franchising. The 30 years of privatisation are what left our railways in the fragmented and dysfunctional state they were in when this Government came to power. We took immediate steps to fix that, passing the Passenger Railway Services (Public Ownership) Act 2024. It is only right that any future Government that wish to return us to a railway with rising costs, confusing and inconsistent fares, and record cancellations should have to seek agreement from this place.

I turn to new clauses 49 and 50, and amendments 124 and 132. They introduce a new route for the independent sector regulator, the ORR, to modify non-GBR operator licences. That will allow the ORR, after consultation with the operator and others and the passing of a statutory notice period, to modify the contents of a licence. That approach is consistent with that taken in other regulated sectors such as water, electricity and gas. Such modifications will be needed across the industry to reflect the changes we are making in this Bill and to ensure the consistent adoption of standards and services across the rail network.

Amendments 168 and 169 ensure that the ORR can still make technical modifications to the GBR licence with GBR's consent. That reflects the fact that it would not be appropriate for the Secretary of State to be involved in every minor and technical amendment to the GBR licence. From day one, we have been committed to creating a simpler and more unified rail sector. Industry-wide alignment is critical to ensuring that passengers and other users of the rail network benefit from a less fragmented system. The amendments will

ensure that all operators, not just GBR, are in lockstep in adhering to consumer standards set by the passenger watchdog, obligations relating to rail safety and the effective delivery of vital cross-industry functions by GBR.

New clause 48 and amendments 110 to 119, and 126 to 128 all build on the transfer scheme provisions that were added to the Bill in Committee. New clause 48, together with amendments 118 and 119, introduces a new power to vary the application of certain taxes in relation to transfer schemes. That ensures that we can restructure the public sector and move staff and assets into GBR in a tax-neutral manner, avoiding a complex and unnecessary money-go-round that would hinder the delivery of better public services. Beyond that, the remaining amendments I referred to are all technical and ensure that the transfer scheme provisions are fit for purpose.

Amendments 107, 108, 141 and 142 are technical amendments to clarify the definition of GBR infrastructure and to ensure that GBR can run trains on third-party infrastructure, for example High Speed 1.

You will have to buckle in for this one, Madam Deputy Speaker: amendments 93, 97 to 106, 109, 120 to 123, 133, 137, 139 and 140 are all technical amendments that ensure the Railways Bill supports the potential future corporate structures of GBR. As I have already said, the Bill will be a long-lasting piece of legislation, and it is right that it provides an appropriate level of flexibility for GBR to adapt and change in the years ahead. It must design itself to meet the challenges of the day, and the Bill must enable it to do that.

Finally, amendments 94, 95 and 136 correct an oversight in the legislation and ensure that Transport for London and other local government bodies can continue to co-operate with the Secretary of State for specific purposes, as well as with GBR, reflecting that decisions about devolution will remain with the Secretary of State.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate my hon. Friend for moving at such pace on this. I am sure that many commuters around the country will be pleased to see the progress. On devolution and the integration with local transport schemes, I know the route, the process and the decision maker if we want to get a new Metrolink tram station in Greater Manchester. If I want to reopen the Middleton Junction train station in my constituency, what route do I go down?

Keir Mather: That is exactly why we are establishing GBR: to provide my hon. Friend with a consistent approach to making the case for the railway infrastructure improvements that he needs. Also, the devolution settlement enshrined in the Bill will ensure that GBR can work at the local level, with the ability for mayors to fund GBR directly to achieve specific local goals. It is our hope that through that devolved approach, with GBR able to work in lockstep with the mayors who are pioneering place-based politics across the United Kingdom, my hon. Friend can realise the changes to the rail system that he so desires.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Like others, I congratulate him on the speed at which he is moving this forward. He talks about the ability of Great British Railways to

[Chris Vince]

support local infrastructure. I have concerns about one of the railway stations in my constituency, Harlow Mill, and the number of suicides because of the lack of safety provision there. Will moving to Great British Railways mean that we can address some of those issues more easily?

Keir Mather: We certainly hope that it will. On the specific issues that my hon. Friend raises, will he consider writing to either myself or the Rail Minister so that we can think about how we can better integrate those live concerns about people suffering from mental health crises and how we might better protect them on our railway? That is an incredibly important point. Just to conclude—

Wendy Morton: Will the Minister give way?

Keir Mather: For the final time, I give way.

Wendy Morton: The Minister mentioned devolution and what a difference that would make in terms of the mayors' role. We have an issue in Aldridge, which I am sure he is well aware of and well rehearsed on, in that the current Labour mayor has taken the funding away. Will the Minister reassure me that GBR will work with Mayor Parker and with me to make sure that we deliver a railway station in Aldridge?

Keir Mather: The right hon. Lady is right to say that I am well aware of the specific measure that she speaks to. Having the relationship between GBR, the mayors and political representatives in Westminster, such as herself, is critical, and it is part of the purpose of GBR to better facilitate those conversations. I am sure that, through its establishment, she can take forward the debate on this particular matter with her usual passion.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD) *rose*—

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD) *rose*—

Keir Mather: I will not give way again; I am sorry. I want to leave time for colleagues to contribute.

The Government have also tabled amendments 96, 125, 129, 130, 131, 134, 135 and 138, which are minor, correctional or consequential amendments to ensure that the drafting of the Bill is fit for purpose and the statute book is kept tidy. They are all sensible amendments that improve the drafting of the Bill and ensure that rail reform can be implemented properly and that GBR can govern the railway for years to come. I am keen to get on with the substantive business of the debate, so I commend the amendments to the House.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I note the Minister's words about new clause 48.

This Report stage follows 16 sittings of the Public Bill Committee, when I and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), tabled well over 200 amendments, of which more than 120 were put to a Division. It is fair to say, therefore, that I think the Bill could do with a bit of work.

Let us start at the beginning, with the purpose, as contained in new clause 52. We began in Committee with a degree of consensus on the idea that—it is fair to say this, and I think the Minister referenced it—the Government have a golden opportunity to improve our railways by addressing one of the key challenges of the previous privatisation settlement, namely closer integration between track and train. Privatisation had some faults, but it also brought many benefits to the railway industry: a huge increase in capital investment, a new focus on what the travelling customer wanted rather than what British Rail decided to give them, innovation in service provision and increased services.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): When we previously discussed that point, I made this same observation: when we think about privatisation, we tend to think of the rolling stock companies. However, we should not forget that originally there was a privatised rail company, Network Rail, and that it cost the lives of over 40 people in the space of three years. Saying that there were some problems with privatisation really does gloss over that. We have moved from a situation where people felt it was unsafe to travel on the railways to now having one of the safest railways in the world. We should be grateful for that.

Jerome Mayhew: I am grateful to the hon. Member, but he will recognise that if we look at the safety record under privatisation as a whole, compared with nationalisation previously under British Rail, safety has increased enormously and I am pleased to say that, prior to nationalisation, we operate one of the safest rail systems in the world.

Dr Arthur *rose*—

Jerome Mayhew: I have addressed that point, so I want to move on.

We have the key challenge that the division of track and train at times created some perverse incentives between the track operator and the service operator, and this too often led to some inefficiencies. This Government, however, inherited from the Conservatives a solution in the Shapps-Williams review: the creation of Great British Railways, where track and train services could be integrated to design out the problems of the earlier settlement while, importantly, retaining the efficiency and service benefits of private operators, as well as the increased access to capital.

3 pm

The opportunity to solve the problem was presented to this Government on a plate, and they could have looked competent. It has been deeply frustrating to watch them take a good idea, then sow the seeds for its ultimate failure by insisting on the ideological imposition of nationalisation on to GBR and losing the focus on what the customers and taxpayers need. The Government have decided to replace market forces with top-down state direction. That is a mistake, but if they insist on it, the top needs to tell GBR what it is for and what it is to do.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): When privatisation happened, the Government of the day fought hard to keep state-owned foreign railways out of the running of the railways, but they were compelled to

accept them by European Union legislation. In Committee, the hon. Gentleman described the involvement of state-owned foreign railways as “a gift from abroad”, so may I congratulate him on his bravery in taking a more pro-European approach on this question than John Major?

Jerome Mayhew: I am interested in pragmatism. I am interested in what works for the taxpayer and for the user of the railways. If state companies want to operate as private businesses in the United Kingdom and bring benefits to the United Kingdom taxpayer and rail user, bring it on! What I do not want, and what is clearly wrong, is to impose nationalisation of the rail network across the board for political reasons, because it is going to bring some real problems, just like it did the last time Labour decided to have a go at this.

As I have said, what the Government are doing is a mistake, but if they insist on it, we need this Bill to direct the top to tell GBR what it is for and what to do. New clause 52—the “purpose” clause missing from the Bill—starts that process by making it clear what GBR is there to do. It is a non-exhaustive list, but it includes

“prioritising the needs of Great British Railways passengers...providing value for money for passengers and taxpayers...expanding and improving the network...modernising working practices”—

putting the customer’s needs above interests of the unions—

“ensuring fair and transparent treatment of open access, freight and devolved operators...integrating track and train...and...supporting multimodal integration”.

As track and train are integrated, this Bill should have been giving GBR the tools it needs to deliver the necessary dynamic management to undertake what is, in anyone’s book, a huge organisational change.

Wendy Morton: Is it not the truth that the Government were given an idea from our days in government, and that it was a golden opportunity to reform the railways of this country? But what has actually happened? Ideology has gotten in the way, and it has gotten in the way of the passengers first and foremost. They are going to be the real losers in this.

Jerome Mayhew: I quite agree with my right hon. Friend. It seems that the Government have insisted on going back to the future: back to the 1970s, with state control and a revamped British Railways. They have even chosen the same logo, which I think tells us a lot about their intentions.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): My constituents in Bexleyheath and Crayford have been at the forefront of this model, with Network Rail and Southeastern Trains now integrated in Southeastern Railway. As a result, we have the top punctuality for any rail service, so would the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that we are showing the delivery model that can be delivered across the country?

Jerome Mayhew: I stand to correct the hon. Gentleman: the most punctual is, I believe, Greater Anglia, which services my constituency, but the point he makes is a good one. The greater integration of track and train brings greater efficiencies and leads to greater punctuality.

That is exactly why that was Conservative party policy going into the last general election. What we do not need is increased control by perhaps heavily unionised workforces being given extra political power through nationalisation, taking the focus off the customer and focusing on the organisation and its purposes instead.

We have the track and train being integrated, and this Bill should be giving GBR the tools it needs to deliver dynamic management. That is crucial for a big organisational change. It should be putting passengers first by giving GBR the power to sort out the worst of the union-imposed inefficient working practices. How can we seriously have a seven-day timetable staffed by a five-day working week, requiring voluntary overtime to staff just normal service? It is clearly ridiculous. This legislation should give GBR the power and, importantly, through this new clause, the political support it will need to fix that problem.

We need to enable drivers to operate train doors where that is not yet standard practice and to fix similar Spanish practices. I think that is very unfair on the Spanish, by the way, who surprisingly run a much more efficient railway in some respects. We need to increase flexible driver training and operation, and so much more. Under new clause 54, tabled in my name, a working practices and productivity modernisation framework would provide GBR with that direction and give it the political cover to act.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): On what is in the best interests of the citizens of this country, why does the hon. Gentleman think it was rational that other state-owned railways were franchised to run the railway system in this country to the exclusion of this country’s operators? That was absolute nonsense. Trenitalia, Deutsche Bahn, Keolis and Nederlandse Spoorwegen were all taking that subsidy and putting it back into their home market. How on earth was that in the interests of the United Kingdom?

Jerome Mayhew: The hon. Member will be aware that I have already addressed that question in answer to one of his colleagues, but if international companies, whether state-owned or private, make a tender that is more attractive than any other operator applying for that tender, the people who benefit most are the taxpayers and service users of the United Kingdom. That is what happens.

Graham Stuart: Does my hon. Friend agree with new clause 85, which would make the interests of disabled people a key performance indicator for Great British Railways? I have been contacted by Katrina, a constituent from Sproatley, who has an upper limb disability as a result of thalidomide and relies heavily on rail travel. There are many services on which she cannot pre-book a seat, which for many of us is a convenience but for her is essential, because she finds being jostled frightening. She needs to have her interests recognised by the railway. Does my hon. Friend therefore agree that it might be very useful for the Government to accept new clause 85?

Jerome Mayhew: My right hon. Friend rightly says that the needs of disabled passengers such as his constituent, whom he so ably represents, are very important. That is one performance indicator that the Government should

[Jerome Mayhew]

impose on GBR, but is it not ridiculous that we have to have Government action to impose KPIs on a railway? We should not be doing it this way.

Instead of giving GBR a clear purpose and direction and then supporting it to deliver, the Government are imposing nationalisation, which will bring with it, as we see in the Bill, an inevitable explosion of bureaucracy, civil service plans, targets, long-term strategies and civil service rights to give guidance and direction, all in the name of the Secretary of State. What will be the impact of this on GBR over time? Will it lead to the dynamic management that this structural reorganisation must have if it is to have a hope of working? Let history be our guide. I cannot think of a single example of a nationalised industry in any country, either now or in the past, that is or was a byword for management dynamism. Members should try it themselves—we cannot think of one, can we? If GBR needs dynamic management, how can nationalisation possibly be the answer?

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): On dynamic management, I thought the Bill was about putting community at the heart of things. My hon. Friend knows that, for years, I have been campaigning for a through train from Grimsby through Market Rasen into London. When Mark Harper was our Transport Secretary, we were on the verge of getting one—we actually had a trial run. Will my hon. Friend give me an assurance on behalf of the Conservative party that when he gets into power at the next election—and he will—he will reopen this whole issue and give Grimsby the direct service to London that it deserves?

Jerome Mayhew: The Father of the House is nailing me down to a cast-iron assurance at the Dispatch Box. I am not in a position to do that, but I fully expect to be in this role in a future Government and look forward to the opportunity to encourage open access to provide the through train that the right hon. Gentleman needs or for GBR to do so.

If GBR needs the dynamic management that we say it does, the Government are imposing for political reasons—very popular ones among their Back Benchers, as we have heard—a management system that has never worked in the past, but somehow it will be different this time. They have made their choice and we need to make the best of it. At the very least, this founding legislation should identify core key performance indicators which will survive the test of time in legislation. New clause 53 and amendment 158 provide them. They are detailed, but in essence, they focus on reliability, safety, comfort and on-board experience, affordability and value for money, passenger and network growth, financial sustainability and freight growth.

Until covid, privatisation undeniably brought a focus on ridership that had been missing previously under nationalisation. I accept that private businesses are not trying to be nice; they work to increase ridership because it brings in fare income, which creates profit. They are not directed to do so; the natural incentives work to solve the problem. The innovation of privatisation, fought tooth and nail at the time by Labour and the unions, was supported by passengers, who voted with their feet. British Rail oversaw the long-term decline in

ridership from about 1 billion in 1950, reducing in a straight line to 750 million in 1992. Privatisation immediately reversed that 40-year trend of decline, growing back ridership not just to 1 billion but to 1.7 billion in 2019.

Under the Bill, GBR does not even have a passenger growth target. New clause 14 in my name would rectify that by requiring the Secretary of State to set GBR a passenger growth target and to keep it under review. How can the Government be against that? They have agreed to put one in for rail freight growth, but for some reason passengers are not listed in the Bill. Instead of these sensible, pro-growth and pro-passenger measures, we have clause after clause of political control, micromanagement of a nationalised structure, and unfettered rights of guidance and direction by the Secretary of State—by which we mean Department for Transport officials—over GBR at any time and for any reason, under clauses 7 and 9. It is a recipe for corporate paralysis where decisions are second-guessed by civil servants.

Amendments 150 and 151 limit at least the giving of guidance by Department for Transport officials to issues where GBR fails to meet a key performance indicator, and the giving of mandatory directions to serious issues where GBR has missed KPIs and the chief executive has been removed in consequence. I fear that over time, as the corporate memory of the train operating companies fades and with it their focus on the customer experience, this focus will be replaced by other incentives.

Heavily unionised workers of a nationalised industry well understand that the Government will now be politically exposed to industrial action as never before. It will be entirely rational for them—I do not blame them for doing so—to use this new bargaining power to increase pay and improve conditions, which sounds good, does it not? Why would they not do so? It does, however, increase costs and reduce productivity. Who benefits? Not the passenger or the taxpayer. Labour will be too weak to stand up for the taxpayer and for fare-paying passengers. Services will become more expensive, worse, less frequent—or all three—and we will be back to the rationing of resources as we see in every nationalised sector.

3.15 pm

Passenger numbers will no longer be the key driver of success. As an engineering-led business, the incentive will be to increase reliability by reducing services, and the Government are already doing that. Look at Avanti West Coast and its timetable for the summer. It has already been nationalised, and it has been directed by the Department for Transport to cut one in seven services to save money. Look at Govia Thameslink: it has been nationalised and ordered by the Department for Transport to cut hundreds of trains this summer to save money. I am not making this up; this is what is happening now as reported in *The Telegraph*. [Laughter.] Labour Members are laughing about *The Telegraph*. The first article was in *The Guardian*, which is their paper of record.

What is left of genuine competition, open-access operators and freight? They will be left to the mercy of GBR as they fight for access to the network. The independent economic regulator, the Office of Rail and Road, is having its role largely abolished by this legislation. For the first time, GBR will be given the power to

decide whether to grant access to its direct competitors, and those decisions can now not be appealed other than for procedural irregularity—the judicial review clause. That is obviously a monumental failure in natural fairness. It is akin to designing out open access while the Government look the other way. Amendment 148 to clause 68 would fix that, at least allowing the Office of Rail and Road to hear appeals on the merits of GBR decisions—all the more important when GBR is operating as both referee and player. The Bill castrates the ORR as a genuine regulator. It is like designing the NHS without the Care Quality Commission, or the school system without Ofsted. It is grossly unfair, the independent rail sector is horrified by it, and the Government need to think again.

Finally, on fare discounts in clause 34, Labour has protected discount fare schemes only for the young, the elderly and the disabled. In Committee, I pointed out to the Government that they had overlooked railcards for veterans and their families and discounts for 26 to 30-year-olds. I had assumed that it was an oversight, but it was not. The Government whipped their Members to vote against giving railcards to veterans and their families and to 26 to 30-year-olds not once but 10 times. Amendment 143 gives hon. Members across the House, but particularly on the Labour Benches, the chance to put that right. This evening, all Labour MPs will need to make a simple decision: do they vote down veteran railcards and discounts for veterans' families and for 26 to 30-year-olds, or do they refuse to be cowed by their Whips—the terrifying Whips in the corner—stand up for what is right, and support our brave veterans and young people?

There are many other needed amendments to this deeply flawed Bill, such as those submitted by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (James Wild) on the importance of Ely junction for freight growth—I have to declare an interest; it affects my constituency of Broadland and Fakenham as well—by my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) on GBR involving local authorities in service decisions affecting their area; by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) on a level-crossing strategy and the integration of services; and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) on seeking effective oversight by the Transport Committee—as well as many more from across the House, including from other Opposition parties.

The sheer number of amendments demonstrates that this remains a deeply flawed Bill based on a key error: preferring political ideology to practical solutions, state control to dynamic management. By doing so, I fear that the Government have wasted this generation's best opportunity for effective rail reform.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I rise to speak to five amendments tabled in my name and those of other members of the Transport Committee, and other Members of the House. They focus on two issues—the long-term rail strategy, and the important issue of accessibility—and they stem from specific recommendations in the report of our inquiry into the

Bill. The Committee recognises the need for structural change on the railways, and it supports the main purpose of the Bill, which is to establish Great British Railways as a single organisation overseeing both track and train, and capable of acting as a directing mind for the railway.

I thank the Government for their thorough and thoughtful response to our report, and for publishing yesterday, as promised, the list of documents and target publication timetables for the key policy documents and public consultations that will be required for GBR to be operational in 2027. I also thank them for the policy document on the draft GBR licence that was published a week or so ago.

Amendments 37 and 38 to clause 15 would require the long-term rail strategy to be placed before Parliament, as well as any revisions to it. I welcome that the Government have committed to publish a discussion document with more detail on what the LTRS will include during the Bill's passage through the House. The Government told us that a requirement to lay the LTRS before the House is not necessary because the documents will be published, thus guaranteeing transparency, and they have committed to place that document in the Libraries and make a written ministerial statement. However, transparency was not the Committee's only concern, as we also wanted a disincentive to change the long-term rail strategy too frequently or trivially. The commitment to make a written ministerial statement is welcome, but will that also apply to updates? It will not bind future Governments.

I now move to other amendments tabled in my name and those of members of the Committee, and by other Members of the House, including a number who are, and have always been, strong advocates for the needs of people with disabilities. The number of amendments tabled shows the strength of concern from Members across the House about the importance of accessibility, of getting it right in the Bill, and of making railways accessible to all. Whether for a long-term wheelchair user, someone who will always need support to buy tickets or navigate a large station, or anyone travelling with small children or luggage, accessible trains, stations, ticketing systems, and staff culture must benefit us all. When that is hardwired into the culture of the organisation, more people—all people—can feel confident in their ability to travel by train.

Helen Maguire: Research from the Royal National Institute of Blind People found that 58% of those with visual impairments reported that it was impossible to use ticket vending machines, and I have tabled new clause 38 to ensure a minimum number of accessible ticket machines. Does the hon. Lady agree that it is incredibly important to ensure that railways are accessible for everyone?

Ruth Cadbury: Yes, of course I do, and much of what I am saying stems from the work we did for our report published in February 2025. It is entitled, "Access denied: rights versus reality in disabled people's access to transport", and it is about so much more than ramps and lifts, although those things are essential for many, and it must be embedded in the culture of the organisation.

Our amendments seek to embed that aspiration in the Bill, and they follow the work we did on the Bill and the report I just mentioned. Amendment 70 would

[*Ruth Cadbury*]

place duties on Ministers and GBR, and amendment 71 would place duties on the passengers' council to seek to secure "improvements" to accessibility, rather than just to "promote the...interests" of disabled people, as currently stated in the Bill. Amendment 71 would also require the passengers' council

"to exercise its functions in a way that promotes improvements in the accessibility of the rail network rather than only having regard to the interests and needs of disabled passengers."

The Minister may well say that the Bill will already drive improvements, and that the details will be in the GBR's business plan and the LTRS, but disabled people would like to see enforceable, statutory responsibilities that require progress, not just vague "having regard to" language, or non-statutory policy documents.

Graham Stuart: The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech on this subject. Earlier I referred to Katrina, my constituent with thalidomide syndrome who struggles to reserve a seat and feel safe, and to use the railway as she wants to. Does the hon. Lady agree that those are the tests we need to see changed, so that people like Katrina can use the railway safely and see their needs recognised?

Ruth Cadbury: The right hon. Member's description of Katrina's needs speak not only for her needs but for those of so many people. He described Katrina's specific physical needs and need to have a seat, but it is important to recognise that every disabled person's needs are different. The rail system—indeed, the whole transport system—must be able to adapt and ensure that those needs are met.

I welcome the sheer number of amendments tabled today that cover accessibility. New clause 39 makes a specific request:

"The Secretary of State must appoint a board of the Passengers' Council."

and it requires that board to include at least two disabled people. The Government told us that legislating for that recommendation is not needed because the Transport Focus board already has such representation, and general duties under clause 18 will apply when the board is appointed. While I welcome the offer to confirm that intention, why is there resistance to putting such a measure into legislation so that it is secured in the future? To say that Transport Focus currently has such representation, and that therefore the passengers' council board will too, relies on custom. Clause 18(2)(a) refers to

"promoting...the needs of disabled passengers"

but it relies on a specific interpretation of a general clause, so neither of those measures are secure. In conclusion, I commend the amendments to the House, but I will not push them to a vote as I anticipate that they will attract a fair bit of attention in the other place when the Bill arrives there.

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

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): As we said on Second Reading and in Committee, the Bill has the right goals: sorting out the convoluted and byzantine structure of our rail industry, and better aligning

infrastructure with train operation. But the question before us is whether the Bill, as currently drafted, will achieve those very valid aims.

The Minister gave the impression in Committee that the Bill was beyond any possible reproach or improvement, on the basis that he rejected all Opposition amendments, but we have learned this afternoon that it is possible to improve it, of course, because the Government have tabled their own amendments. If I may begin in the spirit of generosity, I welcome Government amendments 106, 107 and 108, since, as I understand them, they seemingly clarify that GBR will not have powers to seek to take over privately owned infrastructure, such as freight. That will provide some reassurance to the sector, which is welcome.

However, the Bill remains flawed in many ways, so the Liberal Democrats have tabled amendments in the spirit of wishing to remove some of those flaws. I will group our amendments by theme. New clauses 1 and 46 and amendment 1 are intended to provide much better value for the customer and focus on the customer's journey experience.

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): In North East Hampshire, thousands of London-bound commuters rely on trains as an extension of their office, especially when that train is delayed. Despite that, the UK's onboard wi-fi speed was ranked 16th out of 18 major European and Asian countries. Does my hon. Friend agree that without a statutory passengers' charter, passengers who spend thousands of pounds a year on season tickets have no reasonable way to hold the railways to account when basic standards, such as reliable wi-fi, are simply not met?

3.30 pm

Olly Glover: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why we need new clause 1 to provide a railway passengers' charter fit for the 21st century. With rail fares as high as they are, things like functioning wi-fi or phone signal, enough space for luggage, functioning toilets or even a seat should no longer be seen as indulgent luxuries. I note that the Government have recently announced some serious intentions to improve wi-fi and phone signal, and I wish them all the best with that endeavour.

The new clauses and amendments I mentioned could deliver significant improvements to passenger safety and security at stations and on trains, and they would require higher standards for those, if adopted.

Helen Maguire: On passenger experience, will my hon. Friend extend my thanks to the Minister and Lord Hendy—I have made them aware of my intention to mention this today—for taking forward new clause 36 via operational arrangements, which will permit a bereaved family member of the armed forces to a fare exemption on Remembrance Sunday?

Olly Glover: I am happy to thank the Minister here and Lord Hendy for engaging with my hon. Friend's amendment to better enable members of our armed forces, veterans and their families to travel to services on Remembrance Sunday.

New clauses 6 and 2 and amendments 2 and 3 would require GBR to deliver meaningful fares reform and innovation, such as tap-in and tap-out contactless payment,

as is currently available in the entirety of the Netherlands, and other forms of convenient digital payment, as well as our rail miles scheme, which would extend the concept of air miles and promote domestic tourism by making journeys on our railways as valuable a commodity as air miles are today.

New clause 9 would reduce the ability of the Department for Transport and the Treasury to meddle in the affairs of GBR, because interference and micromanagement by those organisations has caused a lot of the issues afflicting our railways today. To that end, amendments 7 and 6 would align track and train budgets, putting right what I feel is a detailed and structural flaw in the Bill. The Bill's current intention to have infrastructure subject to five-year funding cycles, but funding for passenger services and train operation subject to spending review timescales, undermines the ability to achieve a "whole railway" way of thinking, planning and funding.

Amendments 8 and 9 are intended to deliver stronger accountability and transparency for GBR in relation to capacity allocation and network access fees, powers and decisions, particularly given that freight will remain in the private sector and as an open access endeavour.

Amendment 5 and new clause 3 counter the Bill's poverty of ambition for the railways' potential to further tackle road congestion, improve access to work and productivity, and cut carbon emissions, as shown by the Government's repeated and, frankly, bizarre and incomprehensible refusal to include a requirement for a passenger growth target in the Bill. This is an area on which Liberal Democrats, Greens and Conservatives all tabled similar amendments in Committee—how often does that happen? Not very often, in my experience. Myriad stakeholder organisations have made the same point, as indeed has the Transport Committee.

Perhaps the noble Lord Hendy's recent comments to the Transport Committee partially give the game away. When I asked him about summer service cuts to Avanti West Coast services, he said:

"It is a perfectly reasonable proposition to reduce train services in the short term when there is less demand for them."

On one level that is an understandable view, but where there is lower demand for train services, we need to look at the reasons for that, and perhaps Avanti West Coast's outrageous fares and poor track record are part of that, or it may be less attractive because of the lack of open access on the west coast main line compared with the east coast.

Steff Aquarone (North Norfolk) (LD): Melton Constable in my constituency has a proud railway heritage—the Midland and Great Northern Joint Railway steam train adorns its village sign. New clause 5 would make provision for the exploration of the reinstatement of the orbital railway. Does my hon. Friend agree that being connected to the rail network could bring immense benefits to towns such as Holt? Government support for such a scheme being explored would be very welcome.

Olly Glover: The county of Norfolk suffered particularly from the Beeching cuts of the 1960s, so that needs to be looked at. That is a good example of the potential for rail to improve rural connectivity.

I would not mind so much that the Government are so keen to reduce train service where there is less demand if they or the rail industry appeared to have a comparable appetite for increasing services when there is very clearly

high demand, as there was recently on the 10.30 from Reading to Penzance. Who could have anticipated that at the start of a bank holiday weekend, during half term, with extremely warm weather forecast, there would be high demand? That train was, to use a technical term, "rammed." That is why we need a passenger growth target, to ensure that we are not just amending the timetable for a bit of penny-pinching, but to match customer demand. We must ensure that people who take the train to the west country do so again because they have a good experience.

Helen Maguire: Post covid, the number of trains from Epsom and Ewell was halved. My new clause 37 would ensure that there is community consultation on the frequency of train services. Does my hon. Friend agree that the sensible thing to do would be to consult the community?

Olly Glover: I commend my hon. Friend for her industry in the number of amendments she has tabled to the Bill. I hope the Government will listen and consider new clause 37, as they did with her new clause 36 regarding veterans.

New clauses 7 and 8 would make more explicit commitments for GBR to have greater environmental and carbon emissions reduction obligations than those currently drafted. Our amendments as a whole would increase GBR's potential to avoid making the mistakes of the past. They would encourage it to take bold new steps on electrification and deliver truly joined-up journeys and integrated transport and timetables. They would encourage it to have a real, ambitious rail devolution agenda to bring decision making far closer to communities than is currently the case with Whitehall's domination.

Our amendments would also avoid the total mess of projects led by the Department for Transport, such as the ongoing situation of having no trains between Oxford and Milton Keynes on East West Rail, despite the railway being commissioned 18 months ago. We have HS2—it goes without saying what a mess that is, and that has not been an endeavour led by the private sector. We also have the inter-city express programme for GWR and LNER, which was wildly expensive.

Let me move towards my conclusion. The key test is this: do the Railways Bill and the proposed creation of GBR make my key constituency asks more or less likely to happen? Simpler and better value fares on GWR, particularly during peak times; an end to five-car, overcrowded inter-city operations; a new station at Grove; full electrification between Didcot and Oxford, bringing Oxford into equality with Cambridge, which benefited from such electrification in 1986; an hourly service for Culham; accessibility improvements to Cholsey; and East West Rail actually happening, as I mentioned—only with our amendments do I feel that those things are likely to be within reach.

Although the Government are right about the need to better align track and train and to tackle the current dysfunctional industry structure, the Bill has too many flaws. Do not take that from me—the Transport Committee reached a similar conclusion, with most of the recommendations of its inquiry being rejected by the Government. Absent the Government embracing at least some of the Lib Dem amendments that I have spoken to, we risk creating a GBR that is mired in bureaucracy and overseen by a Department for Transport

[Olly Glover]

that is distracted by dubious GBR train colour schemes and somewhat gimmicky social media videos, rather than adopting good practices from other countries and truly transforming our railway. Absent the Government embracing some of our amendments or the House voting on them, the Bill is not fit to go forward.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With an immediate five-minute time limit, I call John McDonnell.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—I thought that was coming.

I will speak to amendments 15 and 35, which stand in my name. Amendment 15 deals with the creation of an industry-wide travel scheme. One of the benefits of joining British Rail was that travel passes were extended to workers and their families. That was a real perk of the job, and I think it was protected under legislation on a cross-party basis for existing staff. However, that was only for existing staff, and as other companies took over, that benefit was lost. There was a range of different schemes.

All that amendment 15 would do is place a responsibility on GBR to bring together those schemes, so that there is one consistent scheme that will continue into the future for the benefit of the railways. We have written to the Secretary of State on this issue—in March, I think—and we are still seeking a meeting. I would welcome confirmation from the Minister that that will take place.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is really important that that scheme includes people who worked at British Rail Engineering Ltd, who were then privatised and lost their passes as a result. Will my right hon. Friend ensure that BREL is also included in that meeting?

John McDonnell: I think we can place it on the agenda. I hope the Government will have taken this amendment on board by the time we get to the other House, because it is such a simple mechanism to bring together.

My second point is about amendment 35, which seeks to promote the insourcing of workers into GBR. The Government have announced the greatest wave of insourcing in a generation, and the amendment could create benefits by ensuring that the Government implement that promise. As people know, cleaning, catering, security guards and revenue inspectors have all been contracted out, but the biggest example is workers working on the infrastructure. I will run through the figures, which are staggering. Network Rail now directly employs 14,000 workers to maintain its rails and signals, but it also engages tens of thousands of subcontracted workers. Its renewals programme, for example, has been contracted out to a number of construction companies, which engage people on zero-hours contracts. It is insecure work with low wages and without adequate working conditions, and as Members across the House have said, there is often bogus self-employment as well.

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

John McDonnell: Certainly, although I do not get an extra minute for this one.

Cat Eccles: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way—he is worth the extra minute. He has spoken about the rail perks that staff benefited from; does he agree that that has also been lost by those staff who have been outsourced? At West Midlands railway, the company wanted to offer those staff some discounted travel, but the Department for Transport actually refused. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the changes he has described would be welcome?

John McDonnell: I agree wholeheartedly. We just need one comprehensive scheme under which everyone is treated equally—it is a benefit, one that helps to attract staff, but also to retain staff because of the commitment it demonstrates.

Just to understand the scale of outsourcing that has gone on, we believe that at the moment in excess of 100,000 infrastructure workers are engaged through outsourcing and subcontracting. People will be familiar with the impacts of that, including precarious contracts for the workers, but a report has recently been published by the National Union of Rail, Maritime and Transport Workers—an independent report produced by Nina Jorden and Joel Hoskins. I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am the convener of the RMT parliamentary group. The report identifies the scale of costs that contracting out involves, and the critical issue that the contractors have very short-term horizons, so they fail to invest in skills. Time and again we have seen those companies undertake cost-cutting exercises, and the churn of workers leads to the loss of valuable skills and experience.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Black, Asian and minority ethnic workers represent 25% of the directly employed workforce of train operating companies, but that figure rises to just under 60% for outsourced cleaners and caterers. Does my right hon. Friend agree that outsourcing creates systemic racism?

John McDonnell: There is significant evidence of low pay and the way that people are discriminated against consistently throughout the outsourcing mechanism. Given all the research that has been done, that is unchallengeable.

I want to concentrate on the issue of loss of skills. Under British Rail, when someone joined the railway, they could have the vision that if they were committed and stuck with the organisation, they could secure additional training and rise up the ladder. All the way up, they would be gaining additional skills, but under outsourcing there has been a lack of investment in skills. The precarious work means that we are failing to invest in the next generation and, as a result, we may not have the skills to operate an effective system.

3.45 pm

When it comes to outsourcing, people might remember that we brought maintenance work back into Network Rail to reintegrate it because there was a lack of skills, the undermining of safety and blood on the tracks. I attended the funeral of a driver in the Southall crash; that tragedy was a direct reflection of the breaking down of individual contracts that were outsourced and the loss of skills that resulted.

A joint letter has been published today that was sent to the Secretary of State, signed by the RMT and the National Skills Academy for Rail. In the letter, they call for

“a GBR workforce strategy setting out the skills, employment models and supply chain structures needed to build”—

as we all want—

“a stable, high-capability workforce across operations, maintenance and renewals, including consideration of insourcing where appropriate”.

The amendment I have tabled would enable GBR to function and perform its duties in a way that promotes the transfer into GBR of outsourced and subcontracted railway staff.

I would welcome a commitment from the Minister to a meeting with him or the Secretary of State to talk about the plans for insourcing. The Government are doing some excellent work on insourcing across a whole range of Departments, but this proposal has the scale to ensure that we fulfil the promise we made about the greatest wave of insourcing. I end by commending the Mayor of London on what he is doing to insource staff. It is a fine example of what the Government could do on a mass scale across the railway sector.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): Broxbourne is an important commuter area when travelling into London. Millions of journeys start and end at stations in my constituency every year, and more than double the national average number of people use the railway to get to work. The line that I and my constituents rely on—Greater Anglia—was one of the first to be taken over by the Government, and not a week goes by without some sort of incident causing long delays and cancellations. We have not seen any improvements from nationalisation. While I do not support nationalisation in principle, I agree that the railway needs to work better for passengers and the communities it serves and in which it operates. It is in that spirit that I will address a number of amendments.

I support new clause 30, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer). It would place a duty on GBR to publish an accessibility strategy every 10 years. The rail network should be easily accessible for everyone, as most Members have said. There has been lots of progress in recent years on this issue, and I am pleased that most stations in my constituency are fully accessible, but that still leaves some stations that see hundreds of thousands of journeys each year out of reach for constituents with disabilities or using buggies.

Rye House is the only train station in Hoddesdon, a town of 20,000 people, but only one platform is step-free—the other is not. That means someone can have step-free access going into London, but not when they leave to go home. That means passengers in a wheelchair or with buggies having to get off at a different station, with longer journeys to get home.

It gets even worse at Theobalds Grove station, where the situation is even more difficult. No platform has step-free access, so there is no option for those with disabilities, such as those in a wheelchair, or families with buggies to use that station at all. Both stations would be ideal candidates for accessibility improvements, which should be a key priority for Great British Rail.

Since my election, I have campaigned hard on traffic delays and roadworks, and they do not occur in isolation from other modes of transport, particularly the rail network. I support new clause 29, which would direct Great British Rail to co-ordinate with transport authorities to minimise disruption. We need a joined-up and a common-sense approach. When works are planned on a line, we do not also need utility companies coming along to dig up the high street. It seems that once one element causes a bit of disruption, the other goes out of its way to create more disruption at the same time. We need organisations to have a joined-up and common-sense approach.

Level crossings can have massive knock-on effects for my constituents, particularly those who live in the villages. In my constituency, a track runs through the villages of Stanstead Abbots and St Margarets—right through the middle. If the crossing is down for too long or a defect causes it not to reopen, an entire village is cut off from basic services. The level-crossings strategy proposed in amendment 65 would enable us to look at the consequences of things going wrong in that way, which would hopefully reduce disruption for my constituents.

In the case of any public body, value for the taxpayer should be considered above all else, so I support the requirement for Great British Railways to take steps to keep costs as low as possible. Rail services should also respond to changing needs. We have seen thousands of homes built in the last few years, creating more strain on our rail services. Thousands have been built near Cheshunt, the busiest station in my constituency, and more passengers are using it now than before the pandemic.

New clause 40 would ensure that services respond to population changes. Within the national planning policy framework, the Government are trying to bulldoze our green belt and make it easier to obtain planning permission near stations. I fundamentally disagree with that, and it makes new clause 40 even more important. The Government should support it.

New clause 37 is intended to ensure that the trains on which local communities rely run more frequently. The standard of communication from the railway network, the rail companies and my nationalised local rail service is appalling. If people turn up at the station and there are problems on the line, there are no staff around to talk to. No one is communicating with the passengers. They are left at the station to wait for another service, if and when it turns up.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): I urge the hon. Gentleman to reconsider his point about the importance of building near railway stations. My experience, and that of many other Members along the length of the Elizabeth line, is that it is generating a huge amount of economic growth, which is very significant in our communities. It is also reusing a great deal of brownfield land, and I hope that would also benefit the hon. Gentleman's constituents.

Lewis Cocking: I thank the hon. Member for supporting the point I was making. The Elizabeth line was a new line with new trains going along it, but currently, planning applications are submitted and the response is: “This development is next to a railway station. We will grant the planning permission.” There are no new services. There are no extra trains. The only consequences for the

[*Lewis Cocking*]

line are the thousands of houses that are built near it. If my constituency were served by HS2 or we were getting a new train, that would be a completely different matter, but when capacity is being added to existing services and when that planning process is taking place, there is nothing to say that there must be more trains and a more frequent service, and the trains have to be longer during the rush hour to deal with the extra housing.

We need to look at how communication with rail users can be improved and at how this nationalised rail service will work, because, as I have said, the service in my area was one of the first to be nationalised and my constituents have seen no benefit at all.

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): Let me first draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, and to the financial support that I received from rail trade unions at the time of the general election. I am pleased to support the Bill and the wider programme of rail reform, but I want to explain why I have tabled a number of amendments and why I support some of those tabled by others.

Alongside the Passenger Rail Services (Public Ownership) Act 2024, this legislation represents the most significant reversal of rail privatisation in a generation. It creates Great British Railways as the new publicly owned body bringing track and train together under a single strategic direction. After decades of fragmentation, we have an opportunity to build a railway run in the public interest, with resources reinvested in services rather than being extracted from the industry.

But if the Bill is to succeed, it must improve conditions not only for passengers but for railway employees. The transition to GBR should be a just transition for railway workers, not simply an organisational restructuring exercise. I urge the Minister to consider a high-level industrial relations strategy alongside the high-level output specification.

I am concerned by reports of job losses at Network Rail ahead of GBR's creation, and by evidence that some TUPE transfers have been accompanied by the erosion of collective bargaining arrangements. The move to GBR should strengthen industrial relations, not weaken them. In that context, the derecognition of the Transport Salaried Staffs Association for employees transferring from Network Rail to its wholly owned subsidiary Platform4 is deeply troubling. The removal of long-established recognition arrangements at the point of transfer sends the wrong signal about industrial relations under public ownership.

Ministers have been asked what preparations are being made to understand existing recognition agreements and to engage with trade unions during the transition, yet we have heard responses suggesting that recognition remains a matter for individual employers. That risks reproducing the fragmented industrial relations landscape created by privatisation, rather than overcoming it.

John McDonnell: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the work he did over the years to develop the policies that this legislation is largely based on. On the issue of trade union negotiations, we have advocated for sectoral collective bargaining in this sector, as in others, for quite

a while. Why? Because it gives a voice to the workers themselves and brings about stability on issues such as employment and long-term investment. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is one of the building blocks for the new system we are creating?

Andy McDonald: I thank my right hon. Friend for his kind words, and I fully acknowledge his point. That is exactly how we are going to build a sustainable railway that will serve our communities and be responsive to reasonable requests from its workforce.

I have tabled new clause 26 and amendment 64, on the transfer of employees to GBR. The original vision of reform was for a railway with a single directing mind, but there is a strong case for having a single employer too. The legislation should make it clear that employees transferring from Network Rail, DfT Operator operators and former franchises will move into a coherent organisation, with full TUPE protections and clear employment rights. I also encourage the Government to move towards a formal framework for sectoral collective bargaining across the rail industry. Public ownership should create the conditions for partnership, workforce voice and stable industrial relations.

I have also tabled new clause 27, on pension schemes. It is remarkable that legislation transferring the railway back into public ownership contains weaker statutory pension protections than the legislation used to privatise it. The Railways Act 1993 included detailed provisions protecting pension rights, and workers joining GBR deserve the same certainty. Every railway employee should have a statutory right to participate in the railway pension scheme on protected terms.

I also support amendments to preserve schedule 17. We all remember the overwhelming public opposition to the proposals to close ticket offices, and schedule 17 provides an important mechanism for consultation and accountability when significant service changes are proposed. Those protections should not be casually swept aside.

I support the amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds East (Richard Burgon), which would secure GBR in the public sector for the future. I also support amendment 35, which was tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), and the wider principle of insourcing. He is absolutely right to say that the Bill creates an opportunity for the greatest wave of insourcing in a generation. The railway should not rely on fragmented contracting models that create insecurity and limit progression. Bringing contracted workers directly into GBR would strengthen workforce planning, improve standards and help to fulfil Labour's commitment to treat railway staff as an asset rather than a cost.

This Bill is a historic opportunity. Public ownership can deliver a better railway for passengers, but it must also deliver a better railway for the people who run it every day. By strengthening protections for employment, trade union recognition, pensions and insourcing, we can ensure that Great British Railways is built on the foundations of fairness as well as efficiency.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak as we embark on the Government's back to the future nationalisation plan. I will be speaking to new clause 35

and amendments 68 and 69, tabled in my name. Together, they are designed to ensure that Ministers and Great British Railways treat Ely junction as the nationally significant bottleneck it is, and that they make the progress that passengers, freight operators and local communities are entitled to expect.

It is important to set out the context in which my amendments sit. Rail services to North West Norfolk are not good enough. There are too many late trains, cancellations and engineering weekend closures. Those unreliable rail services put people off travelling and have a damaging effect on the local economy, particularly the visitor economy. My constituents deserve better, and improvements to Ely Junction would help deliver that.

4 pm

Why Ely? Put simply, this is one of the most constrained parts of the national rail network. It is a major bottleneck where five lines converge. New clause 35 would require the Secretary of State, when setting the rail freight target and preparing the statutory rail strategy, to treat Ely as a nationally significant capacity constraint. It would also require a report to Parliament on progress, rather than allowing this just to wither on the vine, showing what was being done.

Backing the Ely area capacity enhancement scheme would increase off-peak capacity to 10 trains per hour, enabling additional passenger services to King's Lynn and elsewhere, doubling freight services from Felixstowe to the midlands and the north to meet the growing demand, and removing nearly 100,000 lorry journeys annually. There was real relief across the area when the last Conservative Government approved and funded the Ely project in 2023 as part of scrapping parts of HS2. That was done in recognition of the exceptional cost-benefits of this project, with £5 of benefits for every £1 invested, compared with the derisory £1.20 for every £1 invested in the HS2 scheme.

With rail freight demand growing strongly, increasing the capacity of the network is vital. Amendment 68 would require the rail strategy to include Ely junction as a key capacity constraint for freight as well as for passengers, which would hardwire this into the system and the long-term decisions this Bill is designed to support. That is necessary because, as with so many transport projects in the east of England, such as the A47, this Government have chosen to pause the Ely scheme and cut the funding. Instead, in the spending review Ministers backed projects with much lower cost-benefit ratios, with the result that passengers continue to suffer from unreliable and less frequent services, more freight is required to use roads and infrastructure fails to meet the demand.

Upgrading Ely junction is about improving connectivity and passenger services in one of the growth parts of the country, while supporting our ports and logistics, giving businesses the confidence to invest, and unlocking key housing and employment sites. Amendment 69 would place a specific duty on Great British Railways—the controlling mind in this scheme—to “have particular regard”, in carrying out its capacity function, to increasing capacity at Ely. Without such a duty, even if Ministers considered Ely was a problem to be fixed, there is no guarantee that Great British Railways would choose to prioritise it.

Through these amendments, Parliament has the opportunity to send a clear cross-party message that this upgrade is essential and further delay is not acceptable. Given the compelling benefits—the £5 for every £1 invested—I hope Ministers will accept my amendments.

Laurence Turner: I am grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker, for being able to speak so early in this debate. I wish to focus on Government amendment 92, amendment 166 on devolution, which stands in my name, and the Transport Committee amendments on disability access. At the outset, I thank the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for her leadership on this issue.

Public ownership as a means to the end of improving passenger services has always implicitly been at the heart of this Bill, and Government amendment 92 makes that intent explicit. I warmly welcome its presence on the amendment paper. I hope the House will forgive a few words on the origins of this amendment. As the Minister said, a drafting issue was identified. In essence, although the requirement for public ownership was contained in other legislation, it was contingent on the circumstances of transition and on definitions set out in secondary legislation.

I am sure that Members across the House will agree that, whatever their views on the merits of particular ownership models, such an important decision as public ownership or privatisation of the railways should be taken only by the majority consent of the whole House, and that is exactly what the amendment will achieve, safeguarding Great British Railways from the spectre of privatisation through the back door. I thank the Minister, the Minister of State the noble Lord Hendy and the Bill team for their constructive engagement on this issue.

I am optimistic about the Bill's devolution provisions and I hope that under them Birmingham and the west midlands can enjoy some of the improvements that passengers in London and Liverpool already benefit from. Great things were done in the past through the old section 20 agreements under the Transport Act 1968, not least the creation of the cross-city line which runs through my constituency, but such agreements proved impossible under the fragmented post-privatisation railway. I hope section 5 proves to be a worthy successor to Barbara Castle's section 20.

In the west midlands, we have a particular issue. We have a well-established devolved body, the West Midlands Railway Executive, which covers counties beyond the combined authority's boundaries, such as Worcestershire, Warwickshire and Staffordshire. Clause 5, as it stands, specifies that devolution agreements will cover services in the area of a combined authority. It is important that such devolution agreements reflect the natural railway geographies of those areas, so I hope that reassurance can be given from the Government Front Bench.

Several amendments would take forward the Select Committee's recommendations on disability access. We can judge our transport services on the ability of all passengers to use them and the Bill contains some welcome provisions. Clause 18 states that GBR must “in particular” advance the interests of disabled people. I believe this is the first time any such commitment requirement has been set out in railway legislation. GBR will be subject to the public sector equality duty, but new clause 39 would ensure that when the passengers'

[*Laurence Turner*]

council is constituted disabled people are represented on that body in accordance with the old commitment, “Nothing about us without us”. I hope Ministers will look carefully at that issue.

We heard from the Opposition Front Bench and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), that they wished to advance a passenger growth target. The hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage will know that that was the subject of some constructive disagreement on the Select Committee. Freight has historically been the poor relation on the railway network, in particular when it comes to pathing agreements. I fear that if a passenger growth target was in the Bill on the same basis and weight as the freight growth target, the advantages for the freight growth target in those decisions would be lost. That is an argument we heard in the Public Bill Committee’s evidence sessions from the Rail Freight Group.

Olly Glover: Without boring the House with a re-litigation of the debate we had in Committee, I will just say that the idea that passenger and freight are mutually exclusive and that there must be a choice between them is not correct. The Westbahn upgrade in Austria is a really good example of how investment has delivered an increase in both speed and frequency of passenger trains, and just as much freight, if not more, than before. We do not need to choose between them; we can have both if we so wish.

Laurence Turner: The hon. Member describes the railway as it could be—and he tempts me to get on to Red Star Parcels, but that might be one for another day—but we must have regard to the railway as it is now and the fact is that the railway the Bill inherits sets up that binary choice all too often. I very much hope we can get more interaction between modes, as he describes.

The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) said—I hope I do not misrepresent her—that the Bill carries forward, in a different form, an idea created by the previous Conservative Government, but I think that is really too short a horizon.

Wendy Morton: The point I was making was that the concept of Great British Railways and bringing track and train closer together came during our time in government, when Grant Shapps was the Transport Secretary and I was a rail Minister.

Laurence Turner: I hear what the right hon. Lady says, but it is contradicted by the record and our own experience. She says that integration of track and train is an idea that came from that review, but we were advancing that idea for railway reform on the Labour Benches in 2011 and 2012. The Bill is the culmination of all that reform effort over many, many years.

Andy McDonald: What has been said is not accurate. Our White Paper for GB Rail was published ahead of the Williams-Shapps review. The chronology is either right or wrong, and I am afraid that the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) is wrong.

Laurence Turner: The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills is, I say respectfully, wrong on this issue. When the Labour party first committed to the reintegration of track and train, under the then shadow Rail Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), I wrote the announcement—so I do bring some bearing to that question.

It has been a privilege over these years to ride on the footplate of this reform journey. The Bill will end the national buck-passing game of “Whose Line is it Anyway?”. Most importantly, it will establish a rail network that is run by and for the nation. I look forward to voting against amendments that would undo that important journey of reform.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It was my pleasure to serve on the Bill Committee, and I put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), who led on the legislation for the Liberal Democrats, and behind whose expertise I have gamely hidden throughout. I believe that the Bill should be about passengers, which is why I strongly support new clause 1, tabled by my hon. Friend, which would establish a passengers’ charter.

New clause 1 would establish clear expectations around value for money, quality of service and adequate seating. It would require targets for reliability and a timetable for improvements to the passenger experience. Importantly, it would address issues that passengers in West Dorset have repeatedly raised with me: reliable highspeed wi-fi; comfortable seat design; dependable mobile connectivity; power outlets; luggage and bicycle storage; accessibility and clean toilets; onboard food and drink provision on journeys lasting more than two hours. Those are basic expectations of a modern railway in a modern country.

New clause 1 would also strengthen accessibility and extend the principles behind delay and repay to failure of onboard amenities, while moving towards automatic digital compensation. Importantly, NC1 sends a simple message to all: passengers come first. The same principle underpins new clause 43, which would place a duty on Great British Railways to provide food and drink on rail services lasting over an hour. For many passengers, particularly those travelling long distances from rural areas, access to refreshments is a necessity. If we want people to choose rail over car, we must think about the entire journey experience, and not simply whether the train arrives at the destination.

Passenger-focused reform must also mean affordability, which is why new clause 6 is important. At a time when many households continue to face pressure with the cost of living, the new clause would require plans for fare increases to be capped in line with inflation. It would extend standardised discounts for young people, provide discounted fares for veterans, establish a national tap-in, tap-out system, guarantee that passengers received the best-value fare regardless of how they purchase their tickets, introduce a national railcard, and enable open source access to ticketing systems and fare databases. The new clause would also require collaboration with local and regional transport authorities to enable multimodal ticketing. In rural areas such as West Dorset, where passengers often rely on both rail and bus services, joined-up ticketing could make a huge difference.

Linked to affordability and passenger growth is new clause 2, which would require a report into the merits of the rail-miles programme. We already reward loyalty in

supermarkets and airmiles, yet regular rail passengers receive little recognition for their continued use of the network. A rail-mile programme would encourage repeat journeys, support passenger growth, and provide greater flexibility for commuters, students and working families. It would also help encourage modal shift away from private car use and towards public transport.

For young people, passenger-focused rail reform must also mean access to opportunity. That is why I tabled new clause 47, which would provide free rail travel to 16 to 18-year-olds in education, training or apprenticeships. If a young person cannot physically reach a college, apprenticeship or job opportunity, then every other intervention becomes less effective. New clause 47 would help to remove that barrier and support social mobility, economic participation and fairness.

The needs of rural communities are also reflected in new clause 40, which would place a duty on Great British Railways and the Secretary of State to ensure that rail services respond proportionately to both permanent and seasonal population growth. Coastal communities face the double challenge of being underfunded for their permanent population while simultaneously accommodating huge seasonal increases in demand. This new clause would require consideration of rolling stock services and infrastructure investment to ensure that communities are not left behind simply because population increases occur seasonally rather than permanently.

New clause 42 would require an assessment of the benefits of constructing a passing loop at Tisbury on the west of England line. This proposal is important not only to my constituents, but across the south-west.

4.15 pm

I must get on to climate change, because it is an important issue. If climate and nature are not at the heart of this Bill, we risk failing to build a railway that is resilient to a changing climate and an increase in extreme weather conditions. It is not just about resilience; it is also about ensuring that every decision we make helps to deliver our climate and nature targets. New clause 7 would establish a statutory rail climate resilience and decarbonisation framework and require, alongside scheduled infrastructure improvements, the identification of sections of the network that are vulnerable to drought, soil moisture deficit, flooding, heat and cold. Working with new clauses 8 and 41, it would force the Government and Great British Railways to give proper consideration to climate and nature. I hope the Government will give consideration to our amendments and new clauses.

Rachael Maskell: When we think about a nationalised rail service, we often debate the governance, which is vital. It was a real honour to work with my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) on putting together the blueprint that has set this train in motion. However, we must also remember the staff, and I therefore refer to my entry on the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I raise a number of issues that could really impact their experience of working for our railways.

On 1 November last year, a horror unfolded on the east coast main line on a southbound LNER train. It was a chilling reminder of the incredible skills of rail staff in keeping us safe. It is our duty in this House to

ensure that we keep the staff safe. My amendments 56 and 57 seek to do just that. Rail workers, whether on board, at stations or in our ticket offices, face an unacceptable level of violence and abuse. The industry recognises this, and how changes in working practices such as driver-only operation and lone working increase risk, and supports the changes I am proposing. Amendments 56 and 57 would extend GBR's function to include an assurance for the safety of all rail workers, including from assaults. They would also secure safe staffing levels to achieve that aim.

Let me provide some examples. One rail worker was physically assaulted after trying to prevent a member of the public from climbing on to the train tracks, with trains due into the station imminently. Another rail worker had a hot drink thrown over them after charging an excess for an invalid ticket. Another was punched when they asked to see a ticket, resulting not only in him losing a tooth and requiring extensive dental treatment, but in the long tail of a mental health impact that ended in him leaving the service. Others have been threatened with knives. The level of violence is on the rise, with the British Transport police's latest figures showing a 24% increase in violence against rail workers compared with the previous year. It is staggering.

I have raised this in Parliament many times. We need strong legal protections for public transport workers against assault at work, mirroring new provisions the Government have introduced for retail workers via the Crime and Policing Act 2026, and previously for emergency workers. Transport workers need equally strong protections.

This is a devolved matter, and I understand that the RMT has made significant progress in Scotland, with the Scottish Government committing to create a stand-alone offence of assaulting or abusing a public transport worker, not least as many have an enforceable element to their role. Once that legislation is enforced, it will create two tiers of legal protections where rail workers in Scotland, including those working on GBR cross-border services, are afforded strong legal protections, while those working on GBR services in England and Wales are not. It is really important that we move to a single system to protect staff from assault. The Minister has been very helpful in engaging with me on this, and I hope that we can make real progress so that the safety of our staff who serve us day and night is put first. I appreciate that we have CCTV, bodycams and the British Transport police, but we need safe staffing levels and consultation on any changes.

On the wider issue of safe staffing, it is really important that we strengthen passengers' right to be consulted on changes to staffing levels. Amendment 58 seeks to achieve that. This issue is particularly important for disabled people too. The passenger watchdog has consistently shown that properly staffed trains and stations are not only important for passenger safety, security and accessibility, but safer for staff. Removing guards from trains and cutting staff from platforms, gatelines or ticket offices should be subject to consultation before any decisions are made.

Finally, I have tabled an amendment on open access operators. If they fold, we need to ensure that a process or mechanism is in place whereby staff can be TUPE-ed across—or the equivalent—into GBR, so that they are not left without a job. We need to retain their skills and experience and ensure that they continue to be employed on our national rail service as we move forward.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I rise to speak to new clause 17 and amendment 46, both of which stand in my name. I want to focus my remarks on a very simple principle. If Parliament is creating Great British Railways—we can argue away about any timeline—and we are concentrating more responsibility and decision making within a single national body, it is only right that there is appropriate accountability and local democratic oversight alongside it. As the Bill stands, it falls short in this regard.

New clause 17 does not seek to prevent decisions being made or create unnecessary bureaucracy. Rather, it ensures that where decisions relating to railway services or infrastructure have a significant impact on local communities and economies, Members of this House—elected to represent those communities—are consulted. Surely that it was local democracy and accountability is all about.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a very important point. My constituents are utterly shocked by ticket prices. If they wanted to travel between London and Stoke-on-Trent by train today, it would cost a minimum of £160. We need local democracy and decision making, because these prices are outrageous.

Wendy Morton: My right hon. Friend makes a really important point. I have found of late that, far from being a lot cheaper, as is often lauded, some of the ticket prices to Birmingham are absolutely eye-watering. I call on the Government to take a serious look at that. Rather than just saying, “Fares are all cheaper”, the Government must look right across the board, because some of them are far from affordable. That is also why I support the amendment from my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) about a railcard for our veterans, which must be delivered.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley) demonstrated, Members of Parliament are often the first port of call for constituents when problems arise with rail services or ticketing, or when communities are campaigning for investment. Whether it is constituents, businesses, community groups or local campaigners, they rightly expect their MP to be their voice and champion.

Local knowledge matters. Surely those who are elected to represent our communities should have a role in the decisions that affect them. I know from my own constituency just how important that can be. As the Minister knows, I have long campaigned for the restoration of a railway station in Aldridge—I see he is smiling. I make no apology for championing that case, and I will not be giving up any time soon. Members will have heard me raise this time and again for very good reason, because for too long communities like mine have been left behind by the railways. We hear talk of new passenger services such as Wrexham, Shropshire & Midlands Railway running through our village without stopping—that would be a huge missed opportunity. If we are serious about unlocking the economic growth that the Black Country so desperately needs, connectivity is key.

Throughout the debate, I have been interested by the contributions about the importance of putting passengers at the heart of our railway system. Of course, I agree with that, but surely it cannot be right that decisions

with significant local impacts could be taken without speaking to the very Members elected to represent those communities. If we are to have Great British Railways, we should also have great British accountability. This is not an argument against the Government’s chosen direction, but greater centralisation must be accompanied by greater accountability. That seems a reasonable proposition, and one that I genuinely think Members right across the House would be able to support.

On accountability, amendment 46 would ensure that directions issued to Great British Railways are shared with the Transport Committee. That, again, is entirely sensible, because just as local communities deserve to have a voice through their Members of Parliament, Parliament itself should be able to exercise proper scrutiny. Transparency and accountability go hand in hand, and if Ministers are to have significant powers over Great British Railways, surely it is right that the House and its Select Committees can see how those powers are being exercised.

Ultimately, both my amendment and new clause are about striking the right balance between central direction and democratic accountability. Local communities deserve to have their voices heard, and Parliament should be able to exercise proper scrutiny. While I shall not press them to a vote, I really hope that the Minister will reflect on that, give the proposals serious consideration and respond to them when he wraps up the debate.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Bill. It is fantastic that the vast majority of residents—passengers—in the east of England are travelling on trains in public ownership. This is the next piece of the jigsaw.

I note that the amendment paper appears to be longer than the Bill, so as somebody who has contributed to that, I will turn to some of my amendments. New clause 20 is a simple amendment on promoting integration between trains and everything else—buses, coaches, trams, walking and cycling. I agree that there is nothing in the Bill that prevents that, but I feel there should be something to actively encourage it.

We will all have been at a station when the mainline train has been delayed and, helpfully, the connecting train has been held back for a little time. However, and interestingly, I recently asked somebody at the Transport Committee who ran a bus company whether he had ever come across a situation where the train had been held because his bus had been delayed, and the answer was absolutely not—and vice versa. In fact, there are lots of incentives to stop that happening within the transport system as a whole—after all, a bus company can get fined for having delayed buses. That is why we need something in the Bill that promotes active integration.

Amendments 39 to 42 are about devolution and consultation. Under the Bill as drafted, the Secretary of State and GBR will consult with Scottish and Welsh Ministers. By contrast, elsewhere they will consult with mayoral strategic authorities. The difference is that in one place they are consulting with a person, and in the other they are consulting with an organisation. I strongly believe that consultation should take place with the mayor as the person with that democratic mandate to enable us to have stronger, quicker decision making and ensure that what is happening is clear.

I turn to new clause 2, tabled by the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), on the customer loyalty programme. I cannot say that I agree with the Secretary of State having to lay a report on that within a year—she probably has better things to do. However, the concept of a customer loyalty programme is something I have long called for, and I have had constructive discussions with the Minister on that. Encouraging passengers and would-be passengers to build a loyalty to our railways matters greatly. As has been said, that happens with air miles and with Tesco Clubcard. We could get all kinds of different benefits for passengers, and GBR could use such a programme to try to flex demand.

4.30 pm

Finally, we need a great British spruce-up of all our stations. As we roll out GBR, I want everything to look really good at our stations. Also, I have been reassured by my conversations with the Rail Minister about names on trains. I was worried, as we painted them all red, white and blue, that the names that people have chosen and which show pride in place might disappear—or, indeed, that we might not get any new ones. I hope the Minister will join my campaign to get the next train painted red, white and blue in my area named Q Central, after the fantastic women who were part of that organisation during world war two, which was the communications hub for the whole of the UK. It would be fantastic if the first GBR-branded train bore that name.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): A modern railway system should enable everyone, regardless of their mobility, to travel safely, independently and with dignity. That is why new clause 30, which would place a duty upon Great British Railways to establish an accessible rail strategy, is so important. If the railways are to be nationalised and brought together, we should take that opportunity to ensure that the new body takes a strategic approach to make sure rail travel becomes more accessible for all our constituents.

I have two stations in my constituency, Bridgwater and Highbridge, neither of which is fully accessible. At neither station is it possible for a passenger with poor mobility to cross from one platform to the other without leaving the station and taking a circuitous route that involves crossing a road. That is not only inconvenient but unsafe.

I witnessed that for myself on a recent visit to Highbridge station when, believe it or not, I used a mobility scooter and attempted the journey that many disabled passengers are forced to take. The experience was difficult and, frankly, alarming—especially for anyone who happened to see me. The route included uneven pavements, awkward navigation and a crossing over a railway bridge. It required time, effort and confidence that not every passenger can reasonably be expected to have. This is not just about fairness; with improved accessibility, journeys become smoother, connections are easier and delays caused by limited access are reduced.

Although I welcome the Department for Transport's Access for All scheme, it is disappointing that neither Highbridge nor Bridgwater stations are currently on track to receive support. I will continue to work with Burnham-on-Sea & Highbridge town council to resolve the issue at Highbridge. We have met Network Rail and

Great Western Railway to raise those concerns directly, and although there is a recognition that change is needed, it must be matched with action.

I support new clause 53, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), which would lay down key performance indicators for Great British Railways. Clear, measurable targets should guide how we assess accessibility and service quality. Whether it is step-free access, reduced transfer times or improved passenger satisfaction, such benchmarks matter and, crucially, they must be followed up on with real accountability.

Amendment 157, also tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham, serves a similar purpose, ensuring that Great British Railways is duty-bound to promote passenger and economic growth, and increase investment. In particular, new paragraph (j) would make GBR duty-bound

“to remove or reduce the need for public subsidy of the railways”.

We have not heard from the Minister about getting good value for money for the taxpayer. I am concerned that, over time, Great British Railways will transform into another British Rail: a public corporation beholden to the unions, soaking up ever greater amounts of taxpayers' money, and more focused on keeping Eddie Dempsey and the RMT satisfied than its customers.

I want a better-run, more efficient and more productive railway for my constituents; one that will be used and enjoyed by the greatest number of people; and one that does not cost the taxpayer a fortune.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): This is a very significant piece of legislation. I have tabled a number of amendments that I believe would strengthen it even further, but in the time available I will focus on the issue that is without doubt the top priority for my constituents when it comes to rail reform: cutting fares, through amendment 32.

Thirty years of the railways being run for shareholder profit has left British commuters with some of the highest fares in Europe and taxpayers shelling out more in subsidies than it cost to run a public service for the pleasure. It really was the worst of all worlds. When something basic that people need to live their daily lives, such as getting to work or school, visiting family or seeing a doctor, is treated as a commercial enterprise, what should be a service that facilitates our lives degenerates into a way of squeezing as much profit out of people as possible. When people are more or less turned into human cash machines just to get around, it is no wonder that extortionate fares put so many people off using the railways altogether, and I am sure that we have all seen the mind-numbingly bonkers stories of instances where it has been cheaper to fly to Europe than to get a train from London to one of our great northern cities.

This is what happens when essential public transport is handed over to private capital in a sector where real competition cannot function. For too long, our ability to get around reliably and affordably has come second to extracting profit for shareholders, and we see similarly infuriating failures with our water and energy, too. Taking back control of our railways means that we can rewrite the rules so that they work for ordinary people at long last.

[Chris Hinchliff]

I pay credit to the Labour Government for getting us here, but it is now vital that we grasp the opportunities presented by public ownership and use that control to make rail travel more efficient and accessible for all and, crucially—I turn here to my amendment 32—more affordable. Ultimately, we must always keep in mind that it will not wash to just tell the public that nationalisation has made our railways better; they need to feel it in their pocket. The good will for a different way of doing things is undeniable. The public overwhelmingly support the principle of public ownership, but that support will vanish if fares continue to rise.

My amendment proposes a Great British Railways railcard, our own version of the schemes in Germany, Switzerland and Belgium. Instead of a morass of wildly varying fares, discounts based specifically on age or other characteristics, and schemes that almost seem deliberately designed by some fiendish mind determined to catch passengers out with validity only on certain routes and at specific times, amendment 32 would give every resident in the UK the right to a railcard offering substantially reduced fares on all rail travel, whatever their age, whatever the route and whatever the time of day.

The best signal we could send to the public as we take over the railways is to use some of the savings from reduced waste and management costs and ending profit flowing out of the system to bring down fares. Seven in 10 Brits—a full 70%—say that the Government should wholly reinvest the savings from ending rail privatisation into cutting fares or opening new rail services.

For decades now, the cost of existence in this country has been killing off hope and the chance to embrace so much of what makes life worth living, with death by a thousand costs. Energy bills are too high, rents are out of control and council tax goes up and up. We have to pull every lever available to us across every part of Government to lift the weight of the cost of living crisis, so that everyone can afford the basics of daily life without facing the constant stress and struggle of scraping by. For a key worker who schlepps into work each day on a train, or for a disabled person or pensioner heading for multiple medical appointments a month, knocking 25% or even 50% off their travel costs would make a profound difference to ensuring that the sums added up at the end of the month.

Cheaper fares would benefit millions of people, from those at the sharpest end struggling to put food on the table to the squeezed middle who feel like the helping hand of Government is always reserved for someone else. Rail fares are a crucial way of showing that a Labour Government are on the side of all those people—a benefit to all and a loss to none. I believe that my amendment 32 is a chance to show tangibly, in a way that reaches across generations, geography and traditional political loyalties, that Labour values mean more money in your pocket.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for keeping us on time and on track—much better than some of the trains I have travelled on.

I will speak in favour of new clause 1, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), and amendment 55, tabled by my hon. Friend

the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke). When the Government came into office with a promise to do something about the shocking state of our trains, people back in Yeovil all said, “Finally—it’s about time”, which happens also to be what they say if the train eventually shows up. There is a lot to welcome in the Bill, but it needs to go further if we are to address the problems with rail travel in Somerset.

Luckily enough, us pesky Liberal Democrats have some ideas that the Government can support today. Our passenger charter and our amendments would provide a range of guarantees that would address the challenges that people in Yeovil face when trying to get a train. They would back up those guarantees with a framework for compensation for failures to comply with the charter, such as delay repay. Our charter’s guarantee about value for money would mean that apprentices such as Gregg would not be priced out of rail travel. He worked out that currently it would cost him £5,200 for an annual train ticket to Exeter—a quarter of his salary—instead of £1,750 if he lift-shares with a friend. We can see why people do not use the trains at the moment.

Our charter guarantee of proper seating for any single part of a rail journey longer than 30 minutes will mean that something finally has to be done about the overcrowding on trains from Yeovil junction, which makes travel for people like Colin a nightmare, even when they get off their train and try to get the next one. Only the other day, I was chatting to a disabled passenger on the overcrowded train to London, and she told me that if she wants a seat, she has to fork out lots more money for first-class tickets to have the peace of mind that she will not have to stand. Our charter calls for proper services, including good wi-fi, clean toilets, and catering—and a few plugs would help. It would also mean that long journeys should not be an uncomfortable nightmare.

The charter guarantee on the reliability of services, and amendment 55’s requirements for better links between rail travel and onward transport, such as buses or active travel, will mean that people like Janine will be able to use Yeovil junction more reliably. At the minute, a lack of bus services means that when trains are late, people miss the bus and are forced to wait ages to get home, or they have to fork out for a pricey taxi. Hopefully, we will also get a safe active travel route to Yeovil junction.

Finally, our charter’s guarantee relates to improving the accessibility of trains, stations, the areas around stations and replacement services. It will force more action to support disabled passengers in rural areas because this is a real issue in Yeovil. Staff shortages and a lack of proper training have seen both Jack, a wheelchair user, and Kathy, who is visually impaired, suffer accidents at Yeovil Pen Mill. As Kathy points out, at the moment things are only getting worse, with staff retiring after years of service and GWR not hiring replacements beforehand. Jack even described to me how she was made to feel responsible for her accident, because she needed to use a ramp. That is not good enough and not acceptable at all.

Our charter makes it clear as day that accessibility is the responsibility of Great British Railways, not passengers. I hope the Government will listen and take on board our ideas, because we need this Bill to succeed if we are to get the trains working for people in Yeovil again.

Matt Rodda: It is a pleasure to speak in the debate. I want to address some of the issues raised by new clause 22 and other new clauses in relation to disabled people. If I could just make it clear for the sake of the record, I did not mean to sign new clause 22 and, in fact, I have asked the office to remove my name from that clause, although it will not appear in the paperwork until tomorrow.

I want to offer my wholehearted support for the Bill and to thank the Minister and, indeed, his predecessor as shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald), who I had the pleasure of working with in opposition. This important Bill will bring track and train together and deliver enormous benefits for local residents, not least in constituencies such as Reading Central, where we have a significant number of commuters, but also a lot of economic growth generated by rail investment. It is a shame that I was not able to discuss that further with the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) after his slight misunderstanding of my point on this matter. It is important to consider the benefits of rail in terms of economic growth to the country. While the Elizabeth line cost about £18 billion, in the first three years it operated—it has now operated for several years—£42 billion of economic growth was generated by that wise investment. It was backed by both main parties and, I would hope, other smaller parties as well. I hope that we can all come together to support that.

I should declare a bit of an interest in that not only do I represent a town that has seen huge growth thanks to rail investment, but I was involved in the Paddington rail crash and was lucky to survive it. I am a regular commuter, and I also thank the RMT and ASLEF for supporting my general election campaigns in the past.

4.45 pm

On the importance of improving disabled access, I did not want to speak about step-free access at stations, but there was a clerical error between my office and someone in the House—it was possibly my fault as well; I am not quite clear how it happened. I want to speak about the use of steps for access to taxis at stations, which is currently a live issue at Reading station. A number of local taxi drivers have raised it with me, and in particular I pay tribute to Haji Benares, who is one of the regular, long-standing taxi drivers at Reading station. He and his colleagues have pointed out that due to faults in the design of the new station, which is a huge asset to our community, there are issues getting disabled people in and out of taxis.

I would like to ask the Minister for his help, because it appears to be a problem caused by poor-quality design some years ago. The new station was opened some while back under the previous Government's supervision—I am not criticising them for supporting the rebuilding of the station, but I would like to see more training and understanding of the issue by architects. We need a better understanding of the needs of disabled people, particularly wheelchair users, when getting in and out of taxis at railway stations, in addition to the issue of step-free access at stations. Perhaps it will be possible for me to meet officials in the Department about that important matter.

Reading station is operated by a private railway company on behalf of Network Rail, so it is even more complicated, and I hope the Minister will be able to help me to find a

way through the bureaucracy involved. I have had initial offers of help from Great Western Railway and Reading borough council, but I hope we can address the issue. I do not want taxi drivers to have to lift heavy wheelchairs in and out of taxis at our station; I want it to be a seamless process whereby disabled people can use the trains. They get support at Reading from a dedicated member of staff, which is excellent, and we have step-free access, which I would love to see expanded further. I know the Government want that too.

I would like features to be designed in to allow passengers who are disabled and use wheelchairs to access taxis easily, as they are a vital part of their transport. Integrating road and rail transport in that way is important. I thank the Minister for listening to that point, and I look forward to speaking more about it to his colleagues.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I rise to speak to new clauses 29 to 32 and amendments 65 to 67, tabled in my name.

My mission is to keep Runnymede and Weybridge moving. Rail and transport are important to us: we are situated within the London commuter belt, one 10th of the M25 runs through my constituency, along with the M3, and Egham is five miles from Heathrow. The constituency has companies that were established there because of our transport connections, but also those that deliver services linked to transport, such as logistics.

I have tabled a series of amendments with a view to improving services and transport, not only in my constituency but across the country, as we have heard from colleagues—I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) and for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) for referring to my amendments in their speeches. If the amendments are not pushed to a vote, Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope at the very least that the Minister will be minded to support them, not least in the spirit of improving the rail service across the country, and perhaps to stop having to listen to me rattle on about the level crossings in Egham and other problems in my constituency.

A key strength of the Bill is that, as several Ministers have said, the buck stops with them. I believe the Secretary of State said that the buck stops with her, and when I met Lord Hendy, he said that the buck stops with him. That is a key improvement on the previous system, in which South Western Railway and Network Rail were separate, because we now have a clear person and organisation to go to in order to raise issues or problems about the rail infrastructure in our constituencies.

New clause 29 would give the Secretary of State the power to direct GBR to co-operate with transport authorities to ensure the effective operation of transport networks and to reduce disruption. It does not make sense to have railway engineering works at the same time as local motorways or arterial roads are closed, or to have multiple pockets of utility works around Chertsey, where I live, all taking place at the same time. We need better co-ordination among all bodies to ensure, first, that such works do not all happen at the same time, and secondly, that if a utility company excavates a road to work on the water supply, for example, necessary work to fix the gas or electricity supply or to install broadband takes place at the same time.

[Dr Ben Spencer]

New clause 30 relates to an accessible rail strategy. Accessibility issues affect many stations across the country and, frankly, it is scandalous that we have such accessibility problems. In my constituency, there is a focus on the Weybridge lifts, which I have been going on about for many years, as they frequently break down, affecting many passengers across Weybridge. I would like to give a shout-out to Tim Blanchard, a wheelchair user who has led a campaign to try to improve the Weybridge lifts. I am promised that they will be replaced this summer, which will finally see an end to the Weybridge lift saga, but we need more, and I hope the accessible rail strategy will prevent colleagues from having the same problems that we have had locally.

Sir Ashley Fox: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for tabling new clause 30. Has he been offered any explanation by the Minister or any part of the ministerial team as to why they will not accept his new clause?

Dr Spencer: I hope we will hear from the Minister about why he may or may not accept the new clause—I hope he ends up doing so. Under the previous Government, the Weybridge lifts were notorious in the Department for Transport because of the problems we had—[Interruption.] I see some of my hon. Friends are nodding in agreement. I hope the lifts will lose their notoriety as they are replaced.

New clause 31 sets out requirements for GBR to ensure that any planned changes to passenger services are only made with due consideration of its objectives, and following communication with stakeholders. The new clause relates to an issue in the summer of 2025, when quiet off-peak services—including services from Chertsey between 7.30 am and 9.30 am—were cut during the summer holidays, impacting people's ability to get to work. Feedback from stakeholders is important because, after all, it is a service for our citizens.

New clause 32 would require the Secretary of State to review the provision of rail infrastructure and services before an application for a nationally significant infrastructure project can be approved. The third runway at Heathrow, which I oppose, looks like it will go ahead. If it does, we need to make sure that we have improvements to our local rail infrastructure, which is already creaking, and particularly to surface-access transport.

That brings me nicely to amendments 65 and 67—which I know we have all been awaiting for—on level crossings. Egham is punished day in, day out by the excessively long down times of its level crossings. This is unacceptable and it needs to change. We need one, if not more, of the level crossings to be removed so that we can get Egham moving. If the third runway goes ahead, that work could be linked to the funding coming out of Heathrow. I am grateful for the minor improvements that will be made by SWR, and for SWR's engagement on the issue, but I ask the Minister to please help me to get Egham and Runnymede and Weybridge moving.

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): As I made clear on Second Reading, this crucial Bill is about undoing the immeasurable damage done to our rail network, to passenger confidence and to economic prosperity after decades of privatisation and woeful mismanagement.

I will focus on rail devolution. I commend the Transport Committee on its incisive report on the topic, and I particularly thank my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) for the amendments drafted in her name and her clear desire for us to get the most out of this legislation. I know how much is riding on the Bill for our regional mayors, strategic authorities and, most importantly, the passengers they serve. My appeal today is to ensure that the Bill supports the Government's devolution journey.

Transport planning is a crucial competence of our elected mayors, and where mayoral strategic authorities are truly emboldened, entire city regions, local transport networks and whole communities are strengthened as a result. We must do as much as possible to support connections that improve economic density and therefore boost growth. Our achievements in Greater Manchester are a testament to that, and the absorption of rail into the Bee Network is the critical next step in delivering on the priorities of local people.

I welcome Government amendment 136, which will enable local bodies to enter into certain arrangements with the Secretary of State, but concerns remain that it may not reflect the full capabilities of our mayoral authorities. I would welcome any assurances from the Minister that this provision will not be narrower than existing provisions set out in the Railways Act 2005. Essentially, can the Minister confirm that the amendment supports meaningful partnership with our elected combined authority mayors? As the Bill stands, engagement between Great British Rail and our mayoral authorities could be predicated on good will among officials negotiating on their behalf, with little codified in the way of a formal, statutory partnership between the two.

Mayoral strategic authorities and mayors themselves are now integral to the delivery of housing policy, urban planning and regional economic development. For them to do that role without much of a stake in local rail networks is to proceed with one arm tied behind their backs. Authorities need to be sufficiently empowered in relation to Great British Railways to get on and demonstrate that they deserve greater scope to plan transport alongside other policy areas—for example, by strategically aligning rail corridors and house building. Great British Rail cannot inhibit this kind of common-sense approach in the way that Network Rail sometimes has in the past. Great British Rail and our local rail networks must work in lockstep with spatial plans and the changes we see across our communities. That is the only way we can ensure benefits for peripheral towns as much as for the hearts of our city centres.

We also need to think about the future. We can never say with certainty how committed a future Government may be to devolution, so the Bill must enshrine a robust partnership duty to ensure that mayoral authorities have a decisive role in commissioning services, shaping specifications and influencing fares and performance outcomes. We cannot simply rely on a duty to consult.

Local transport plans are critical, too. As the Bill stands, Great British Rail should “have regard to” local transport plans—forward-looking, multi-year plans developed by local transport authorities, each with a statutory basis, that promote safe, integrated, reliable and sustainable local transport policy. Simply having regard to them could lead to rail policy being delivered entirely by Great British Rail in a silo and in isolation from wider place-based policy.

I appreciate that we are planning a national rail network, but that work must not run roughshod over local economic and transport priorities. I therefore urge the Minister and the Government to consider revising the language in clause 16 from “have regard to” to “act in accordance with”. I know that, in their response to the Transport Committee’s report on this matter, the Government were clear in their view that the current language is sufficient, but I am keen to stress that this Bill is about not just the next few years but the next few decades. We need to set an irreversible course for sustained devolution, and doing so means GBR not just regarding the plans, but fully aligning with them. I would welcome the Minister’s remarks on that.

I offer my full support to this crucial legislation, and I thank the Government for their continued engagement. Our regional leaders have an invaluable contribution to make in engaging with GBR; for that to be realised, we need to move beyond notions of consultation and towards equal and productive partnerships between mayoral strategic authorities and our rail network’s new guiding mind. That means making train travel and other forms of public transport better for passengers across the country, irrespective of where that may be, and ultimately driving economic growth. This ambition must be what guides us going forward, and that is how passengers nationwide will come to judge what we are doing here today.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I rise to speak to new clauses 10, 12 and 13, tabled in my name. Before I start, may I sincerely thank the Minister for meeting me a few weeks ago? The dialogue was constructive and welcomed, and I really hope that other Ministers take a leaf out of his book and reach across the Floor to have dialogue when moving forward with legislation.

New clause 10 would devolve rail powers in Wales to the Welsh Government and, crucially, devolve the funding that goes along with them. The current system in which one Government control trains and another Government control the track simply does not work for Wales. It prevents Wales from creating its own integrated network and planning and delivering the rail system it needs. If we are serious about improving rail for the people of Wales, we must address this fundamental issue through the full devolution of rail infrastructure, which the people of Wales support. The new Plaid Cymru Welsh Government were elected on a commitment to devolve rail, as is already the case in Scotland. Devolution would finally unlock the investment Wales has been denied and end the injustice of Welsh taxpayers funding England-only projects such as HS2, Oxford-Cambridge—which is nowhere near Wales—and Northern Powerhouse Rail, which again is nowhere near Wales. HS2 alone deprives Wales of nearly £6 billion.

5 pm

Network Rail’s funding and planning remain reserved to Westminster, unlike in Scotland. Meanwhile, the Welsh Government receive no dedicated budget for rail enhancements, despite—in fairness—having invested over £1.3 billion in the south Wales metro. That money was diverted from essential issues such as health and education services, because the Wales block grant provides nothing for rail. New clause 12 addresses this historic underfunding. Wales has received just 1% to 2% of enhancement funding despite having 11% of the UK network. The

UK Government repeatedly claim that they are investing £14 billion in Welsh rail, but I am afraid that this is simply not the case. It is an unfunded pledge—a wish list, a hoped-for. When I asked the Department for Transport in a written question whether the Treasury had guaranteed that funding, the answer was no.

Even the Government’s own figures are inconsistent. Ministers speak of a £14 billion plan, yet Transport for Wales estimates that the pipeline of projects the UK Government say they would support would cost around £10 billion. Let us look at what actual money has been committed. So far, £445 million has been committed over 10 years, with no guarantees of further funding—that is £44.5 million per year. To put that into perspective, each of our local governments has a far bigger budget than that to run our local services with. We need an urgent step change in funding for Wales to deliver the railway investment we need, and I hope the UK Government will work constructively with the new Welsh Government to deliver it. I am afraid that commitments on paper mean nothing without the funding that makes them real. The new Welsh deputy Minister for transport has already reached out to the UK Government on this issue, and I am sure the Minister will respond positively.

The last amendment that stands in my name is new clause 13, which concerns rural investment. The £445 million mainly concerns new stations in the east of Wales; rural communities, particularly in the west, have been overlooked for generations. In my constituency of Caerfyrddin, the case for reopening St Clears station is well established, as is the need to improve links towards Pembrokeshire, which I have been pressing for alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) and the hon. Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell). New clause 13 would require a clear plan to ensure projects such as these merit consideration and that rural Wales and, in particular, rural west Wales finally receive their fair share of funding.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): To ensure I get all colleagues in, I am introducing an immediate four-minute time limit.

Navendu Mishra: I thank all railway staff at stations across Stockport, not only in my constituency but in neighbouring constituencies. I also declare an interest—trade unions have made donations to my constituency Labour party.

The British Transport Police recorded a 5% increase in crime in the 12 months leading up to June 2025, including a rise in violence and sexual offences, leading to claims of an “epidemic of violence”. It is facing a funding shortfall of £8.5 million this financial year, and I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) that we in this House have a duty to keep passengers and staff safe. As such, I urge the Government to ensure that proper, adequate funding is allocated to the BTP.

I also echo the points made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) about outsourcing. Outsourcing is embedding systemic racism in parts of the railway network where outsourced workers are disproportionately from ethnic minority backgrounds. As I said earlier in an intervention, ethnic minority workers represent 25% of the directly employed train operating company workforce, but that figure rises to just under 60% for outsourced cleaners and caterers.

[Navendu Mishra]

The outsourcing model is driven by employers taking on workers on precarious contracts and on poor terms and conditions, such as inadequate sick pay and pensions when compared with directly employed workers. Outsourced workers typically have no travel facilities, but many in the House will be aware that a chief executive of a private train company has excellent terms and conditions, benefits and travel facilities. GBR should tackle these outsourced contracts and the poor terms and conditions that people are on. Everyone deserves fair pay and treatment, as well as dignity at work.

Those who work for open-access railway companies do a great job, but open access injects unnecessary complexity and fragmentation into operations and operators cherry-pick the most profitable routes on our network. My view is that no further open-access contracts or extensions should be granted, and that existing services and jobs should be absorbed into GBR at the earliest opportunity.

Reddish South train station in my constituency has one train a week. That is not a joke. It is absolutely ridiculous. Proper passenger services must be restored at Reddish South train station. I pay tribute to the Friends of Reddish South Station, who do such important work in my patch. In the last reporting period, only 102 passengers used that train station in an entire year. We need to ensure that as we move on with modernising our railway system, Reddish South is not left behind and train stations have proper services.

I did support new clause 16, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden). It has now been withdrawn, but it would have required GBR to establish a department to look at options to increase services to underserved places. I invite the Minister to visit Reddish South. Lord Hendy made a visit to my constituency last year, but it was at short notice and he did not have a chance to go to Reddish South. I invite the Minister and Lord Hendy to come to my constituency specifically to meet the Friends of Reddish South.

I will make a quick point on disabled access. The Access for All scheme is a good scheme, but it is far too slow. Nathaniel Yates, a constituent of mine, has done so much work over the years to improve disabled access for all, but accessibility at train stations in the north is poor, with fewer than half of all stations having step-free access. We need to ensure that more people are not excluded from our railways, such as those with mobility issues, underlying health conditions or heavy luggage. I support amendments 29 and 33, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff), which would protect and promote the rights of disabled passengers.

I end on the point that since privatisation, rolling stock companies have been rinsing the taxpayer. Those companies should be brought in house, and Great British Railways should create its own rolling stock procurement team to stop taxpayers being taken advantage of.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): When I was growing up, the state of the railways, alongside the weather, was a general complaint that united most people. Thankfully, the days of the cardboard British Rail sandwich are long gone, but I regret to say

that general dissatisfaction with the railway experience in my part of the world remains. That is why I welcomed the Railways Bill and the creation of Great British Railways, and I was optimistic about the renationalisation of South Western Railway, which covers my constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole. I regret that the reliability of that service and the experience of my constituents is, if anything, worse than a year ago. I now no longer tell my family to collect me at the scheduled arrival time, but call ahead, so regular are the delays.

James, a constituent who has travelled from Wareham to London for 50 years, told me that the service has never been so poor and is not a pleasant experience. That is why I have no hesitation in supporting new clause 1, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), which would create a passenger charter. It should not be too much to ask for wi-fi that works, access to a drink or snack on a long journey, clean toilets and a guaranteed seat. Those with disabilities, bikes and prams should be able to get on and off a train and be able to put their luggage or equipment on board.

I also support new clause 6 and in particular its provision relating to fares for children. That issue was raised by students of Purbeck school when I visited last year. More than half do not stay on for sixth form, accessing colleges in Poole, Bournemouth, Weymouth and Bournemouth. We all consider children to be children until they are 18, but not the rail companies, to whom childhood stops at 15. I presume that dates back to when we left school at 16, but we are more civilised now, and it is outrageous that a 16-year-old is considered an adult. Regardless of what happens to the new clause, please will the Government fix that?

My new clause 11 is about reducing bike thefts linked to the railways. Until February this year, bike thefts were not investigated where the bike had been left for more than two hours. That is a ridiculous position, bearing in mind that most people are going to school, out for the day or to work, and so staying away for more than two hours. The change that now allows bike thefts caught on CCTV to be investigated is great, but small rural stations such as mine at Holton Heath do not have any CCTV, so we should be preventing the bike thefts in the first place. More than 4,000 bikes were stolen from railway stations in 2024, so a modest requirement for secure cycle storage alongside car parking, or on platforms of smaller stations, seems only reasonable. I asked South Western Railway to do that voluntarily, but it refused, so my only option was to put my name to a new clause that would give passengers security and peace of mind but also reduce the need for people to drive to stations, thus supporting the railway's role in carbon reduction.

There is an opportunity to take the railway to more people, which is why I support amendment 55, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke), and new clause 16, which was tabled by the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) but has, I believe, now been withdrawn. In Dorset we have a huge opportunity to revolutionise rail use through Dorset Metro, which could increase train frequency across the local area from Wareham to Christchurch and create potential new stations or halts to take the strain from the heavily congested roads. In

areas where railways cannot be restored because of housing developments, the “rails to trails” programme proposed in new clause 5 provides a great opportunity. The fantastic Castleman Trailway runs through the heart of my constituency, but at Corfe Mullen it stops abruptly as it reaches the A31, and there is a missed opportunity to connect those on both sides of the community.

If we are going to let the train take the strain, it must be reliable, affordable and safe. My constituent Adam says that as things stand, he is considering moving elsewhere because travel is such a problem. While the Bill constitutes a good step, I am not sure that we can currently call this the “Great” British Railway, and I hope that the Minister will do better and accept more of the amendments to allow it to be great again.

Cat Eccles: I am proud to be part of a Labour Government who are taking the railways back into public control after decades of privatisation failure.

Amendment 50, which stands in my name, would ensure that all Great British Rail products were available from ticket offices, ending the practice by some operators of making certain fares, particularly discounted fares, available only online. This practice significantly disadvantages those who have no access to digital ticketing, including many disabled and older passengers. It also discriminates against those on low incomes who cannot necessarily afford a smartphone or consistent internet access.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): My hon. Friend is referring to the importance of railway accessibility. I wish to put on record, as I have been advised to by the Public Bill Office and the Clerks, that my name has been mistakenly added to new clauses 22, 59, 60, 61 and 62, but has correctly been added to new clause 23, which concerns that issue of railway accessibility.

Cat Eccles: The Government are right to simplify retail under a unified Great British Rail offer, but the offer must be available to everyone, not just those who can navigate digital platforms. Accessibility must be designed into the system from the start, not added as an afterthought. I hope that the Minister can commit himself to ensuring that every fare and discount available online will also be available through ticket offices and assisted channels, so that no one is excluded.

Amendments 51 and 52, also in my name, are intended to confirm the existing process whereby ticket office hours and staffing levels are regulated and any proposed changes are subject to consultation overseen by the passenger watchdog. The amendments would formalise that by including it in the Bill, ensuring that the current process is retained by Great British Rail.

The last Government attempted to close about 1,000 ticket offices around the country. They were forced to U-turn after considerable opposition. In Stourbridge—alongside the RMT and George the station cat—I ran the biggest campaign in the country to save ticket offices. Public opinion was overwhelmingly in favour of saving them because they provide such a vital service to communities. They were saved owing to schedule 17 of the Ticketing and Settlement Agreement, whereby ticket offices can be closed only subject to consultation. During the consultation process a few years ago, it became clear that the public would not tolerate any closures. While

this Government would not be so short-sighted as to try to strip communities of these important ticket offices, we must future-proof the legislation, and the amendments are consistent with the Government’s commitment to strengthen the passenger watchdog and passengers’ voices under GBR. I hope the Minister can assure the House that GBR will retain the current process, ensuring that there is consultation with rail users before any changes are made to opening hours or any closures of ticket offices are proposed.

I had planned to speak in favour of new clause 16, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr, which I believe has now been withdrawn. It would have given us the opportunity to reopen closed lines and restore connections to ensure that no community is left behind. In my constituency, the proposed Stourbridge Dasher service to Brierley Hill demonstrates exactly what can be achieved by making smarter use of the infrastructure we already have. Put forward by local light rail company Pre Metro, it would link Stourbridge and Brierley Hill along a corridor currently plagued by heavy traffic congestion and very few viable road improvement options, and bring existing freight track back into use for passenger services, as it would have been before the Beeching cuts. Up and down the country, there are hundreds of similar examples of where existing lines could be used to restore connections and ensure that communities are no longer held back by poor connectivity.

5.15 pm

Finally, I wish to speak in favour of new clause 45, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool West Derby (Ian Byrne). The privatisation of British Rail in 1994 was an unmitigated disaster and has left passengers facing some of the highest fares in Europe, alongside persistent issues with service reliability and quality. Railways are by their very nature a monopoly, and they should never have been fragmented and placed into private hands; they should be under public ownership and accountable control, and that principle should expand to rolling stock. In 2023 alone, private train-leasing companies made over £400 million in profit. True public ownership should mean the Bill bringing rolling stock under Great British Railways and passing on savings to passengers.

I will not press any of my amendments to a vote, but I trust that the Minister and the Rail Minister in the other place will take these matters into account. I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for taking this action today.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): We in this place all recognise the transformative role that railways can play in creating better-connected places and driving the economic growth that our communities and country need, yet that potential remains largely unrealised in some counties. Wiltshire has an extensive network of existing railway lines, but they remain primarily geared towards ferrying passengers and freight across the county, rather than providing a service on which residents can rely for local commuting, business and leisure travel.

Thanks to tireless local campaigning, Melksham saw a significant uplift in its rail service back in 2013, but with an average of just one train every two hours, the

[*Brian Mathew*]

service remains too intermittent to meet the needs of a town experiencing rapid population growth. Meanwhile, a 20-mile station-less stretch of line runs between Westbury and Pewsey. It passes within three miles of Devizes, but there is no railway access for over 30,000 people living in the heart of Wiltshire, which is holding back the area's economy. The Bill acknowledges the importance of local and regional rail, and requires GBR to align decisions with local transport strategies, but making mayoral strategic authorities the sole vehicle for this new co-operation leaves some 60% of England's population not yet covered and without the tools to harness rail's potential.

If the Government are committed to sustainable housing growth, town centre regeneration, access to jobs, education and decarbonisation, the Bill must go much further in enabling local rail. Metroisation of our railways is not just for large cities; counties such as Cornwall and Northumberland are already demonstrating how more frequent and reliable rail can transform rural economies. The Government need to ensure that market towns such as Melksham and Devizes are not left behind in economic development and can benefit from the rail network.

The creation of GBR must also be accompanied by a brand-new passenger charter. If we want more passengers to choose rail over road, we must tackle issues such as overpriced tickets and overcrowded carriages with poor wi-fi and little or no catering. I urge the Government to accept new clauses 1 and 58, and set a new bar for value for money, accessibility and passenger comfort in our new Great British Railways.

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): I thank the Ministers both here and in the other place for their hard work and engagement on this important Bill. I will focus my comments in favour of new clause 16.

Great British Railways cannot come soon enough for my constituency of Shrewsbury. Under privatisation, our geography has penalised us, as we sit on the edge of everyone's maps between regional operators serving either Wales or Birmingham, leaving us under-invested and underserved. As Members may recall—I have mentioned it quite a few times—Shropshire remains the only county without a direct train to London. The value of such a direct service is not just the obvious economic boost for jobs, education and tourism, or the improved accessibility of avoiding step-heavy connections, but the important investment in infrastructure that inter-city services could unlock at our station. We need more frequent and reliable regional services, with much more capacity to cope with the vast demand for services for a county town of 70,000 residents. For example, our local university campus closed last year, and students now have to travel beyond Shrewsbury to access education, training and employment.

For these reasons, I am pleased to put my name in support of five amendments, including new clause 16, which calls for the reopening of services to underserved areas. This new clause calls for GBR to establish a department for the purpose of identifying areas underserved and unserved by railway services, and to assess passenger and community needs for adding services, routes or stations where they are missing. It is crucial that the full opportunities of this new integrated, nationalised railway

are felt across the whole country by improving service levels in underserved and often rural areas such as Shropshire, not just adding increased frequency for already well-served cities. Just last month, Madam Deputy Speaker, you will recall that I stood in this very place to present a petition signed by over 10,000 fare-paying passengers asking this Government to recognise the demand for a direct train service at Shrewsbury and to approve extra routes to London.

As we stand together on the cusp of nationalising our rail system, we must ensure that the mantra of "people before profit" becomes a reality in places such as Shrewsbury. Where investment has been lacking, let us take this opportunity to rebuild; where services have withered away, let us deliver for our communities; and where towns have been left behind, let us reconnect them. In short, let us show in deeds, not words, how Great British Railways will deliver more services for more places such as Shrewsbury.

Monica Harding: I rise in support of new clause 1, on the passengers' charter, new clause 3, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), and my own new clause 60, which addresses reliability, accessibility and refurbishment.

All seven of my railway stations in Esher and Walton are under the stewardship of South Western Railway, making our constituency one of the first to experience the transition to public ownership, and there are significant reliability challenges. The latest performance figures show that, in March, 3% of all services were cancelled and only 65% of services arrived on time, meaning more than one in three trains fail to arrive when passengers expected them to.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I have statistics for Worcester Park station, which is also served by South Western Railway, and in the very last period before nationalisation—period 2 for 2025-26—punctuality was 89.3%, which is still not good enough, and cancellations was 1%. In all the periods since then, performance has been worse. Under nationalisation, Worcester Park has seen a worse service in every single period. Does my hon. Friend agree that our residents, particularly those of Worcester Park, do not care if a train turns up wrapped in a Union flag, but about whether that train is on time and not cancelled?

Monica Harding: They 100% do care and that is why we should support new clause 1.

It would also help if constituents could access the railway in the first place. Investment in making our stations accessible for all need to be at the very heart of the programme of rail reform. Hersham and Hinchley Wood stations are completely without step-free access, while Walton, Claygate, Esher and Thames Ditton only have partial step-free access. That is why I tabled new clause 60, requiring Great British Railways to undertake and publish an assessment of the accessibility barriers at Hersham and Hinchley Wood stations. I am also pleased to support new clause 2, which does the same, requiring the Secretary of State to publish an accessibility strategy for the railway network.

That brings me to Hersham station, because accessibility failures there sit alongside something much more fundamental, which new clause 3 would address. Hersham supports around 700,000 passengers every year in one

of the busiest rail corridors in the country, in a constituency that contributes more to the Exchequer than any other constituency outside London. Thousands of people pass through the station every week to run businesses, create jobs and drive economic growth. The state of that station is an affront to every single one of them. It is an eyesore: ramshackle and neglected, mould climbs the fence lines, the paintwork is peeling and the station sits under exposed corrugated iron roofing. More seriously, both platforms were built in the 1960s using materials that were only ever intended to be temporary. More than half a century later, they are still there. Groups of schoolchildren step off the train and put their feet through the platform. Constituents have repeatedly raised safety concerns. The stairs visibly move beneath their feet. These passengers are not asking for luxury; they are asking for a station that is safe.

There is nothing in the Bill that will give my residents in Hersham a station that they can be proud of. I therefore urge the Minister to look seriously at new clause 3, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Didcot and Wantage, which would establish a tomorrow's railway fund, enabling local authorities to bid for funding for new stations, infrastructure and feasibility studies. This is exactly the kind of mechanism that stations and wealth creators in Hersham need.

All my constituents are asking for are trains that run on time, stations they can actually get into and infrastructure that is safe to use. Performance, accessibility and condition are not separate issues. They are three sides of the same failure and the Bill must address all three. I urge the Minister to accept the amendments and show that Great British Railways will finally deliver a railway worthy of the people who depend on it every day.

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): The Bill is a necessary and long-overdue step towards bringing our railways back into public ownership. Great British Railways represents a real opportunity to build a railway that works in the interests of passengers and staff, rather than profiteering companies and distant shareholders.

For railway workers, the transition to GBR must be an opportunity to strengthen good, secure and unionised jobs across the sector. Rail staff are the backbone of the network. Whether they work on trains, in stations, or on signalling, engineering or maintenance, they keep this country moving every single day.

I also want to commend the work of campaign groups such as We Own It, alongside the rails unions the RMT, the TSSA and ASLEF, for their long-standing commitment to the renationalisation of our railways. Working constructively with the trade unions will be vital if GBR is to succeed. A publicly owned railway must also be a railway built on a partnership with its workforce.

The transport unions have raised a number of concerns that the Government should address. Tens of thousands of rail workers still do not know exactly who their future employer will be under GBR, nor do they know what pension arrangements will apply. There are also real fears about potential job losses linked to the transition. Around 870 Network Rail staff are reportedly at risk of redundancy and are concerned at de-recognition of trade unions during the TUPE transfer from Network Rail into its wholly owned public subsidiary, Platform4.

A fundamental principle of the transition from private to public ownership should be that every workplace within GBR recognises trade unions.

My now-withdrawn new clause largely spoke to Beeching. The Beeching cuts, now widely recognised as a significant failure, saw the closure of up to 2,363 stations and approximately 5,000 miles of track. It severed vital links for many communities, causing lasting damage to local economies. That is felt all too acutely in Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr, where we have a huge gap between Caersws and Machynlleth—the longest stretch of line without a station in the whole of Wales.

5.30 pm

New clause 16, in my name, aims to establish a dedicated function with a duty to identify opportunities to expand rail services in a cost-effective and efficient way to underserved and unserved areas across the UK. As the Minister pointed out, other avenues exist by which hon. Members and community groups can pursue the reopening of closed stations. I echo the sentiments expressed by the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) on the readiness of the Minister to engage in meaningful and constructive dialogue.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): The hon. Member is giving an impassioned speech about areas that are underserved by rail connections. My constituency is one such area—it does not have a single mainline station, despite being the largest constituency by land in Cornwall. Unfortunately, the North Cornwall railway was a victim of the Beeching cuts. Will the hon. Member ask the Minister how the Bill will help such areas to bring back vital rail links? There are initiatives such as Kernow Connect, which has the potential to connect my constituency at Launceston, but does the hon. Member agree that the Bill does not go far enough in that regard?

Steve Witherden: The hon. Member serves a similarly large and rural constituency to mine. Getting stations open in such areas is incredibly important, and I urge him to work closely with community groups, as I am sure he is already doing, so that what I am trying to do in mid and north Wales might also be done in Cornwall.

Great British Railways presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rebuild our railways and create a service that works for the public good rather than for private profit. Workers must not be sidelined; jobs, pensions and trade union rights must be protected; and passengers must see genuine improvements in affordability and reliability.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): This Bill represents a once-in-a-generation chance to create a simpler, more effective and more accountable railway. I am pleased that c2c, which serves my constituents in Thurrock, was one of the first operators to come under public ownership. I look forward to the reversal of 30 years of privatisation, which have seen fragmentation, outsourcing and a dangerous lack of investment in infrastructure. Nationalisation and the establishment of Great British Railways will allow us to protect the long-term future of our railways, putting passengers first, not profit.

When we commit to putting passengers first, however, that must mean all passengers. That is why I strongly support amendments 70 and 71, proposed by the Chair

[Jen Craft]

of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury). Last year, the Transport Committee released a worrying report on access to public transport by disabled people. The Committee estimated that more than one third of disabled people were regularly avoiding travel because they believed it would be too complicated, too unsafe, or things would be too likely to go wrong.

The amendments would require a commitment from Great British Railways and a proposed passenger council not simply to consider the interests of disabled users, but to carry out their responsibilities in a way that actively promotes their interests. Accessibility must not be viewed through the same lens as customer service, where minor delays or engineering faults are considered irritating but, unfortunately, normal. Accessibility failures should be incredible rare, and failures to meet standards should be regarded as a serious infraction of people's rights.

Melanie Ward: My hon. Friend is making some important points about railway accessibility, which is also an issue for my constituents, particularly at the railway stations in Burntisland, Cowdenbeath and Kinghorn. That is why I added my name to new clause 23, which would have introduced a strategy to ensure full railway accessibility across the country within the next 10 years. We have been waiting far too long for our railways to be accessible. We need action now.

Jen Craft: I completely agree. We have waited since the inception of the railways for them to be accessible. As anyone who, like me, is a bit of a rail geek and enjoys a trip on a steam train of a weekend will know, railways in the past were not designed with access for all in mind, and we can and must do better.

If a train station lift breaks overnight, wheelchair users who travel regularly on the train might find themselves in a position where they are unable to travel to work or school, visit family or get to their local hospital. That is not inconvenient; it is unacceptable. The lifts are currently out of service at Tilbury in my constituency, and the solution that is being offered is for people to travel on to the next stop, change trains, go round and come back. It is completely and utterly unacceptable. This sentiment is not reflected in the way we currently talk or think about service provision for disabled people. We urgently need a change of mindset, recognising that accessibility is a non-negotiable matter—it is the bare minimum.

At my local station in Grays, we have been waiting for operational lifts for years. Although c2c received a grant under the Access for All scheme, the lifts have been a categorical failure. As the fourth most used station in the east of England and a busy transport hub, it should have the proper infrastructure. The lifts were initially promised for late 2024, but they were not delivered until August 2025. They did not work—in fact, they have never worked. They frequently break down. Now, due to quite a lot of persistence from me, they are finally being torn out and replaced.

This has had a significant impact on my disabled constituents. One woman told me that she was trapped in a lift for 35 minutes and had to be removed by firefighters, while another told me that her husband is

reluctant to use the station because he has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and struggles with stairs. It is just such a shame that these brand-new lifts, which were promised under an access scheme, are out of order so very often.

I am very pleased that the Bill will bring Network Rail, which is responsible for providing, servicing and now replacing these lifts, into Great British Railways. It is absolutely right that the organisation becomes part of a unified, publicly owned body that is accountable to all the passengers who rely on it. I am hopeful that this added accountability will help to foster genuine progress on accessibility.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I wonder whether I could give the hon. Lady an update from my own constituency. A year on from South Western Railway's nationalisation, its performance metrics continue to fall. My constituents commuting to Portsmouth or Fareham can expect that one in every three journeys will be late. It is not a good sign for the Government's nationalisation plans, especially as GBR is now marking its own homework. The trains are dirty and overcrowded, and passengers are lucky if they can find wi-fi that works. That is the lesson we have learned from the Government's nationalisation so far.

Jen Craft: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. I find that quite unusual, as, having travelled on privatised trains for a number of years, I am very familiar with dirty, unreliable trains, and GBR will finally unite rail and the networks to enable them to turn those things around, ensuring a rail network that delivers for all who use it and puts people over profit, which is absolutely fantastic.

It is absolutely crucial that there is added accountability in a rail service. If amendments 70 and 71 are given proper consideration, we could really see a turning point in how disabled people who regularly use the rail network are viewed. We have to consistently get the basics right. We need lifts that work, ramps with railings and staff on hand to help people on and off the trains. We also need these things to be reliably available.

With Great British Railways, we also have the potential to use the power of procurement to ensure that trains are fully designed to meet the needs of all passengers, instead of being designed around one bloke with a briefcase travelling to and from the office, as they were in the past. In the modern world, so many different people use the train, and we have an opportunity to have a rail network that services all who use it.

With Great British Railways, we have the opportunity to go further still by being more innovative and forward thinking in our efforts to support disabled passengers. I would like to shout out Railscape, a business operating locally to me, which has been developing an interactive model that allows neurodiverse people in particular to look around the station ahead of time. When neurodiverse people are looking at getting into the workforce and travelling to work, a huge barrier is anxiety over how to navigate a rail station—where the ticket barriers are, where to buy a ticket and so on—and this model allows them to plan ahead of their visit and see where they are going. I hope that this is the sort of work that Great British Railways will encourage and incorporate, as it is a fantastic example of how important it is to actively promote the interests of disabled people.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I would like to draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

For decades, my constituents have been dealing with the consequences of the failed experiment of the privatisation of our railways. This Bill begins to put that right. At its heart is the creation of Great British Railways—a single, publicly owned body focused not on shareholders, but on the people who use the railways day in, day out. Government amendment 92 will ensure that the benefits of nationalisation are felt by passengers for decades to come. It prevents future Ministers from undoing this progress and dragging our railways back into the chaos and fragmentation of the past.

My gramps was a train driver, and my amazing auntie Michelle—Michelle Nolan McSweeney—has dedicated her career to the railways, so for me this Bill is personal. I know the pride that hard-working railway workers take in what they do. They want to deliver a quality service for their passengers, but they have been failed by a system that puts profit above people. For too long, our railways have been broken up into pieces—pieces of track, trains and operation—all working under different initiatives. That fragmentation has made it harder to plan properly, invest and deliver the railways that passengers deserve.

A railway works best when it is treated as one. We need the people who run the trains, manage the infrastructure and make investment decisions all to be working together, not pulling in different directions. Every pound generated by our railways should be focused on improving our railway network and supporting development here in the UK. It should not flow out to private interests or be used to support railways elsewhere.

Under privatisation, some of the companies operating our rail services have been owned by overseas interests, including state-linked rail companies from other countries. That means that money from UK passengers has at times helped to support transport systems and priorities outside our own country. Our railways should be an asset that strengthens the UK economy. The fares that passengers pay and the value created by our network should help to fund better services, infrastructure and connections for communities in Britain.

We can see from across Europe that a more co-ordinated approach can deliver better infrastructure. Strong infrastructure is not just about trains; it is about jobs, housing, businesses and opportunity. We are beginning to see what a different approach can achieve. Last year, South Western Railway became the first railway company under public ownership. At the end of last month, Southern Rail followed. Public ownership operators are performing better on average on punctuality and cancellations compared with those still in private ownership. Avanti, which was referred to by the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), has cut services and remains owned by the private companies FirstGroup and Trenitalia, which are owned by the Italian state railway.

Under public ownership, South Western Railway has accelerated its plans for new trains and improved driver training, increased capacity and more space on routes into London. It will also provide information and connections to local bus, ferry and transport services to join up the systems locally. Southern Rail's new publicly owned operator has committed to practical improvements

too, including giving passengers direct access. That is welcome, but we must make sure that those promises are properly challenged and scrutinised. Passengers need improvements that they can feel every day, including value-for-money tickets, reliable information, better customer service and better access. People also expect the basics, such as decent wi-fi and connectivity on their journey.

Those improvements matter locally. In Portsmouth North, for passengers using stations such as Hilsea and Cosham, the railway is not abstract; it is a part of everyday life. It is about getting to work, getting kids to school and college, and staying connected with communities. I look forward to working with Great British Railways to ensure that those stations have full accessibility, full safety and extended facilities.

The Bill is about bringing the railways back together and simplifying a system that has become too complex, fragmented and difficult to navigate. Amendment 92 secures this system into the future. I am proud to support the Government's mission to keep Great British Railways in public ownership and ensure that the mistakes of privatisation are not repeated.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): Railways are critical for many of my constituents, and I am pleased to speak to the Government's amendments, particularly the measures that will ensure that nationalisation fully proceeds with no scope for future partial privatisation through the back door.

I welcome this Government's focus on the railways, as frustratingly only part of my constituency is served by rail. The major towns of Renfrew, Erskine and Inchinnan are railway deserts right now, meaning that residents have to rely on the road network. Since privatisation in 1997, railway connections have felt more fragmented. As a regular traveller southward, I understand how important it is that the Bill will enable the system to work together, as integrated transportation is currently lacking.

The strategic planning that underlines this legislation means integrated track ownership infrastructure, and better management, service and procurement, so Great British Railways will increasingly pay off. I welcome the provisions to allow Scottish Ministers to contribute to the broader strategic planning of the railway system, and the new technical amendments for the transfer of staff under TUPE, which is essential for a smooth transition.

I am encouraged by the inclusion of rail freight in the Bill. In my constituency, Russell's, a family-run business with a massive distribution depot in Hillington Park, already makes significant use of rail for freight distribution, and it is looking to recommission the existing railway track from Hillington and get it operational once again. I am keen to explore how I can support its aim to transport freight by rail all the way from Hillington to the centre of Europe.

5.45 pm

The advantage of transporting freight by rail has been particularly relevant recently as the M8 motorway has been subject to long-standing structural repairs. Rail currently carries only about 7% of freight. If the UK were to match the European average of 19%, that

would remove millions of heavy goods vehicles from the road and cut carbon emissions while reducing road congestion.

Members may have picked up that I have long been an advocate for improving rail infrastructure in my Paisley and Renfrewshire North constituency, which houses an important strategic connection in Glasgow airport. I hope that the establishment of Great British Railways will help with a local goal. It is a source of considerable frustration for my constituents that they can take a train to Manchester airport but not to Glasgow airport, which lies just over a mile from Paisley Gilmour Street station. There is a very strong case for a rail link within my constituency, and I look forward to making that case in the context of the more strategic approach to railways that the Government's amendments seek to deliver.

Keir Mather: With the leave of the House, I thank right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. While it will not be possible to address every amendment, I will try to discuss the topics raised and do my very best to do them justice.

I turn first to amendments not covered by the Bill as drafted. New clauses 11, 18 and 46 and amendments 56 and 57 focus on safety and safeguarding. It is essential that staff and passengers on the railway are safe. We recently announced the new safer railway scheme to tackle low-level crime, antisocial behaviour and violence against women and girls. GBR's services will all be accredited by the scheme, exactly as suggested by new clause 18, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Connor Naismith). I am grateful to him for raising awareness on behalf of his charity, Railway Children, and I hope he was pleased to see the announcement that addresses his new clause.

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) that we should do everything we can to keep staff safe. I will be monitoring how the new offence of assault against a retail worker impacts safety across the sector. I agree that her suggestion to gather more evidence—via a call for evidence, for example—would be a sensible next step if further action were warranted. For now, the strongest evidence shows that body-worn cameras and conflict-prevention training deliver the most immediate improvements in staff safety by deterring offending and providing evidence to support effective prosecution.

GBR's success will be built on the effectiveness of its workforce, a topic addressed in amendments 35, 36 and 64 and new clauses 19, 21, 26, 27, 34 and 54. I note the related early-day motion. I confirm that provisions in the Bill already enable the transfer of staff into GBR on TUPE principles, ensuring that employment rights are protected, as they should be. It is essential that we give security to staff who may be affected by the transition. I am therefore happy to confirm to my hon. Friends the Members for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan), for Middlesbrough and Thornaby East (Andy McDonald) and for Isle of Wight West (Richard Quigley) that we expect the railways pension scheme to continue under GBR.

On GBR's governance, my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight West proposed passenger groups. I confirm that GBR will engage with customers at national and regional level. Its local business units will run station-based engagements and use panels of customer

representatives to co-design products and services, while national advisory groups will support GBR on disability and other matters. Of course, the passenger watchdog will also advise GBR. I hope that reassures my hon. Friend that our intentions in this space are aligned.

New clauses 4, 5, 7, 8, 16, 20, 40, 41 and 44 and amendments 30, 55, 66, 72, 170 and 171 contain requirements on GBR regarding matters that the long-term rail strategy could include or align with. Amendments 4, 37, 38 and 86 seek to ensure the strategy's longevity and transparency.

I thank the hon. Member for Glastonbury and Somerton (Sarah Dyke) for her considered comments on connectivity for rural areas. I hope my comments will satisfy others who tabled similar amendments. I am happy to commit today that the strategy will explicitly reference modal shift and the need to bring more people on to the railway. The strategy will also include provisions directing GBR to work with mayoral strategic authorities and local communities to seek the best multimodal solutions for each region.

On the environment, I thank the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) for tabling his amendments. I confirm to the House that the strategy will include a specific objective relating to environmental sustainability, with which GBR will need to demonstrate alignment. I am also pleased to confirm that accessibility, socioeconomic benefits and affordability will be key objectives in the strategy, that it will be 30 years long and that it will align with the UK's 10-year infrastructure strategy.

I hope that also reassures my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) and the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover). The Government recognise the potential of our railways to connect communities to work, leisure and economic centres. As my hon. Friend mentioned, nothing in the Bill prevents GBR from reopening disused stations or lines. GBR will be constantly guided by its duties, including requirements to consider the public interest and social factors.

New clauses 22, 23 and 38 and amendments 59 to 63 mandate specific station improvements. Step-free access is an absolute priority for the Government, but it must be deliverable. Access for All already targets funding where it has the greatest impact, and the forthcoming rolling stock strategy will set out a bold vision for accessible trains. We feel that the more rigid duty proposed in new clause 22 could limit GBR's ability to prioritise and maximise its impact and, in many cases, staffing, accessible trains and high-quality information can be better suited to deliver significant benefits in the short and medium terms. Nevertheless, I reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) in particular that our intentions on the matter are aligned. I hope we can discuss how we can further our mutual aims of step-free access, including for her constituents in Luton, outside this debate, and I look forward to a meeting on that and a visit to Leagrave station.

On the new clause tabled by the Chair of the Transport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), the passenger watchdog will represent all passengers and maintain a clear focus on the experience of disabled passengers. I fully recognise the value that lived experience brings in that regard, and that will continue to be reflected in the make-up of the

watchdog's board, as it is today. However, I also note the points made on the matter by my hon. Friend, and I am confident that the Rail Minister will continue the discussion with her, the Transport Committee and their lordships in the other place.

Dr Arthur: I thank the Minister for meeting me and Olivia from my office to try to find a way to implement the new clause. I also thank Simon Watkins, who is vice-chair of the Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland, who has repeatedly raised the new clause's objective with me. The Minister said earlier that GBR will be "owned by the British people and run in their interests"; does he agree that when we talk about the British people we mean all the British people and that, when the Bill proceeds to the Lords, our representative there, the Rail Minister, would be wise to—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order.

Keir Mather: I could not agree more strongly with the sentiments expressed by my hon. Friend. He will know—we have discussed this—that under the council's current arrangements, two members have lived experience of navigating the transport network with a disability. We fully expect that arrangement to continue. I applaud the efforts of my hon. Friend and those of all the members of the Transport Committee in holding the Government's feet to the fire on this incredibly important issue.

On fares and ticketing, amendments 143 to 147, tabled by the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), relate to discounted travel. Let me reaffirm the Government's gratitude to those who have served our country and confirm again that there are no plans to withdraw any discount schemes. However, it is right to allow GBR to adapt its customer offer. In future, we may want a simplified offer for the entire armed forces community, rather than separating veterans and families. The amendments would inhibit that by freezing current railcards in statute.

Our willingness to take forward proactive measures to support veterans and their families can hopefully be seen in our embrace of the excellent proposal from the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) to improve the Remembrance Sunday offer for families. I thank her for her efforts in making that a reality.

On amendments 149 and 165, on freight access, allow me to reassure Members that clause 72 cannot be used to nationalise freight terminals. It cannot be used to bring any other infrastructure managers or their assets into public ownership, so in our view the amendments are unnecessary.

New clauses 10, 12, 13 and 33, tabled by the hon. Members for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) and for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe (David Chadwick), cover devolution and Wales. We absolutely share the ambition that the Bill should be a positive change for everyone, including the people of Wales. That is why our draft memorandum of understanding with the previous Welsh Government committed to support Transport for Wales to integrate track and train.

The intention was that the clause 72 power in the Bill could be used to facilitate integration on the Core Valley Lines. Although the MOU was signed with the previous Welsh Government, we are ready to engage with the new Plaid Government with the same proactive

and collaborative spirit. I hope the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin will encourage her colleagues in the Welsh Government to engage with us—I have no doubt she will—and make options for integration a reality.

Laurence Turner: My hon. Friend will have heard representations for ensuring that, under clause 5, devolution agreements must not be unduly limited, either by the Bill or its implementation. Is he able to offer any reassurances to Transport for West Midlands and other bodies that they will continue to be part of the conversation about how the Bill is implemented?

Keir Mather: Absolutely. To build on my hon. Friend's point, this is very much the start of the conversation, not the end of it, in thinking about how GBR can better integrate rail services that are run through mayoral strategic authorities with the wider network, with mayors of course being able to use funding for GBR services where they think it can improve transport provision in their area.

As I begin to wind down, I will touch on issues impacting constituencies, which include amendments 65, 67, 68 and 69 and new clauses 35 and 42. It is absolutely a Government priority to upgrade key areas of the network. For instance, we have already committed £1.1 billion of funding to improve rail services in the north via Northern Powerhouse Rail. However, this Bill is focused on setting up GBR and transforming the structure of the railways. It is not the appropriate place for commitments to specific infrastructure or station projects.

James Wild: The Minister referred to my new clause 35, and to £1 billion of funding to the north; how much is the east of England getting?

Keir Mather: The hon. Member is a tireless advocate for his part of the country, and we can continue our conversations. I merely reflected the point that having things about specific transport projects on the face of legislation is not the right way to address it, in the view of the Government, but I would be glad to meet him to take the conversation further.

John McDonnell: My hon. Friend is dealing with things at breakneck speed, and incredibly competently, but I think he has missed the confirmation in his briefing that he is willing to meet the RMT parliamentary group to discuss travel facilities for staff and insourcing.

Keir Mather: I thank my right hon. Friend for reminding me of that important matter, and I would be glad to facilitate a meeting either with me, if that is most appropriate, or with the Rail Minister to take that conversation forward.

Wendy Morton: Will the Minister give way?

Keir Mather: Oh, go on then. Why not?

Wendy Morton: I am conscious that the Minister is winding up, and I promise I will not ask about Aldridge train station. I want to ask about accountability. The Minister has spoken a lot about the transfer of powers and about devolution; I tabled an amendment, which I have decided not to press, on the need for clearer accountability and transparency.

Keir Mather: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right that accountability and transparency should be at the heart of this. I think we have pointed to a bit of a discrepancy between the views of the major parties on how that should take place. It would be an interesting argument to say that, on the one hand, we did not want to micromanage the railway but then to put on the face of the Bill lots of key performance indicators that would allow us to do so. Nevertheless, the right hon. Lady is right to highlight the sentiment that accountability needs to run to the heart of GBR. That is what the passenger watchdog is there for: to enforce consumer standards on the railway as licence conditions for all operators. I thank her for raising that important point.

Finally, I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage for his new clause 56, on antisocial noise. That is a debate that I certainly want to take forward, and he knows how passionate I was on that matter in Committee. I thank Members once again for their contributions and for getting the Railways Bill on track for what I am sure will be a pleasant journey through the other place.

Question put and agreed to.

New clause 48 accordingly read a Second time, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 49

MODIFICATION OF LICENCE CONDITIONS

“For section 12 of the Railways Act 1993 substitute—

“12 Modification of licence conditions by the Office of Rail and Road

(1) The Office of Rail and Road may modify the conditions of a licence under section 8.

(2) Before making modifications under this section, the Office of Rail and Road must give notice—

- (a) stating that it proposes to make the modifications,
- (b) setting out the proposed modifications and their effect,
- (c) stating the reasons why it proposes to make the modifications, and
- (d) specifying the period (not being less than 28 days beginning with the date of publication of the notice) within which representations or objections with respect to the proposed modifications may be made,

and must, before making the modifications, consider any representations or objections which are duly made and not withdrawn.

(3) A notice under subsection (2) must be given—

- (a) by publishing the notice in such manner as the Office of Rail and Road considers appropriate for the purpose of bringing the notice to the attention of persons likely to be affected by the making of the modifications; and
- (b) by serving a copy of the notice on—
 - (i) each licence holder whose licence conditions are affected,
 - (ii) the Secretary of State,
 - (iii) the Scottish Ministers,
 - (iv) the Welsh Ministers, and
 - (v) the Passengers’ Council.

(4) Subsections (5) to (7) apply where, having complied with subsections (2) and (3), the Office of Rail and Road decides to proceed with the making of modifications of the conditions of any licence under this section.

(5) The Office of Rail and Road must—

- (a) publish the decision and the modifications in such manner as it considers appropriate for the purpose of bringing them to the attention of persons likely to be affected by the making of the modifications,

- (b) state the effect of the modifications,
- (c) state how it has taken account of any representations duly made, and
- (d) state the reason for any differences between the modifications and those set out in the notice by virtue of subsection (2)(b).

(6) Each modification has effect from the date specified by the Office of Rail and Road in relation to that modification.

(7) The date specified by virtue of subsection (6) may not be less than 56 days beginning with the date of publication of the decision to proceed with the making of modifications under this section.”—(*Keir Mather.*)

This new clause would allow the Office of Rail and Road to modify rail operator licences, including as required to promote consistent adoption of standards and services across the industry.

Brought up, read the First and Second time, and added to the Bill.

6 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, 9 December).

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

New Clause 50

MODIFICATION OF SNRPs

“For regulation 13 of the Railway (Licensing of Railway Undertakings) Regulations 2005 (S.I. 2005/3050) substitute—

“Modification of SNRPs by the ORR

(1) The ORR may modify the conditions of a SNRP.

(2) Before making modifications under this regulation, the ORR must give notice—

- (a) stating that it proposes to make the modifications,
 - (b) setting out the proposed modifications and their effect,
 - (c) stating the reasons why it proposes to make the modifications, and
 - (d) specifying the period (not being less than 28 days beginning with the date of publication of the notice) within which representations or objections with respect to the proposed modifications may be made,
- and must, before making the modifications, consider any representations or objections which are duly made and not withdrawn.

(3) A notice under paragraph (2) must be given—

- (a) by publishing the notice in such manner as the ORR considers appropriate for the purpose of bringing the notice to the attention of persons likely to be affected by the making of the modifications; and
- (b) by serving a copy of the notice on—
 - (i) each SNRP holder whose SNRP conditions are affected,
 - (ii) the Secretary of State,
 - (iii) the Scottish Ministers,
 - (iv) the Welsh Ministers, and
 - (v) the Passengers’ Council.

(4) Paragraphs (5) to (7) apply where, having complied with paragraphs (2) and (3), the ORR decides to proceed with the making of modifications of the conditions of any SNRP under this regulation.

(5) The ORR must—

- (a) publish the decision and the modifications in such manner as it considers appropriate for the purpose of bringing them to the attention of persons likely to be affected by the making of the modifications,
- (b) state the effect of the modifications,
- (c) state how it has taken account of any representations duly made, and

- (d) state the reason for any differences between the modifications and those set out in the notice by virtue of paragraph (2)(b).

(6) Each modification has effect from the date specified by the ORR in relation to that modification.

(7) The date specified by virtue of paragraph (6) may not be less than 56 days beginning with the date of publication of the decision to proceed with the making of modifications under this regulation.”—(*Keir Mather*).

This new clause would allow the Office of Rail and Road to modify SNRPs, including as required to promote consistent adoption of standards and services across the industry.

Brought up, and added to the Bill.

New Clause 1

PASSENGERS' CHARTER

“(1) The Secretary of State must, within six months beginning on the day on which this Act is passed, lay before Parliament a Passengers' Charter.

(2) A Passengers' Charter must include—

- (a) a guarantee about value for money, quality of service, and provision of adequate seating for any single part of a journey taken by rail for a duration greater than thirty minutes;
- (b) targets for reliability of services;
- (c) a timetable for implementing improvements to passenger accommodation on train services, including in relation to—
 - (i) seat design,
 - (ii) availability of high-speed WiFi and reliable cellular network service,
 - (iii) provision of power outlets,
 - (iv) storage for luggage, bicycles, pushchairs and prams,
 - (v) provision of toilets, including standards of cleanliness and accessibility, and
 - (vi) provision of on-board catering on any train service with a total duration of at least two hours;
- (d) a guarantee relating to improving the accessibility of trains, stations, areas immediately surrounding stations and interfaces with connecting transport modes, and replacement road services, for passengers with disabilities;
- (e) extension of the principles behind Delay Repay compensation to include a framework of compensation for failures to comply with the Passengers' Charter for lack of specified on-board amenities;
- (f) a commitment that Great British Railways will take all reasonable steps to ensure that systems for compensating passengers for delays or disruption—
 - (i) are digital by default;
 - (ii) minimise any administrative burden on passengers when applying for compensation;
 - (iii) allow, where practicable, for compensation to be issued automatically based on information attainable by Great British Railways from about a customer's journey or from a ticketing account.”—(*Olly Glover*.)

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to lay a Passengers' Charter and sets out what the charter should contain, including provision relating to customer amenities, value for money, accessibility and compensation.

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The House divided: Ayes 77, Noes 271.

Division No. 19]

[6.1 pm

AYES

Amos, Gideon	Babarinde, Josh
Anderson, Lee	Bennett, Alison
Aquarone, Steff	Berry, Siân

Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
Denyer, Carla (*Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry*)
Forster, Mr Will
Franklin, Zöe
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Gilmour, Rachel
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Harding, Monica
Heylings, Pippa
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jarvis, Liz
Jones, Clive
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Martin, Mike

Mathew, Brian
Maynard, Charlie
Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Murray, Susan
Olney, Sarah
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Ramsay, Adrian
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Hannah
Sultana, Zarah
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Cameron
Tice, Richard
Voaden, Caroline
Wilkinson, Max
Wilson, Munira
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:

Charlotte Cane and
Tessa Munt

NOES

Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carden, Dan
Carns, Al
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary

Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Dean, Josh
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir

Khan, Afzal
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McNally, Frank
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Mullan, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Quigley, Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike

Reed, rh Steve
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rigby, rh Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell*)
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
 Gregor Poynton and
 Shaun Davies

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 1

GREAT BRITISH RAILWAYS

Amendment made: 92, page 1, line 8, at end insert—

- “(2) A body corporate may be designated by the regulations only if it is wholly owned by the Crown.
- (3) Where the designation of a body corporate by the regulations has effect no Minister of the Crown, and no person who is a member of the body, may take any steps that will result in the body ceasing to be wholly owned by the Crown.
- (4) In this section ‘Minister of the Crown’ has the same meaning as in the Ministers of the Crown Act 1975.”
 —(*Keir Mather.*)

This amendment would require that the body corporate to be designated as Great British Railways be wholly owned by the Crown, and would prevent ministers and members of the body from taking steps that would result in that status changing.

Clause 2

CROWN STATUS ETC

Amendment made: 93, page 2, line 7, at end insert—

- “(6A) This section applies in relation to GBR companies as it applies in relation to Great British Railways.”—(*Keir Mather.*)

This section would ensure that subsidiaries of GBR and companies jointly owned by GBR and the Scottish or Welsh Ministers are treated in the same way for the purposes of Crown status as is GBR itself.

Clause 6**CO-OPERATION WITH TRANSPORT FOR LONDON**

Amendments made: 94, page 4, line 24, leave out subsection (5) and insert—

“(5) In subsection (2)—

(a) for ‘the purposes of the co-operation required under subsection (1) above,’ substitute ‘purposes connected with passenger transport services for persons travelling to, from and within Greater London, Great British Railways,’ and

(b) for ‘one another’ substitute ‘each other’.

(5A) In subsection (2A), after ‘London to’ insert ‘Great British Railways or’.”

This amendment would reinstate references to the Secretary of State in section 175(2) and (2A) of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 and allow payments to be made by TfL to the Secretary of State in connection with London rail services.

Amendment 95, page 4, line 31, at end insert—

“(b) a reference to the functions of the Secretary of State is to be read as a reference to the functions of the Secretary of State under—

(i) sections 22 to 24 of the Railways Act 2005 (discontinuance of railway passenger services), and

(ii) sections 25, 28 and 30 of the Railways Act 2026 (designation of railway passenger services).”—(*Keir Mather.*)

This amendment would define what is meant by references to the functions of the Secretary of State for the purposes of section 175(2) of the Greater London Authority Act 1999.

Clause 34**DISCOUNT FARE SCHEMES**

Amendment proposed: 143, page 18, line 21, after “are” insert—

“UK veterans, members of the UK armed forces and their families, aged 26-30.”—(*Jerome Mayhew.*)

The House divided: Ayes 167, Noes 266.

Division No. 20]

[6.16 pm

AYES

Amos, Gideon	Cocking, Lewis
Anderson, Lee	Coghlan, Chris
Andrew, rh Stuart	Collins, Victoria
Aquarone, Steff	Cooper, Daisy
Argar, rh Edward	Cooper, John
Babarinde, Josh	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Bacon, Gareth	Costa, Alberto
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Barclay, rh Steve	Cross, Harriet
Bedford, Mr Peter	Dance, Adam
Bennett, Alison	Darling, Steve
Berry, Siân	Davey, rh Ed
Bhatti, Saqib (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)	Davies, Ann
Blackman, Bob	Davies, Mims
Bowie, Andrew	Davis, rh David (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Dean, Bobby (<i>Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain</i>)
Brewer, Alex	Denyer, Carla (<i>Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry</i>)
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Cane, Charlotte	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Cartlidge, James	Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Chadwick, David	Evans, Dr Luke
Chamberlain, Wendy	Forster, Mr Will
Chambers, Dr Danny	Fortune, Peter
Chowns, Dr Ellie	
Cleverly, rh Sir James	

Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 George, Andrew
 Gibson, Sarah
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Heylings, Pippa
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Holmes, Paul
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Jarvis, Liz
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Moran, Layla
 Morello, Edward
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom
 Morrissey, Joy

Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 Olney, Sarah
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Hannah
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Trott, rh Laura
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Voaden, Caroline
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wood, Mike
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
David Simmonds and
Mr Andrew Snowden

NOES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Callum

Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Alex
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carden, Dan
 Carns, Al
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Dean, Josh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir
 Khan, Afzal
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris

McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McNally, Frank
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Quigley, Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rigby, rh Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell*)
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun

Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scroggum, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Swallow, Peter
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
 Gregor Poynton and
 Shaun Davies

Question accordingly negated.

Clause 58

RESTRICTIONS ON DISCLOSURE OF INFORMATION BY THE LTUC

Amendment made: 96, page 32, line 36, at end insert—

“(2) In the application of section 145(5)(a) of the Railways Act 1993 by virtue of subsection (1) of this section, the reference to section 50 of the Railways Act 2026 is to be read as a reference to section 252DB of this Act.”—(*Keir Mather.*)

This amendment would provide for the general restriction on disclosure of information in section 145 of the Railways Act 1993 not to apply to information and advice published by the LTUC under section 252DB of the Greater London Authority Act 1999.

Clause 68

APPEALS PROCEDURE

Amendment proposed: 148, page 38, line 16, leave out subsection (1) and insert—

“(1) When determining an appeal under this Chapter, the Office of Rail and Road must decide the matter on its merits, having regard to the objectives set out in this Act.”—(*Jerome Mayhew.*)

This amendment would change the current appeals provision so that appeals can be decided on the merits.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 155, Noes 279.

Division No. 21]

[6.28 pm

AYES

Amos, Gideon	Franklin, Zöe
Anderson, Lee	French, Mr Louie
Andrew, rh Stuart	Fuller, Richard
Aquarone, Steff	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Argar, rh Edward	Garnier, Mark
Babarinde, Josh	George, Andrew
Bacon, Gareth	Gibson, Sarah
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Glen, rh John
Barclay, rh Steve	Glover, Olly
Bedford, Mr Peter	Goldman, Marie
Bennett, Alison	Gordon, Tom
Bhatti, Saqib (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)	Green, Sarah
Blackman, Bob	Griffith, Andrew
Bowie, Andrew	Griffiths, Alison
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Harding, Monica
Brewer, Alex	Harris, Rebecca
Brown-Fuller, Jess	Hayes, rh Sir John
Burghart, Alex	Heylings, Pippa
Cane, Charlotte	Hinds, rh Damian
Cartlidge, James	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Chadwick, David	Holmes, Paul
Chamberlain, Wendy	Huddleston, Nigel
Chambers, Dr Danny	Hudson, Dr Neil
Cleverly, rh Sir James	Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Cocking, Lewis	Jarvis, Liz
Coghlan, Chris	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Collins, Victoria	Jones, Clive
Cooper, Daisy	Jopp, Lincoln
Cooper, John	Lam, Katie
Costa, Alberto	Lamont, John
Coutinho, rh Claire	Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Cross, Harriet	Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Dance, Adam	Lopez, Julia
Darling, Steve	Lowe, Rupert
Davey, rh Ed	MacCleary, James
Davies, Mims	MacDonald, Mr Angus
Davis, rh David (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Maguire, Ben
Dean, Bobby (<i>Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain</i>)	Maguire, Helen
Dinenage, Dame Caroline	Malthouse, rh Kit
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver	Martin, Mike
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain	Mathew, Brian
Evans, Dr Luke	Mayhew, Jerome
Forster, Mr Will	Maynard, Charlie
Fortune, Peter	McVey, rh Esther
Fox, Sir Ashley	Miller, Calum
Francois, rh Mr Mark	Milne, John
	Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
	Mohamed, Iqbal
	Mohindra, Mr Gagan

Moore, Robbie	Smith, Greg
Moran, Layla	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Morello, Edward	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Morgan, Helen	Sollom, Ian
Morrison, Mr Tom	Spencer, Dr Ben
Morrissey, Joy	Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)
Morton, rh Wendy	Stafford, Gregory
Mullan, Dr Kieran	Stride, rh Sir Mel
Munt, Tessa	Stuart, rh Graham
Murray, Susan	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Taylor, Luke
Norman, rh Jesse	Thomas, Bradley
Obese-Jecty, Ben	Thomas, Cameron
O'Brien, Neil	Tice, Richard
Olney, Sarah	Timothy, Nick
Patel, rh Priti	Trott, rh Laura
Paul, Rebecca	Vickers, Martin
Philp, rh Chris	Vickers, Matt
Pinkerton, Dr Al	Voaden, Caroline
Pritchard, rh Mark	Whately, Helen
Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Rankin, Jack	Wild, James
Reed, David	Wilkinson, Max
Reynolds, Mr Joshua	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Robertson, Joe	Wilson, Munira
Roome, Ian	Wood, Mike
Rosindell, Andrew	Wrigley, Martin
Savage, Dr Roz	Young, Claire
Shannon, Jim	
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil	
Slade, Vikki	
Smart, Lisa	

Tellers for the Ayes:
David Simmonds and
Alicia Kearns

NOES

Abbott, Jack	Brickell, Phil
Abrahams, Debbie	Buckley, Julia
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Burgon, Richard
Akehurst, Luke	Burke, Maureen
Aldridge, Dan	Burton-Sampson, David
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Byrne, rh Liam
Alexander, rh Heidi	Cadbury, Ruth
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Caliskan, Nesil
Ali, Rushanara	Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Ali, Tahir	Campbell, Irene
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Campbell, Juliet
Anderson, Callum	Campbell-Savours, Markus
Anderson, Fleur	Carden, Dan
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Carns, Al
Arthur, Dr Scott	Chowns, Dr Ellie
Asato, Jess	Clark, Feryal
Asser, James	Coleman, Ben
Athwal, Jas	Collier, Jacob
Atkinson, Catherine	Collins, Tom
Atkinson, Lewis	Conlon, Liam
Bailey, Olivia	Coombes, Sarah
Baker, Alex	Cooper, Andrew
Barron, Lee	Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Cox, Pam
Baxter, Johanna	Coyle, Neil
Beales, Danny	Craft, Jen
Beavers, Lorraine	Creagh, Mary
Begum, Apsana	Creasy, Ms Stella
Bell, Torsten	Crichton, Torcuil
Berry, Siân	Daby, Janet
Betts, Mr Clive	Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Blake, Olivia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin</i>)	Dalton, Ashley
Bloore, Chris	Darlington, Emily
Blundell, Mrs Elsie	Davies, Ann
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Davies, Jonathan
	Davies, Paul

Dean, Josh
 Denyer, Carla (*Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry*)
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hall, Sarah
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir
 Khan, Afzal
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahan, Jim
 McNally, Frank
 Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Quigley, Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin

Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rigby, rh Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell*)
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Scrogham, Michelle
 Sowards, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Spencer, Hannah
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
Tellers for the Noes:
 Gregor Poynton and
 Shaun Davies

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 69

ACCESS AGREEMENTS

Amendments made: 97, page 39, line 32, after “Railways” insert “or a GBR company”.

This amendment and amendments 98 to 105 would provide for GBR companies to be treated in the same way as Great British Railways for the purposes of the access provisions of the Railways Act 1993.

Amendment 98, page 39, line 37, after “Railways” insert “or a GBR company”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 97.

Amendment 99, page 40, line 2, leave out

“Great British Railways may not,”

and insert

“Neither Great British Railways nor a GBR company may.”

See the explanatory statement for amendment 97.

Amendment 100, page 40, line 9, after “Railways” insert “or a GBR company”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 97.

Amendment 101, page 40, line 11, after “Railways” insert “or a GBR company”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 97.

Amendment 102, page 40, line 15, after “Railways” insert “or a GBR company”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 97.

Amendment 103, page 40, line 19, after “Railways” insert “or a GBR company”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 97.

Amendment 104, page 40, line 26, after “Railways” insert “or a GBR company”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 97.

Amendment 105, page 40, line 31, after “Railways” insert “or a GBR company”.—(*Keir Mather.*)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 97.

Clause 70

ACCESS RIGHTS

Amendment made: 106, page 40, line 36, after “Railways” insert “or a GBR company”.—(*Keir Mather.*)

This amendment would prevent GBR companies from being infrastructure managers for the purposes of the Railways (Access, Management and Licensing of Railway Undertakings) Regulations 2016.

Clause 72

REGULATIONS ABOUT NON-GBR INFRASTRUCTURE, FACILITIES AND SERVICES

Amendment made: 107, page 42, line 27, leave out from “not” to end of line and insert “GBR infrastructure”.—(*Keir Mather.*)

This amendment is consequential on amendment 108.

Clause 73

INTERPRETATION OF CHAPTER 1 OF PART 3

Amendment made: 108, page 42, line 30, leave out from second “infrastructure” to end of line 31 and insert—

“managed or operated by Great British Railways or a GBR company, but does not include any such infrastructure managed or operated on behalf of a person other than Great British Railways or a GBR company”.—(*Keir Mather.*)

This amendment would define GBR infrastructure so as to exclude infrastructure managed or operated by GBR or a GBR company on behalf of non-GBR companies from the definition of GBR infrastructure.

Clause 75

MISCELLANEOUS FUNCTIONS OF ORR

Amendment made: 109, page 44, line 6, at end insert “or a GBR company”.—(*Keir Mather.*)

This amendment would prevent the ORR from giving a direction to a GBR company under section 16A of the Railways Act 1993.

Clause 86

TRANSFER SCHEMES MADE BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE

Amendments made: 110, page 51, line 10, leave out “or”.

This amendment and amendment 111 would expand the categories of property, rights and liabilities that could be transferred under a transfer scheme.

Amendment 111, page 51, line 11, after “services” insert—

“or the management of land or other property formerly used in connection with the provision of such services.”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 110.

Amendment 112, page 51, line 31, leave out “or”.

This amendment and amendments 113, 114, 115, 116 and 117 would amend clauses 86 and 88 to achieve equivalence between the powers of the Secretary of State, the Scottish Ministers and the Welsh Ministers to make transfer schemes.

Amendment 113, page 51, line 31, at end insert “or a company jointly owned by the Secretary of State and a former GBR,”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 112.

Amendment 114, page 52, line 6, at end insert—

“(iia) the Secretary of State,

(iib) a company wholly owned by the Crown,”

See the explanatory statement for amendment 112.

Amendment 115, page 52, line 10, at end insert—

“(f) from a company wholly owned by the Crown to another company wholly owned by the Crown.”—(*Keir Mather.*)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 112.

Clause 88

TRANSFER SCHEMES MADE BY WELSH MINISTERS

Amendments made: 116, page 53, line 35, leave out “or”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 112.

Amendment 117, page 53, line 35, at end insert—

“or a company jointly owned by the Welsh Ministers and a former GBR,”.—(*Keir Mather.*)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 112.

Clause 95

REGULATIONS

Amendments made: 118, page 57, line 17, after “State” insert “or the Treasury”.

This amendment makes provision consequential on NC48.

Amendment 119, page 57, line 33, at end insert—

“(4A) A statutory instrument containing regulations under section (Tax consequences of transfer schemes) is subject to annulment in pursuance of a resolution of the House of Commons.”—(*Keir Mather.*)

This amendment makes provision consequential on NC48.

Schedule 1

LICENSING OF GREAT BRITISH RAILWAYS

Amendments made: 120, page 60, line 12, after “Railways” insert “and its subsidiaries”.

This amendment would allow subsidiaries of Great British Railways to be authorised by the GBR licence to operate railway assets.

Amendment 121, page 60, line 27, leave out

“other than Great British Railways”.

This amendment and amendments 122 and 123 would ensure that a subsidiary of Great British Railways may not also be licensed under section 8.

Amendment 122, page 60, line 31, leave out

“other than Great British Railways”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 121.

Amendment 123, page 60, line 33, at end insert—

“(2A) The powers under subsections (1) and (2) may not be exercised to grant a licence to Great British Railways or a subsidiary of Great British Railways.”—(*Keir Mather.*)

See the explanatory statement for amendment 121.

Amendment 168, page 63, line 30, leave out from “specifying” to “which” in line 31 and insert—

“the period (not being less than 28 days beginning with the date of publication of the notice) within”.

This amendment would bring the period for objections and representations specified under section 11A(3)(c) of the Railways Act 1993 into line with that under the provision that would be inserted by Amendment 169.

Amendment 169, page 64, line 4, at end insert—

“11B Modification of Great British Railways’ licence by agreement

(1) The Office of Rail and Road may, after any consultation required by subsection (2), modify the conditions of a licence held by Great British Railways if Great British Railways consents to the modification.

(2) This subsection requires consultation with the Passengers’ Council if the proposed modifications relate to functions of the Council.

(3) Before making modifications under this section, the Office of Rail and Road must give notice—

- (a) stating that it proposes to make the modifications and setting out their effect,
- (b) stating the reasons for proposing to do so, and
- (c) specifying the period (not being less than 28 days beginning with the date of publication of the notice) within which representations or objections with respect to the proposed modifications may be made.

(4) A notice under subsection (3) is given—

- (a) by publishing the notice in such manner as the Office of Rail and Road considers appropriate for the purpose of bringing the notice to the attention of persons likely to be affected by the making of the modifications, and
- (b) by serving a copy of the notice on Great British Railways.

(5) The Office of Rail and Road must consider any representations or objections which are made before the end of the period specified in the notice and not withdrawn.

(6) As soon as practicable after modifying the conditions of a licence under this section, the Office of Rail and Road must send a copy of the modifications to the Secretary of State and the Passengers’ Council.”

This amendment would allow the Office of Rail and Road and Great British Railways to agree to modify conditions of the licence held by Great British Railways.

Amendment 124, page 64, line 5, leave out paragraphs 7 and 8.—(Keir Mather.)

This amendment would remove amendments to the Railways Act 1993 which are no longer required due to the substitution of section 12 made by NC49 and the repeal inserted by amendment 132.

Schedule 2

FUNDING GREAT BRITISH RAILWAYS

Amendment made: 125, page 73, line 17, leave out “Secretary of State considers” and insert “Scottish Ministers consider”.—(Keir Mather.)

This amendment would correct a drafting error in paragraph 13(5) of Schedule 2.

Schedule 3

TRANSFER SCHEMES

Amendments made: 126, page 75, line 18, after “liabilities” insert “under or”.

This amendment and amendment 128 would broaden the provision that may be made under a transfer scheme regarding contracts of employment.

Amendment 127, page 78, line 17, leave out paragraph 8 and insert—

“8 (1) A transfer scheme may provide for—

- (a) modifications by agreement;
- (b) modifications to have effect from the date when the original scheme came into effect.

(2) Any such modifications may include—

- (a) any provision that could have been contained in the original scheme;
- (b) incidental, supplemental, consequential and transitional provision in connection with the modifications.”

This amendment would amend provision regarding modification of transfer schemes.

Amendment 128, page 78, line 32, after “liabilities” insert “under or”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 126.

Amendment 129, page 80, line 8, leave out “Secretary of State” and insert “appropriate Minister”.

This amendment would require information under paragraph 11(5)(b) of Schedule 3 to the Bill to be provided to the Scottish and Welsh Ministers, instead of the Secretary of State, in appropriate cases.

Amendment 130, page 80, line 19, leave out “Secretary of State” and insert “appropriate Minister”.

This amendment would allow an application for an order under paragraph 11(8) of Schedule 3 to the Bill to be made by the Scottish and Welsh Ministers, instead of the Secretary of State, in appropriate cases.

Amendment 131, page 80, line 28, at end insert—

“(11) In this paragraph “the court” means—

- (a) in England and Wales, the High Court;
- (b) in Scotland, the Court of Session.”—(Keir Mather.)

This amendment would add a definition of “the court” to paragraph 11 of Schedule 3.

Schedule 4

MINOR AND CONSEQUENTIAL AMENDMENTS

Amendments made: 132, page 82, line 20, leave out paragraphs 6 and 7 and insert—

“6 Omit sections 13 to 15C.”

This amendment would repeal sections 13 to 15C of the Railways Act 1993, which concern a licence modification referral mechanism which is no longer required.

Amendment 133, page 84, line 15, at end insert—

“(1A) At the appropriate place insert—

““GBR company” has the same meaning as in the Railways Act 2026 (see section 96(1) of that Act);”.

This amendment defines GBR company in the Railways Act 1993 for the purposes of the references added to that Act by amendments 97 to 105, 106 and 109.

Amendment 134, page 85, line 21, leave out “At the end of” and insert “In”.

This amendment and amendment 135 would provide for the general restriction on disclosure of information in section 145 of the Railways Act 1993 not to apply to information and advice published by the Passengers’ Council under clause 50 of the Bill.

Amendment 135, page 85, line 21, after “(5)(a)” insert—

- “(a) after “71 above” insert “, or section 50 of the Railways Act 2026,”; and
- (b) at the end”.

See the explanatory statement for amendment 134.

Amendment 136, page 88, line 5, at end insert—

“47A After section 12 insert—

“Local government bodies

12A Arrangements between local government bodies and Secretary of State

- (1) A relevant local government body and the Secretary of State may, for purposes connected with railway passenger services for persons travelling to, from or within the body's area, enter into arrangements with respect to the exercise and performance of their respective functions on such terms as may appear to them to be expedient.
- (2) Those arrangements may include arrangements under which sums become due from the body to the Secretary of State—
 - (a) in respect of railway passenger services for persons travelling to, from or within the body's area;
 - (b) in respect of station services provided in connection with such railway passenger services;
 - (c) in respect of bus substitution services provided as alternatives for such railway passenger services.
- (3) In this section—
 - (a) “relevant local government body” means—
 - (i) a mayoral combined authority (within the meaning of the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026),
 - (ii) a mayoral combined county authority, (within the meaning of that Act), or
 - (iii) a Passenger Transport Executive for an integrated transport area;
 - (b) a reference to the functions of the Secretary of State is to be read as a reference to the functions of the Secretary of State under—
 - (i) sections 22 to 24 of this Act (discontinuance of railway passenger services), and
 - (ii) sections 25, 28 and 30 of the Railways Act 2026 (designation of railway passenger services).”

This amendment would allow relevant local government bodies power to enter into arrangements with the Secretary of State in respect of railway and station services for their areas similar to those that amendment 94 would allow TfL to enter into.

Amendment 137, page 90, line 38, leave out paragraph 73 and insert—

- “73 (1) Regulation 2(1) is amended as follows.
- (2) In the definition of “railway undertaking”, after “private undertaking,” insert “other than Great British Railways or a subsidiary of Great British Railways.”.
 - (3) At the appropriate place insert—

““subsidiary” has the meaning given by section 1159 of the Companies Act 2006;”.

This amendment would exempt subsidiaries of Great British Railways from needing a railway undertaking licence under the Railway (licensing of Railway Undertakings) Regulations 2005.

Amendment 138, page 91, line 31, leave out from “2(1)” to “, after” and insert “(scope)”.

This amendment would remove a duplicated reference to Regulation (EC) No 1371/2007, and add a note on the Article being amended.

Amendment 139, page 91, line 34, after “Railways” insert

“or a subsidiary of Great British Railways”.

This amendment and amendment 140 would ensure that Regulation (EC) No 1371/2007 applies to subsidiaries of Great British Railways.

Amendment 140, page 91, line 35, at end insert—

“79A In Article 3 (definitions), at the end insert—

- “19. ‘subsidiary’ has the meaning given by section 1159 of the Companies Act 2006.”

See the explanatory statement for amendment 139.

Amendment 141, page 92, line 33, at end insert—

“88A (1) Regulation 3 is amended as follows.

- (2) In the definition of “railway undertaking”, after “means” insert—

- “(a) Great British Railways or a subsidiary of Great British Railways, but only in relation to the provision of services for the transport of passengers by rail where the operation of the trains providing the services is authorised by a licence under section 7B of the Act; and

- (3) At the appropriate place insert—

““subsidiary” has the meaning given by section 1159 of the Companies Act 2006;”.

88B In regulation 8(1), after “Railway undertakings” insert “(other than Great British Railways or a subsidiary of Great British Railways)”.

This amendment would include GBR and its subsidiaries in the definition of railway undertaking in the Railways (Access, Management and Licensing of Railway Undertakings) Regulations 2016. It would exempt them from management independence requirements under regulation 8, because the Bill includes similar requirements in relation to them.

Amendment 142, page 93, line 1, leave out paragraph 90 and insert—

“90 (1) Regulation 12 is amended as follows.

- (2) In paragraph (2)(c), omit “the strategy referred to in regulation 11 and”
- (3) In paragraph (4) after “railway undertaking” insert “(other than Great British Railways or a subsidiary of Great British Railways).”—(Keir Mather.)

This amendment would exempt GBR and its subsidiaries from the business plan requirements under Regulation 12 of the Railways (Access, Management and Licensing of Railway Undertakings) Regulations 2016, because the Bill imposes similar requirements on them.

Third Reading

6.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Madam Deputy Speaker, with your indulgence, I would like to start my remarks with a short story. This time two years ago, like many colleagues on the Government Benches today, I was not a sitting MP. I was a parliamentary candidate standing for the first time to represent my home town of Swindon, a place with a proud railway heritage, with its people unashamedly ambitious for the future. When I stood in that election, I stood on a promise of renationalising our railways.

There were some who doubted whether we would ever do it, but as this Bill heads off to the other place for its next stage of parliamentary scrutiny, I say to the doubters that this is what change looks like: a Government doing what they said they would do in their manifesto; a Government delivering for the ordinary men and women who use our railways, the businesses that depend on our railways, and the staff who work on them; a Government replacing a privatised system, which was corroding in a state of perpetual decline, with one where there is now new hope.

When I stood at London Bridge station last December, as we unveiled the new Great British Railways branding and train livery, I saw hope in the eyes of the passengers I spoke to—hope for a better, more reliable railway; hope for an end to waiting for trains that never arrive; hope for the basics of working toilets, enough seats and simple fares—because if we are honest, hope has been in short supply on the railways for far too long. For years, the industry delivered poorer performance for higher prices. As a nation, we spent billions on upgrading infrastructure, but a fragmented system could not translate

[Heidi Alexander]

that into passenger benefits. We have had 30 reviews since 2006, all diagnosing the same problem—re-diagnosing it time and again—yet the previous Government were not able and were not willing to do the hard work to create solutions. Today, we make that change.

Thanks to this Bill, we will deliver the biggest reform to our railways in 30 years. Where there is fragmentation, we will bring integration; where decisions used to be made for private profit, they will now be made for the public good; and where passengers were forced to navigate multiple companies and unclear accountabilities, they will soon deal with one railway and one team with one mission, which is to deliver better services for the travelling public.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Droitwich and Evesham (Nigel Huddleston) and I have a hope, which is that parking at Worcestershire Parkway station can expand. We have been told by Great Western Railway that it can no longer do that, because it is now the responsibility of Great British Railways. Can the Secretary of State reassure my hon. Friend and me that the wonderful entity she is creating through this legislation will expand the parking, so that my constituents can hope for a parking place at Worcestershire Parkway?

Heidi Alexander: People obviously need to be able to get to the railway station. This Bill gives me the power to establish Great British Railways. I will talk to Great Western Railway about the issue the hon. Member raises—the company is still in private ownership—and I will write back to her with further detail.

I would like to summarise the main features of the Bill and remind Members what we have already achieved. Over half of operators are already under public control, thanks to legislation we introduced weeks after entering office. The benefits are starting to be felt: around 40 new Arterio trains on South Western, rolling stock that was sat for years in the sidings under privatisation, now released into service; performance among operators under public control now outstripping those still in private hands; pay-as-you-go ticketing being rolled out to more stations across the south-east; easier to understand fares in Greater Manchester; and passengers keeping more of their hard-earned cash thanks to the first rail fares freeze in 30 years.

This Bill will be the most significant step yet. For decades, the industry has been crying out for coherent direction and leadership. With Great British Railways that is what it will get: a single national leader co-ordinating track and train, setting timetables and fares.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the new powers in the Bill, particularly on timetabling. To give an example from my patch of how the new powers could be used to improve passengers' experience without having to build any new railway infrastructure, hundreds of people have told me that they want a faster service from Hastings to London that does not stop at every single station along the way. That could shave a long time off people's morning commute. On the other line I represent, passengers in Rye constantly miss their connection at Ashford because of the late-arriving Marshlink service, and face either missing their train or

an extremely dangerous dash through Ashford station, where people fall over. If we could better co-ordinate between Southeastern and Southern Railway, that could be alleviated.

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend has been a dogged campaigner on the railways for her constituents in Hastings and Rye. I believe her proposals are worthy of consideration by Southeastern, a company in public ownership. I would be happy to pursue that further on her behalf.

GBR will sweep away decades of inefficiency and waste. We will finally bear down on spiralling costs. We will wave goodbye to a system riddled with perverse incentives, in which armies of lawyers argue over whose fault a delay is. Instead, GBR will be a publicly owned and commercially agile company run by industry experts, not politicians. We will turn a web of competing interests into one railway that makes decisions in customers' interest and their interest alone.

Graham Stuart: I speak to the staff on Hull Trains, which are used by the Secretary of State's ministerial colleagues—to her left, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), and to her right, the hon. Member for Selby (Keir Mather). I speak to the customers of Hull Trains and I see the huge economic benefit that Hull Trains, an open access operator, has brought to our region and all the other areas it serves down to London. They are fearful of the perverse incentives of a GBR that does not necessarily have any regard for open access operators. What is there in the Bill to protect Hull Trains when it seeks access to rail track in future?

Heidi Alexander: I have always been clear that there is a role for open access operators on our network where they provide value for money.

If I may now turn to passengers, I am not ashamed of the fact that GBR will be obsessed with delivering for its customers. In fact, it will have a statutory duty to promote their interests. That starts with ticketing, which is currently a mind-bendingly complex system. I have said it before and I will say it again: buying a ticket should be effortless. Fares should be simple and consistent, and passengers should know they are always getting the best value—and under GBR, they will.

A new ticketing app and website will give passengers the ability to buy tickets, check train times and access a range of support all from the palm of their hands—no booking fees, no navigating lots of websites; just a 21st-century way of paying for a service. If passengers are let down, if accessibility falls short or if performance is not up to scratch, they will have a powerful champion fighting their corner: a strengthened passenger watchdog.

Wendy Morton: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Heidi Alexander: I will not give way.

GBR will also manage access decisions in relation to track capacity, enabling us to unlock the full potential of the whole network. That also means unleashing the huge economic and environmental potential of freight. Rail remains the best way to send bulky goods long distance, which is why GBR will have a legal duty to promote rail freight in line with our 2050 target.

GBR represents a simpler, more transparent railway to do business with. No longer will suppliers need to make their case to multiple parts of the network. GBR will be the single decision maker, able to take a long-term view, giving the private sector the confidence and certainty it needs.

I finish by thanking all Members who have taken part in the debates on the Bill so far—particularly those on the Transport Committee for their diligent approach.

Wendy Morton: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Heidi Alexander: No. I am conscious of giving time to the shadow Secretary of State.

I thank all members of the Public Bill Committee for completing the painstaking task of line-by-line scrutiny. I also thank Members on the Front Bench, as well as those sat on the Back Benches, for their vital perspectives. I particularly thank the Minister for Aviation, Maritime and Decarbonisation for handling the passage of the Bill so dutifully and ably. I also thank my colleague in the other place, the Rail Minister, and give a huge thanks to all the officials in my Department who have worked so hard to get the Bill to this stage.

This Government promised to fix what was broken in our economy and reform what does not work. That is why the Bill matters. We will fix our broken railways. While I cannot promise it will be achieved overnight, I say this: will GBR put the needs of passengers and freight users above all else? Yes, absolutely. Will passengers soon see the difference in ticketing and reliability in a railway that is easier to use? Most definitely. Will GBR help to unlock economic growth, house building and opportunity across the country? Undoubtedly. The Bill draws a line under the decline and dysfunction of the past. Today, we are bringing hope back to our railways. I commend the Bill to the House.

6.51 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I do not know what my hon. Friend the Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) and the hon. Member for Selby (Keir Mather) are going to do when they are not spending so much time together, week in, week out.

We are gathered here to witness this slowly-collapsing Government put passengers and taxpayers on the hook for, over time, more expensive fares and more subsidy—or both—for fewer trains, and for a service run in the best interests not of passengers but of the Labour party's union paymasters.

Opposition Members all know, as perhaps do some on the Government Benches—perhaps even the Secretary of State, who has reportedly had some doubts about total state control—that the Bill is not the answer. If Labour really cared about passengers, wallets and purses, Labour Members would have backed our amendments on railcards to protect young people and our brave veterans. We know that “no plans” does not mean no: just ask farmers and small businesses up and down the country about the promises from this Labour Government.

That is the bigger story about the Government's plan for state control. The Bill is not about bringing track and train together—something I think we can all agree on. This Labour Government have no qualms about

concentrating power, no concern about removing independent challenge, and no thought for the taxpayers who will be asked to foot the bill if and when their experiment goes wrong.

Under the Bill, the organisation that runs the trains will also decide who else gets to run the trains. The organisation that sets the fares will also dominate selling the tickets. When something goes wrong, the Secretary of State will have nowhere to hide.

Wendy Morton: The shadow Secretary of State is willing to give way to a Back Bencher and listen to their perspective. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government are far from offering passengers hope, particularly when they will not even answer questions from Back Benchers about simple constituency matters?

Mr Holden: My right hon. Friend makes an important point.

If the Government truly believe in putting passengers first, why are they making life harder for the very operators that have delivered some of the lowest fares and highest levels of passenger satisfaction on the entire network? Why are they squeezing open access operators off the tracks? Why are they creating a system in which GBR will be both player and referee at the same time? It is just ridiculous. We were told that Great British Railways would be accountable, but accountable to whom? The regulator loses powers, competitors lose protections and the Secretary of State gains more control.

Labour came to power promising to change the railways for good; it has accomplished a Bill that will reduce passenger rights and, at the same time, lead to fewer services. By gutting the ORR and letting GBR be judge, jury and executioner, the Secretary of State is ensuring that on her watch, everyone but the unions will be worse off.

We tried to rectify this blatant power grab with our amendments, supported by the Liberal Democrats, to make it easier for others to appeal against the GBR overlords after removing the bizarre judicial review benchmark. To no one's surprise, Labour Members—all of them—voted against every single one of the very sensible Opposition amendments. That is the problem that Labour MPs have: they were forced to sign up to an ideological experiment, and it is going against everything that their constituents and the country desire.

When the complaints start arriving, when the cheaper rail fares disappear, as they are doing already, when services are cut to make the statistics look better and when passengers discover that Great British Railways is more like “Little Britain Railways”, I hope the Secretary of State will appreciate that this is no way to run a railway.

The Opposition are voting against the Bill because state control is not the same thing as improvement, because bureaucracy is not the same thing as accountability and because putting major decisions in the hands of one giant state body is a retrograde step, not a positive move. When all is said and done—when the fares rise, the services shrink and the complaints pile up—the Secretary of State and the Labour party will have nobody but themselves to blame.

Question put. That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The House divided: Ayes 278, Noes 149.

Division No. 22]

[6.56 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Anderson, Lee
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baker, Alex
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Berry, Siân
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Blake, Olivia (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Carden, Dan
 Carns, Al
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Dean, Josh
 Denyer, Carla (*Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry*)
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Ellis, Maya
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Foy, Mary Kelly
 Francis, Daniel
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gemmell, Alan
 German, Gill
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Hall, Sarah
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Irons, Natasha
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, Gerald
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir

Khan, Afzal
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lightwood, Simon
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McNally, Frank
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Norris, Alex
 Norris, Dan (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin*)
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Quigley, Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rand, Mr Connor
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Rigby, rh Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell*)
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Sarah
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Scrogg, Michelle
 Seward, Mark
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smyth, Karin
 Spencer, Hannah
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tice, Richard
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Toale, Jessica
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turner, Laurence
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean

Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Ayes:
Gregor Poynton and
Shaun Davies

NOES

Amos, Gideon
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bennett, Alison
Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
Blackman, Bob
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Cane, Charlotte
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Mims
Dean, Bobby (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Evans, Dr Luke
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Franklin, Zöe
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gibson, Sarah
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa

Hinds, rh Damian
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Jarvis, Liz
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lopez, Julia
Lowe, Rupert
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Malthouse, rh Kit
Martin, Mike
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McVey, rh Esther
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Olney, Sarah
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Roome, Ian
Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben

Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood*)
Stafford, Gregory
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Stuart, rh Graham
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt

Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wood, Mike
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
David Simmonds and
Alicia Kearns

Question accordingly agreed to.

Bill read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Marine Licensing (Miscellaneous Provisions) (Amendment etc.) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 15 April, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

Question agreed to.

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

ELECTRICITY

That the draft Contracts for Difference (Allocation) (Amendment) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 20 April, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

Question agreed to.

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

RETAINED EU LAW REFORM

That the draft Airports Slot Allocation (Alleviation of Usage Requirements) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 20 May, be approved.—(*Stephen Morgan.*)

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That notices of Amendments, new Clauses and new Schedules to be moved in Committee in respect of the National Security (State Threats) Bill may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before it has been read a second time.—(*Sir Alan Campbell.*)

PETITION

Royal Lime Trees in Walton-le-Dale

7.10 pm

Maya Ellis (Ribble Valley) (Lab): I am delighted to present this petition on behalf of Walton-le-Dale residents in my constituency regarding the potential felling of the 18 royal lime trees that have stood for 112 years. In this petition, and in a similar, separate e-petition with almost 8,000 signatures, the petitioners believe that the Environment Agency has not sufficiently factored in local heritage in its preferred flooding solutions.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Ribble Valley,

Declares that the Royal Lime Trees on Victoria Road, Walton-le-Dale, Preston, which have stood for over 112 years and serve as a living memorial to the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary, form part of the community's identity and landscape but the Environment Agency's current plans within the Preston Flood Alleviation Scheme would see 18 trees cut down; further declares that specific modelling has not been carried out and appropriate steps not taken to gather sufficient structural or geotechnical evidence for these plans; and further declares that the current plans are intrusive on the community and natural landscape, while less disruptive alternatives have not been adequately explored.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to direct the Environment Agency to commit to an independent review of the Victoria Road design in the Preston and South Ribble Flood Risk Management Scheme, and to provide flood defences that are environmentally responsible, respect local heritage and reduce community disruption.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003206]

National Resilience

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

7.11 pm

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): It is a privilege to lead this evening's Adjournment debate on improving national resilience. I am also glad that the Security Minister is responding. He is a man for whom I have a great deal of respect. As we have both served in what is now the Special Forces Strike Group, albeit at different times, I know he is one of the few people in this House who has seen the sharp end of national insecurity at first hand.

It has sadly become commonplace to say that we are living through unprecedented times. The international system we have all lived under has fractured, war has broken out across multiple continents and technological upheaval and a warming planet compound to create an increasingly volatile world.

We hear repeatedly across this House that the first duty of any Government is the defence of the realm. It is repeated so often that it risks becoming a platitude, but here is the hard question: are we actually living up to that duty here in the UK in 2026? This evening, I will set out why I believe we are falling short and, more importantly, what we might do about it and how we might build a country and citizenship resilient enough to meet the growing and interconnected number of threats to our homeland.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member. Resilience is about not just defence but health. To cast the mind of the hon. Gentleman and that of the House back to the national emergency of covid-19, the report of the UK covid inquiry mentioned "fatal strategic flaws". The NHS did not collapse, although it came close and patients often did not receive the standard of care that they were due, and that led to delays in diagnosis and treatment. Does the hon. Member not agree that serious concerns about the lack of the health service's effective surge capacity need to be addressed in anticipation of another national health emergency and to secure national resilience in the face of medical uncertainty?

David Reed: The hon. Member raises a serious points, which I will come on to, on interconnectedness. We saw how covid-19 affected so many different parts of society—it closed down industry and the economy. We have to start to think about these things cross-departmentally.

The Government's definition of national resilience is a society's ability to anticipate, withstand, respond to and quickly recover from severe crises, whether natural disasters, pandemics, geopolitical shocks or deliberate attacks. It rests on a whole-of-society approach in which Government, business and the public work together to protect critical national infrastructure and maintain vital services.

Last year's strategic defence review made precisely that point. One of its central recommendations was a national conversation on defence and resilience built on that whole-of-society approach and premised on a simple idea: that defending the nation is no longer the job of the armed forces alone. A year on, however, I think it is fair to say that that conversation has barely begun.

One critical central challenge, both to having that conversation with the British public and, more importantly, to making the preparations to be resilient, is that living memory of needing to be resilient in this country is fading. I often speak to my father about this. He was born in 1942 in Plymouth during the blitz. His generation is the last with a direct lived experience of national insecurity on home soil. The contrast is stark. To the young people I speak to about the risks we face, the idea that we might have to defend our homeland, our democracy and our way of life, remains abstract—something that happens to other people in other places.

We are in a more vulnerable position still, however, because beyond the fading of that memory, resilience is no longer woven into our national story. In Taiwan or Finland, the people I speak to have a geographical proximity to the threat, which they feel in their bones: the Chinese dragon across the strait and the Russian bear across the border. Those threats are real and they are close, and that is precisely why those countries do resilience well: their people and their institutions understand in their core the need to be strong. A quotation that has stayed with me since my Royal Marines training puts that well:

“You cannot dream yourself into a strong character: you must hammer and forge yourself into one.”

As a country, we must wake from that dream, and it is incumbent on the Government to have the hard conversation with the public about how we fund our national resilience.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate and making an excellent speech. Clearly, the UK faces malign threats from Russia, from China and especially from Iran, as recent examples have shown. I commend the Government for bringing forward the tackling state threats Bill—reportedly next Wednesday, but we will see the business statement tomorrow—that will allow us to deal with the threats, but the public do not necessarily know just how severe they are. Does he agree that, as well as dealing with the threats, we need to educate the public on just how threatening these state actors are and why we need to deal with them now?

David Reed: There must have been a leak, because I am going to come on to that paragraph straight away.

Beyond the issue of funding, the obvious question that flows from this is who in Government should take the lead in having that conversation with the public about the panoply of threats that we face. That leads to the central argument of this debate: is the British state structured to deal effectively with them? I accept that the machinery of government is a surefire way to send those in this Chamber to sleep, but it is central to the direction of travel we must take.

I was waiting with bated breath to see who the Government would send to respond to the debate this evening, because logic would dictate that the Minister responding should come from the Department that the Prime Minister has charged with leading the national conversation on resilience. Here lies the first problem. The Security Minister sits across both the Cabinet Office and the Home Office. His portfolio is broad, but

it clearly does not cover anywhere near the full range of threats set out in the Government's own definition of national resilience.

The Cabinet Office has a resilience directorate, which does important work co-ordinating civil contingency planning, crisis management and emergency response across national and local levels. I would not diminish the work that it does for a moment, but let us consider its design: a directorate for preparedness and a Cobra unit for crisis response. Risk and response. Notice what is missing. There is machinery to assess the threat and machinery to manage the emergency, but nowhere is anyone charged with turning to the public and saying, “Here is the threat we face, here is your part in it, and here is what is being done in your name.” The national conversation that we need therefore finds no natural home. It does not emanate from the directorates whose remit is risk and response; nor has the Ministry of Defence acted on the strategic defence review's own call for a national conversation on defence and resilience.

The result is a system in which responsibility is spread so thinly that no single Minister owns the problem. The danger of that is not merely administrative tidiness but that when a crisis strikes, command and control will fracture at precisely the moment it must hold. For example, the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill—which hands the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology sweeping new powers to direct critical entities—illustrates the trend rather than reversing it. Individual Departments are accruing resilience powers of their own, with each cooking up policies to support their own patch. A whistle must be blown on this approach, because we risk spreading responsibility through legislation so thinly that no one truly understands where it lies.

When I speak to civil servants—all of whom want to see a stronger and safer country—I notice that the word “resilience” has itself become something of a buzzword, a phrase to attach to a business case to secure a bigger departmental budget. That is a sign of a system without a clear centre of gravity, not of one that is working. That led me to research in depth how our near neighbours have approached this problem—countries with national stories like our own and populations whose memories of insecurity have faded, just as ours have.

The clearest exemplar I found is Denmark. The Danes have grasped something that we have not yet acted upon: in an age of interconnected threats—where cyber-attacks become supply shocks become public-safety emergencies—danger no longer respects departmental boundaries. For decades they had run, as we still do, on a principle of sectoral responsibility—each Department minding risk in its own lane. They concluded that a system in which everyone is responsible is one in which, in practice, no one is.

In August 2024, the Danes acted, creating a dedicated ministry of resilience and preparedness, the first of its kind in the region, with a Cabinet Minister in charge. Within months, they established a resilience agency beneath it, drawing scattered functions into one organisation—one ministry, one Cabinet Minister, one clear line of accountability.

If truth be told, it is too early to say with certainty whether the model delivers the better outcomes that the Danes expect. The real test will come in the next crisis, not the last reorganisation. But the logic is sound because

[David Reed]

the alternative—broadly what we have—is a system where resilience is everyone's second priority and nobody's first. As someone who wants to see a smaller and sharper state, the answer is not a new layer of governance, but collapsing many duplicated ones into a single, accountable home. It is an idea that the Government should actively investigate.

I have also been struck by how our Danish and Dutch friends have begun to share the responsibility for resilience with their citizens, reinforcing civic duty in a far more deliberate way than we do here in the UK. Both have started speaking plainly to their people about preparedness and, strikingly, they tell them much the same thing: “Be ready to look after yourself for three days, or 72 hours.” The Dutch Government now tell every household to hold enough to manage for 72 hours in the event of war, a cyber-attack or a major disaster—things such as water, food, medication, a battery radio, some cash and key documents. They did not merely issue advice; they delivered a printed survival guide to every door and published it online in dozens of languages. Its message was carefully chosen, and the aim, Ministers said, is not to frighten people but to prepare them, because those who think through the first 72 hours of a crisis feel safer, not more fearful. The campaign's slogan is simple: “Think Ahead”.

Denmark's advice is almost identical, and the reasoning is the same: if ordinary people can get through the first three days, the authorities can concentrate on those who cannot. Denmark sent that guidance to every adult through its secure Government messaging system and placed 300,000 printed copies in libraries and public offices. It does not shy away from naming why, either. Its Defence Minister told Danes plainly that they and their allies face hybrid war and that each of us should prepare to be without power, water or shops for a short while. In both countries, the principle is the same: resilience is not something the state can simply hand to its people; it is a habit that the public must share in.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for bringing this debate and in particular for his focus on the need for cross-Government action and to address the range of threats we face. Does he agree that as part of the resilience planning, addressing the risks attached to climate breakdown and nature collapse are absolutely central? On his point about transparency, does he agree that the two suppressed reports from the Joint Intelligence Committee and from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' futures team need to be made available if the Government and Members across parties are to work clearly to address these issues and inform the public?

David Reed: The hon. Member raises an important point. For anyone who understands the science and sees the effects globally, climate change is happening, the planet is warming up, and we will all feel the effects of a heating planet. What that does to our critical national infrastructure, to businesses and how they operate, and to our energy systems will be profound, and it is something that I do not think we talk about enough. We talked about it a great deal a few years ago, but it sort of slid off the agenda. However, I also understand the challenges

that the Government are facing at the moment: there are international threats, which seem to be conjoining, and climate change seems to be a further away problem. I understand the issues, and I hope the Minister can draw that subject in to show the interconnection of threats and how we will deal with them.

The uncomfortable part is that in terms of national messaging Britain has said and tried to do the same thing, but we say the words without a plan behind them, the public get alarmed, the moment passes, and nothing changes. Denmark and the Netherlands said those words and built them into the life of the nation, and that, in a sentence, is the difference between talking about resilience and doing it.

Let me close with three concrete asks of the Government. First, will the Minister confirm whether any Department or Minister has been formally charged with delivering the national conversation on resilience called for by the strategic defence review? If not, that gap must be filled—I think we would all agree on that. Secondly, will the Government commission a review, led from the centre, into whether the current dispersal of resilience responsibilities across Whitehall is fit for purpose, with the Danish and Dutch models considered explicitly? Thirdly, will the Government speak plainly to the British public about the threats we face, and back those words with a sustained public preparedness campaign, not a single statement that fades within a week, but a message built into the life of the nation?

I return to the statement that is made repeatedly in this House, which is that the first duty of any Government is the defence of the realm. Meeting that duty requires a state that is structured to lead, and a public who are prepared to follow. We are not yet that country, but I have faith we can be.

7.26 pm

The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis): I begin by paying tribute to the hon. and gallant Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed) for his previous service, including in the special forces support group. I also thank him for bringing this vital matter to the House, as this debate is central to our national security and our duty to the public. He made a number of helpful and important points. I completely understand why he mentioned the importance of the national conversation, and he can expect to hear much more about that shortly. He was also right to draw a comparison with other countries, and I am proud that many of the UK's resilience structures and capabilities serve as examples of best practice. For example, the National Situation Centre, established under the previous Government, is highly regarded internationally, and the UK Resilience Academy, which I visited just the other day, is an important part of the skills and engagement offer.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): The Crystal Palace transmitting station in my constituency is such an iconic feature of our south London skyline that people often refer to it as Crystal Paris. It is also vital communications infrastructure. Will the Minister join me in recognising it not only for its everyday role in broadcasting television and radio to millions across our capital and beyond, but also for the contribution that such infrastructure makes to our national resilience in times of crisis and emergency, when trusted, reliable

communications matter more than ever? Will he also join me in thanking the engineers, technicians, operators and all the staff who maintain and run that critical national infrastructure, often behind the scenes, ensuring that the public stay informed, connected and safe?

Dan Jarvis: I am happy to join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the work done at the Crystal Palace transmitting station. As he knows better than I, it is an iconic feature of south London, so I am happy to take the opportunity to thank all those involved for their work ensuring that the public stay informed, connected and safe. While I am on that subject, let me also thank all those who work at Emley Moor in West Yorkshire who do similar work. I was privileged to meet them just the other day.

Let me return to the remarks by the hon. Member for Exmouth and Exeter East about international comparisons. There are many similarities with our international partners, but as he will acknowledge, each nation's approach is influenced by its history, geography, and societal approach to resilience.

Building on the good work of the previous Government, we have set out our strategic vision on resilience. Take for example our work following the covid-19 inquiry: we considered the findings and made deliberate updates to our resilience plans, including strengthening our relationships with the devolved Governments through the four nations ministerial group.

As I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will also recognise, successive Governments have for more than 20 years anchored the national security risk assessment as the foundation of their approach to the complex resilience landscape. That landscape continues to evolve and the risks that we face today are volatile, varied and interconnected. They include cyber-attacks, threats to energy security, global supply chain pressures and, of course, armed conflict. I am pleased to be able to talk about the Government's approach to those areas, but first let me say something in response to the hon. Gentleman about accountability.

Under the lead Department model, each risk is owned by a single Department, ensuring those with the relevant expertise are responsible for the work to keep us protected against that particular risk. To support that, the Government will publish a refreshed expectation set for lead Departments. That will clarify how they are expected to deliver their responsibilities, as well as the role of other Departments in supporting them.

The Government have also taken steps to clarify accountability and enhance our readiness for the highest impact whole-of-system crises. We have explicitly embedded the leadership role of the Cabinet Office in our central crisis management doctrine, the Amber Book, and we have strengthened governance on risk planning and mapped key cascading impacts of catastrophic risk to ensure a true whole-of-Government response, so if a catastrophe should happen, no Department can be in any doubt about its role.

Let us take a national power outage as an example. The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero remains the lead Department across the whole risk cycle, from assessment to recovery, and continues to lead on the Government's relationship with the energy sector. The role of the Cabinet Office is to step in to help lead the response, given the significant cross-cutting

impacts that a national power outage would bring. That central co-ordination function allows all responding Departments to respond to their impacted areas, with the Cabinet Office providing situational reporting of the whole-system impacts of the risk. That way, the Government collectively understands and is prepared for the risks that the UK faces.

The Cabinet Office also leads on the overall response to severe weather. This is underpinned by the severe weather resilience network, where crucial inputs from the Met Office, which I know the hon. Gentleman will be very familiar with, are shared with individual Departments that lead on the response planning and resilience of the sectors that they represent. That ensures that when the weather turns, our response is unified, rapid and robust.

Our work is not just about how we plan for responding to emergencies; we have informed our understanding of their impact as well. We know that emergencies impact people unequally, and to address that we have developed the risk vulnerability tool and provided further guidance to local resilience forums, so that they can better identify and support those who are most vulnerable.

The UK Government are proud to be a part of an international community in which we can both learn from others and share our learnings, but I would not want anyone listening to think that planning and response is all down to Departments. Local resilience forums are a critical part of our resilience system. In fact, the stronger LRF trailblazers programme moves beyond legacy structures to build a local network that is agile, accountable and capable of protecting citizens at the neighbourhood level. The resilience action plan envisages a whole-of-society approach, redefining national resilience as a shared mission where citizens, communities, civil society, businesses and the public sector all play a vital and active role.

Finally, building a truly resilient society requires a fundamental cultural shift in the way that emergency preparedness is thought about. That includes being clear about the risks that we face and the actions that we can all take to improve our collective resilience.

Adrian Ramsay: On the point about transparency, the Joint Intelligence Committee's national security assessment was partially released in January—it was a redacted version—only after a freedom of information request from Green Alliance. That report highlighted that biodiversity loss and ecosystem collapse are a threat to national security. What action is being taken following that report? In particular, when will the full version of the report be made available to Members of this House?

Dan Jarvis: I absolutely share the hon. Gentleman's concerns. Let me give an undertaking to come back with the technical detail about the report that he has raised, but I hope he can be assured of the seriousness that the Government attach to such matters. All of us in this place, I hope, understand the nature of the climate crisis and the impact it is having now and will have in the future, and we in Government have an absolute responsibility to ensure that we are properly prepared for that.

The Government's Prepare website provides guidance on the actions recommended for individuals, households and communities to increase their own preparedness and resilience. This debate highlights something

[Dan Jarvis]

fundamental: resilience is not an abstract policy objective, but, I hope, a shared national endeavour. The hon. Member for Exmouth and Exeter East has spoken powerfully about the importance of strengthening national resilience in the face of evolving risks. We share his determination, and I would be very happy to continue the conversation with him about these matters.

Let me give the hon. Member some further assurance. Next month, the Government will make their annual statement to Parliament on resilience, which will provide

a detailed update on the progress we have been making to deliver against the commitments over the last 12 months or so. I hope that will go some way further to address the points that he has made, but, regardless, I give him and the House an assurance that we will continue to learn, adapt and build a robust future for the United Kingdom.

Question put and agreed to.

7.36 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 10 June 2026

[DR ANDREW MURRISON *in the Chair*]

Local Government Reform

9.31 am

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered local government reform.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Morrison. I would particularly like to thank Mr Speaker for granting me exceptional permission to speak from the Back Benches on an issue that many of my constituents feel very strongly about.

One day, not long after the new Labour Government came into office, they suddenly announced that they were going to abolish every district and borough council in this country and also change the boundaries of many cities. Following that, a proposal was swiftly put forward by the Labour Mayor of Leicester to expand the boundaries of the city, to swallow up many surrounding areas. All of this came completely out of the blue—it had not been mentioned in the general election—and the Government did not start by asking people what they might want; instead, they simply told them what was going to happen.

Right from the start, it was clear to me from speaking to people in Leicestershire that there was very strong opposition to this plan. Right from the start, I have said to Ministers on the Floor of the Commons, “If you believe this is the right thing, and if you believe this is what local people want, why don’t you let us have a vote on it? Why don’t you give people a say?” But Ministers treated the idea of giving people a vote as ridiculous—“What an absurd idea! Why would we ask people what they want?”—and said no to allowing us a local referendum. Because the Government will not give people a vote, I have given my constituents a vote. Over recent weeks, I have been balloting people in the affected area about whether they want to be part of the city of Leicester. I sent every household in the area a ballot paper asking, in a completely neutral way, “Do you want to become part of the city or not?”

The result has been surprising and overwhelming. I knew that people felt very strongly. It turns out they feel very, very strongly about this issue. I sent a ballot paper to all 22,000 households in Oadby and Wigston, and 10,774 have responded—about half, which is an incredible response to an informal local referendum. Of those who have voted, almost all are opposed to Oadby and Wigston being swallowed up by the city. In fact, 97% of people—10,410—voted against it, so it could not be clearer that people in Oadby and Wigston do not want to be swallowed up by the city.

But that is not all. The plan put forward by the Mayor of Leicester would see him taking over other areas as well, such as part of the Harborough district including Great Glen, Newton Harcourt and the area around the Strettons. The bid he has put into Government would see him swallowing up all of the Harborough district, including Market Harborough. We have no idea how the Government will respond to that.

We know that the mayor definitely wants to take over the area around Great Glen, but people there are also very strongly opposed to this. I sent out 2,000 ballot papers there. Around that area, 1,035 people voted, of whom 1,013 voted against being part of the city—98% of people do not want to join the city. If we take all those together—Oadby and Wigston and the area around Great Glen—that is 11,423 people who have voted against joining the city, which is an incredible number in quite a small area.

I have not balloted other places nearby in quite the same detail, but I suspect that if I gave a vote to people in Kibworth, Burton Overy, Gaulby or King’s Norton, they would say exactly the same. People do not want to be part of the city, yet so far the Labour Government have refused to listen and have not wanted to give people a say. They must now start listening to the wishes of the people. Next month, we will find out what the Government have decided to do. If the Minister decides to push ahead with plans to expand the city, Ministers must know that they are doing so in the face of total and overwhelming local opposition.

When I talk to local people, they give me different reasons why they do not want to be part of the city. One factor is higher council tax. A typical band D property in the city pays £122 more than a property in Oadby and Wigston, and £139 more than a property in Harborough. Obviously, a bigger property pays even more: a band H property pays £244 more in the city than in Oadby and Wigston, and £278 more than in Harborough.

But it is not just the cost that is driving the opposition; people do not want to lose local accountability and their local identity. All these places have their own strong local character. Oadby and Wigston have always been separate from the city of Leicester. Wigston is in the Domesday Book—in fact, it had been around for about 500 years even then. It has two beautiful medieval churches and is known for their two spires. South Wigston is very different. It is a Victorian model town, built by a visionary industrialist called Orson Wright, who built the whole place with his own brickworks. That red brick character can still be seen driving up the Blaby Road.

Oadby, as the name implies—there are lots of “by’s” around Leicestershire—has Viking origins. It has its own quirks and history, too. For example, of the 114 livery companies in this country, all are in the City of London apart from one, which is in Oadby, in the beautiful hall and alms-houses created by the Framework Knitters.

I could go on and on. Great Glen has its own history. It has a beautiful church, which was quite badly damaged by parliamentarians who were camping there during the civil war—I suppose that, as a parliamentarian myself, I should apologise for that. These are places with their own strong history, and their desire to hold on to that local accountability and identity is seen as ridiculous by local officials.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a really important point about local identity and about how important it is that Ministers listen. We have a Minister here today listening. I want to talk about the local government reorganisation in Kent, an area that has an incredibly strong historic identity. It is actually England’s oldest county, with a

[*Helen Whately*]

history going back more than 2,000 years—it was the Kingdom of Kent—yet under this local government reorganisation, Kent is due to be broken up, and it is not even getting a mayor. It will be fragmented into multiple parts. The population between Kent and Medway is over 2 million. At the moment, Kent has an identity and a voice. It is set to lose both through this local government reorganisation, and the case for substantial savings simply is not there. The local government reorganisation needs to be looked at again, and I hope that my hon. Friend agrees that, at the moment, the proposals are a shambles.

Neil O'Brien: I am very sorry to hear that. I was just about to make that point: as well as the loss of local accountability and identity, the argument is just wrong. Ministers believe that big is always better—that big is beautiful—but the evidence does not support that. If big were beautiful, Birmingham city council, which is the biggest unitary in the country, would be our best council. Is it our best council? No, it is not; we have bins piling up in the streets.

It is not just that one anecdote; the point can be expressed in lots of different ways. The Local Councils Network found that, for mega-councils with populations of over half a million, which was the Government's original target for this reorganisation, the average council tax is £2,009, but for councils below that size, it is £250 a year cheaper. If mega-councils are so efficient and wonderful, why are they much more expensive? Why are local residents not feeling the benefit of the efficiency? The truth is, of course, that the gains are not there. The reorganisation, and the chaos that will come with all this, will actually cost us lots of money, and we will end up with something that is remote but not more efficient.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is very clear from my hon. Friend's powerful speech that his constituents in Leicestershire do not want local government reform, and my constituents in Rayleigh and Wickford in Essex do not want it either. Has he seen the letter from 16 council leaders from the County Council Network giving a whole host of reasons why it is a bad idea? I would add that it is a Trojan horse that Labour is using to try to cover our green fields in concrete. There is no demand for this. People do not want it. They want to protect their existing local identities. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government should take the hint and drop the whole barmy plan?

Neil O'Brien: My right hon. Friend is quite right, and he has also pre-empted something I was about to say. The Government are pressing on with "big is beautiful"—they have expanded Norwich, Ipswich, Portsmouth, Southampton, and so forth—but we can see that bigger councils are not more efficient.

One motive on the part of officials is the belief that making those cities bigger will cause more housing to be built. I do not think that is right, but the logic is this: a bigger council will be more remote from people, so will be less likely to listen to local opposition and more able to ride roughshod over it. In particular for Labour, there is a belief that expanding cities makes it easier for those often Labour-run urban councils to move the housing need on to the outskirts, and not to have to

ruffle any feathers in the city. I can see why Labour politicians find that idea attractive but it is wrong, particularly in Leicestershire.

In Manchester, the places that were derelict mills when I was a teenager are now trendy flats and coffee bars with flat whites, and it is all very cool. In Leicester, all those derelict mills are still just derelict mills. The city is in desperate need of urban regeneration and needs new life and younger people to move in, but that is not being generated. Instead, there is a desire—not just with this proposal, but with prior moves by the mayor—to dump housing need into areas around him and not do the difficult things to fix the city itself.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case against the reorganisation in principle, but does he agree that if it is to go ahead, the Government should stick to the guidelines they provided to councils? In Oxfordshire, a Labour city proposal for a similar expansion of the boundaries of the city violates many of the principles set out, such as that it should be bounded by the existing district boundaries and, as far as possible, avoid breaking up service provision. Does he agree that, if this is to go ahead, the Government should stick to clear criteria when making decisions?

Neil O'Brien: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman, who is absolutely right. The local nature of local government is critical.

The other problem with these giant councils is how remote they will be. In Oadby and Wigston at the moment, everyone can walk to the council offices, or take a maximum five-minute drive. Harborough is a little bigger, but is still very local. If we get a giant council, my constituents will have to drive 40 minutes up the M1 motorway to see council officers. The whole thing will feel more remote and local government will be less local. The point of local government is to be truly local and to care about the things that a big, remote authority will not necessarily care about.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent argument for councils to be more accountable to local residents by being closer. The Government responded to Sussex's proposals by redrawing the red lines they had originally set and putting forward a third proposal. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that just throws communities into total disarray? They thought they had responded to a consultation that was going to form the next council, but now they have been told, "Oh, actually, you can't have either of those things. We're going to come up with a new solution for you."

Neil O'Brien: I am very sorry to hear that. It is bad when people feel that the goalposts are being moved because it erodes trust in the process even further.

Crucially, nobody asked for this. People email me every day about all kinds of things they want sorted out locally, but nobody ever emailed me to say they wanted their councils to be abolished and replaced with something bigger and more remote. No one emailed me to say they wanted to be part of the city of Leicester. It is a bad idea, being done for the wrong reasons and in an undemocratic way.

I can see why the Mayor of Leicester wants to expand. He wants a bigger city and will get all the council tax and business rate revenues from the areas moved in. He would have a place to dump all the housing need without ruffling any feathers in the city. I can see the upside for him, but I cannot see what is in it for my constituents, and nor can they. They do not want this, as is clear and indisputable. The Government cannot pretend for a second that this is in any sense what local people want. The Minister here today does not live in our area, which is not her fault, but she has asked people what they think. Now that she has heard, I hope she will start to listen to local people as she makes her decisions.

9.44 am

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) on his success in securing this important debate. He has set out how this is the answer to a question that no one asked. Whatever anyone thinks about local government reform, the Government have made it clear that they will impose it, and if we and councils do not engage with it, it will simply be done to us.

I was very clear from the outset that if the Government were fixed on local government reorganisation and reform, there were certain conditions that, at a very minimum, had to be met. I made it very clear that what emerged should not move local services further away from local communities or local accountability, and that as part of the process there should be a genuine listening exercise not just with upper-tier and lower-tier authorities, but with parish councils and, most importantly, local representatives and residents of affected areas.

Similar to my hon. Friend, there are very real concerns among my constituents and genuine anger about what may happen. I have a few questions for the Minister. I know her of old, and she is extremely diligent. I know she will do her best to answer the questions, in anticipation of which I am grateful.

Will the Minister confirm that when she, or the Secretary of State on her advice, makes a decision, it will be based on the proposals that have been presented, not on a proposal that was never presented or on a merging of proposals by civil servants in her Department? There are three different proposals before her, from the borough and district councils, from the county council and from the mayor and city of Leicester. The mayor's proposal does not, at this stage, take in all the areas of my patch that are very worried about it. There are very real concerns in places like Syston, Thurmaston and the villages. Notwithstanding that, the Minister's officials could still recommend that a line be drawn on a map to expand the city of Leicester to take in those villages and towns.

Councillors Poland, Bradshaw, Seaton, Jackson, Braker and Lowe have been campaigning very hard to make sure that local voices are heard. My constituents in those areas are strongly opposed to a land grab by the mayor that would take into the city areas that are, historically and in every sense of their identity, communities and economy, very much of the county.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston set out their concerns very clearly. They know they would end up paying more if they were absorbed into the city. They worry that reform is simply a reason to enable the mayor to build on greenfield sites outside the city boundaries that do not want that extra burden. They are already taking an awful lot more housing, and the communities I have just mentioned have taken an incredible amount of development in recent years. The communities worry about their sense of identity. The Minister knows that every community, even a village community, has a very strong sense of identity compared with the next village, let alone of being a county village as opposed to being part of the city.

My worry is that the pillars on which the Mayor of Leicester is pushing and advocating for an expansion of the city no longer stand up to scrutiny. First, the idea that the city needs to expand to be able to absorb more housing to meet its unmet housing targets is already being dealt with by agreement between the city and the boroughs and districts, which are already voluntarily taking a chunk of the housing that the mayor seems incapable of delivering within the city boundaries. That is already being addressed.

Secondly, the mayor has previously argued that the city's finances need to be more sustainable and that it can come only from an expansion of the city boundaries, which he bases on the city's previous financial position. We saw quite a generous local government finance settlement for the city of Leicester, and I am sure those in the city will be very grateful to the Minister. It was a little less generous for the county of Leicestershire, but the city now has its finances in a more sustainable place. I would argue that the city needs to do a lot more to spend that money wisely and efficiently, but the Minister has, to a degree, addressed that problem for it, too. I worry that the arguments no longer hold water. I also worry, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston set out so ably, that the ideology of "bigger is better" sadly does not reflect the reality of service delivery.

I have known the Minister a very long time, and I know she is very diligent and genuinely cares both about her brief and about communities up and down this country. Will she please listen to the people who have responded to the consultation, and to Members of Parliament today? Do not impose what people do not want by endorsing a city land grab of our counties, towns and villages. Please do not change the rules of the game midway through by adopting a proposal that was not consulted on and was not included in the initial consultation, and please instead focus on what works and delivers for local people to improve local services.

9.51 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) for securing this debate.

Obviously, the Minister is not responsible for local government reorganisation in Northern Ireland, but I want to caution against the approach that has been put forward today, because the shortfalls of what we have done in Northern Ireland will undoubtedly be replicated here on the mainland.

[*Jim Shannon*]

It is nice to see the Minister in her place. She will know some of the things I have said in the past, including in my questions to her in the Chamber. We have done a local government review and reorganisation in Northern Ireland and it did not quite work out, so perhaps a cautionary approach should be taken, learning from the promises that were made and ultimately not delivered for us in Northern Ireland.

I note the optimistic projections before us. The House was told that this grand restructuring will streamline services and save an estimated £2.9 billion over five years. That is to be welcomed, if those words turn into reality. I wish I could say it is the reality of what happened in Northern Ireland, but it is not because the promises were not realised at all. From our distinct experience in Northern Ireland, I must therefore issue a strong note of caution to the Government.

We had reform of all councils in Northern Ireland, reducing their number from 26 to 11. Massive savings were promised due to less duplication, with no need to have so many middle staff because one departmental head could look after two sections, and no need to have buildings in all the council areas. Lots of savings were promised, and unfortunately they were not realised.

I served on a council for some 26 years from 1985 right through to 2010, so there is a very special place in my heart for local government. I know at first hand the real and tangible benefit of local councils making local decisions for the people who live there. Indeed, some of the best days I had were on the council. I love bread-and-butter issues, and councillors get their hands dirty with that sort of stuff.

I know that any Member who has served at local council level will agree that the general public having access to their council must be protected at every single level. Unfortunately, I suspect that will not happen with these reforms. We know the importance of that level of representation and advocacy. I look back with fondness on my 26 years of apprenticeship. For a short period of three months, I served as a councillor, a Member of the Legislative Assembly and an MP at the same time. I gave an undertaking to resign from the other two places to take up my position here, and I did.

The systematic removal of face-to-face access for people in our towns and villages caused by aggressive centralisation can never be acceptable. We have seen this movie before. It is like a less funny “Groundhog Day”. It happened to us in Northern Ireland, and it is going to happen here again—except when we wake up this time, it will not be so much fun.

Northern Ireland is now a decade on from our own major reform of local authorities, which reduced the number of councils from 26 to 11. The promises made then mirror the promises made today. A 2024 Department for Communities report concluded that it is still too early to determine if those reforms have been cost-effective. Crucially, the report also revealed that the new, larger councils are actually spending more than their 26 predecessors combined—wow. The promises were never realised. Indeed, they went the other way. As has already been said, bigger does not automatically mean cheaper. Centralisation does not inherently guarantee efficiency.

The Minister is an honourable lady who does her best for us all in this Chamber. Looking to Northern Ireland, has she and her Department fully taken into account the findings of that DFC report and the deep financial uncertainties that it highlighted? What iron-clad guarantees can she offer to ensure that we are not promising billions in theoretical savings, when the reality might mean taking more hard-earned cash from the pockets of local taxpayers and ratepayers? That is what this means, as that is who pays for it all at the end of the day.

We must not allow structural change to become an expensive, box-ticking exercise that leaves hard-working families picking up the tab at a particularly difficult time.

Jess Brown-Fuller: The hon. Gentleman makes an excellent point about local government finances. My constituency currently sits in two different district councils. The Government’s proposals would mean that my residents in Pagham and Bersted will end up in a coastal authority that will be bankrupt on day one; the rest of my constituents will be in an authority that should be on a sound financial footing. What will happen to my residents in Pagham and Bersted? Their council tax bills will go up overnight to manage the debt that is currently held in Adur and Worthing, when their current council is on a sound financial footing. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is an unacceptable position for my residents to be put in, when they did not ask for this?

Jim Shannon: That intervention sums up my comments, and it provides further evidence. When Ards borough council, on which I served for 26 years, was partnered with North Down council, we took on North Down’s debt, while we had been prudent—very Ulster Scottish—and had made sure that our moneys were well managed. That is not a bad reflection on North Down council, but it illustrates the issue. The hon. Lady has illustrated it incredibly well with her comments.

I am all for making efficiencies, but throwing areas together that have little in common, as the hon. Lady just said, and removing the face-to-face contact points, centralising to an inaccessible hub and doing all of that with no savings to show over 10 years must be a warning to all. Sometimes financial projections do not meet the reality. We must all be aware of the myriad difficulties presented. I gave the example of Ards borough council and the changes in Northern Ireland. It did not work for us. Will it work here?

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Colleagues will note the number of Members who are interested in speaking and the time available. I will call the Front Benchers from 10.30 am, so please do the maths.

9.58 am

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O’Brien) on securing this important debate. I place on the record my thanks to Grace Thomas from my office for the notes associated with my speech today.

The Minister was in front of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee yesterday and gave us some strong answers, which is typical of her style.

Today, I want to try a slightly different tack. It is on the record that I am not a fan of unitaries. I was a councillor for many years, at parish, district and county level. I know the strengths and weaknesses associated with that model, and I would argue that it is a lot better and more efficient than unitary authorities. As I said to the Minister yesterday, in my experience, the proposed savings from moving to the unitary model never come to fruition. If it is not broken, why change it? Others have already spoken about the debt levels associated with some authorities. There is an inherent unfairness in taking on someone else's debt and being forced to pay for it.

However, my focus today is volunteers and the voluntary sector. Last week was Volunteers' Week, which provided us with an opportunity to recognise the extraordinary contribution made by volunteers and charities across South West Hertfordshire. To mark the occasion, I visited a number of outstanding community organisations whose work is made possible by the dedication of volunteers and charitable support. Those organisations provide vital services to local residents and strengthen the fabric of our communities, but many of them rely heavily on local government funding streams and commissioning arrangements to sustain their work. For example, the citizens advice bureau in South Oxhey highlighted that the proposals for local government reform have created huge uncertainty, and that there are concerns about how changes will affect its ability to continue supporting the 20,000 clients it assists each year.

When I met the medium-sized charity Community Action Dacorum in Kings Langley, Simon spoke about how it is reliant on commissioned contracts from local authorities to provide support in the community. The charity stressed the importance of MPs' understanding the impact of LGR on the funding and operation of charities, describing it as a

"significant risk to the voluntary and community sector".

Many charities like CAD are concerned that the transition to new unitary structures could disrupt existing commissioning arrangements and funding streams, creating financial instability.

There is also concern about unintended consequences. Charities report increasing pressure to align with Government priorities because of fears that failing to do so could affect future commissioning and funding opportunities. Charities and community organisations should be focused on delivering vital services to local residents, not managing uncertainty over future funding and governance arrangements. The disruption of established funding mechanisms and commissioning structures risks undermining the sustainability of essential local services and the support networks that my communities depend on.

10.1 am

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I preface my remarks by saying that I have a high personal regard for the Minister and I am sure that she would never personally wish to do anything unfair or politically partisan. However, there are very good reasons why, when changes are made to anything to do with constituency arrangements or democratic arrangements, they are normally carried out under the authority of an impartial body. I believe, as I suspect my Conservative colleagues believe, that if a body such as the Boundary Commission had been in charge of this operation, the results would have been very different. A coach and horses has been

driven through anything to do with local, cultural or historical, as well as, shall we say, orientation among communities—all those ideas have been totally disregarded.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) on securing the debate, but I must say to him and to you, Dr Murrison, that we would need a much longer debate if we were to do justice to the enormity of what has been proposed. My hon. Friend laid out the fact that totally inappropriate areas will be subsumed under and swallowed up by the city of Leicester. That is exactly what is happening in the city of Southampton, with the naked land-grab of huge areas of the New Forest East constituency—wards known collectively as the Waterside—coupled with another land-grab of wards from Test Valley borough council that are contained in the Romsey and Southampton North constituency.

I must emphasise that the changes were first proposed long after the general election and were not in Labour's general election manifesto. Labour rightly thought it proper to put in its manifesto the fact that there would be elected mayors and strategic authorities, but the abolition and merging of historic borough councils, district councils and county councils was nowhere flagged up in advance of anybody's vote.

The Government like to trumpet the fact that they are strongly in favour of the devolution of political power and of listening to what local people want. Well, I have some data for the Government. Ever since this outrageous proposition that Southampton should take over vast areas of my constituency—splitting the constituency and the New Forest apart and tearing the Waterside away from the New Forest, which Waterside inhabitants have for hundreds of years viewed as part of their community—an online petition has been gathering signatures. This issue is relatively local to a part of the south of Hampshire, so we might think that, if we were lucky, the petition might get 5,000 or 6,000 signatures. I checked at exactly 10 o'clock this morning and there are 22,812 signatures so far, and I am sure that the total is well over 25,000 with paper signatures taken into account. What sort of issue must there be for 25,000 people in a local area to say that they utterly reject the tearing apart of the New Forest in this way and its takeover by the city of Southampton, which, as we have heard is the case in other scenarios, is in a far worse financial position than the people who live at present under the aegis of New Forest district council are accustomed to being in?

I have many more points that I would like to make, but, out of consideration for my colleagues, I am not going to make them. I will make just one final point. We have tried—we really have—to engage in a sincere way with the Government. When the original Minister, the hon. Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon), wrote to us, he set out what appeared to be reassuring criteria: there would be no unnecessary duplication or fragmentation, and the building blocks of the new unitary authorities would be the areas covered by the existing borough and district councils unless—as an exception—there was a very strong reason for interfering with boundaries. However, the only reasons given have been vague comments about maximising economic prosperity or something, which could be said in justification of any change, no matter how politically outrageous.

[Sir Julian Lewis]

I am sure that if this Minister had full strategic authority—to make a bad pun—over this policy, we would not be experiencing what we are experiencing. There is total outrage about this matter. It needs to be put right, and I hope the Government can be persuaded to think again.

10.7 am

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to see you in the chair, Dr Murrison. I congratulate and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) for securing this important debate.

It was also a pleasure to hear from everybody's honourable friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It is not the first time he has come here and said, "I know that Northern Ireland is not covered by this, Minister, but perhaps our experience can be instructive," but boy was he right today. There are two key questions, and he highlighted the importance of the first: "Why do this at all?" With all the attention it needs, it will take away from other priorities, at a time, in particular, when we are about to have huge changes to the system for special educational needs and disability. There are also the costs involved. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar) said, it is a question that literally no one was asking, and the answer was not in the Labour manifesto.

Even if we accept that there can be reorganisation, we must ask: "On what basis?" In East Hampshire, this plan will break up communities, take away local identities and put people into new artifices. It will take the people of Horndean, Clanfield and Rowlands Castle and put them into a new super-council area centred on Portsmouth, with the rest of East Hampshire going to a vast area called the Mid Hampshire unitary authority, all for an uncertain and quite likely negative return. In plain English, that means that local people will end up paying more.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) mentioned, the Government set out clear criteria for reorganisation, which included a focus on sustainability of high-quality services and a minimum scale of 500,000—that number did not come out of nowhere; it came from a serious piece of work by PricewaterhouseCoopers about the minimum scale needed to deliver services—and, crucially, that the building blocks of the new organisation should be existing districts and boroughs. It was on that basis that local leaders engaged in the process. They were not clamouring for it—leaders in Hampshire were not knocking down the door of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government saying, "Please reorganise us!"—but they engaged in good faith in the process.

Nick Adams-King, the leader of Hampshire county council, set out a summary of conditions for change, including that any new structure must be sustainable financially, operationally and democratically. He said:

"It must be capable of delivering high-quality services"

and

"resilient enough to manage demand in adult social care, children's services and SEND."

Crucially, he said, it must have "a balanced tax base" and "reflect real communities", and

"not create winners and losers by stripping growth, infrastructure and income from area to shore up another."

I do not think I could put it any better than that, but that is not what has happened. There were three different options in Hampshire, with different rationales for them. In theory, the fewer the unitary councils, the bigger the cost savings, but Hampshire county council and my district council in East Hampshire preferred the middle option, which was to have four authorities—a balance between delivering savings and reducing risk.

There has been a big disagreement about the analysis of those different options by different people looking at them. Crucially, we do not know the Government's own analysis of the different options for carving up Hampshire and why they chose the one they did. We do know that, of the different local authorities, two on the mainland are smaller than the 500,000 minimum. Of course, the Isle of Wight is smaller again, although there are unique circumstances there.

We know that there are substantial costs. Although there will be some economies of scale in things moving from district level to unitary level, there will also be diseconomies of scale in things moving from county level to unitary level, and those are the things with the biggest cost pressures in our system. People worry what this will mean for housing. All the local plan work was done on the basis of the existing district councils; now, that will not work. People worry about the loss of local knowledge. Parish councils are concerned about the implications for them.

Crucially, there is the question of identity and cohesion. I already mentioned Horndean, Rowlands Castle and Clanfield being split off into Portsmouth, and this is also a concern, as my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East said, for parts of the New Forest, for Test Valley and for Winchester. The Minister has spoken of how identities grow over time. These are entities that have been in place for at least 50 years, around which other organisations have organised themselves. Charities and other public sector organisations organise themselves around district and borough boundaries, and these changes will inconvenience them.

If the Government insist on proceeding, the process will need time and sober assessment, and for local authorities to come together to find consensus on the way forward. This is not a trivial question; it is about some of the most important things in our lives, such as the care for our ageing mums and dads and for the children with the highest needs and vulnerabilities. It is a long-term decision. This will not have an effect for three or five years; it will have an effect for decades.

We need to start by knowing on what basis the Government made their decision. We cannot very easily argue with it if we do not know what it is. The letter from the 16 council leaders mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) makes a very reasonable ask: that we should know the Department's own analysis and feasibility assessment. I say to the Minister simply: please, show us your workings.

10.12 am

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough,

Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) on bringing this important debate before us today and on the passion with which he spoke. I wish to focus on the one issue that has filled my inbox since the proposal was first announced: the Government's approach to reorganisation in Leicester and Leicestershire.

Reorganisation must be done with the consent of local residents, which is a point that many of my Conservative colleagues have made today. Unfortunately, the Government, who are so enthusiastic about consultation, appear to be unwilling to give the final say to the very people who matter the most—the people who sent us to this place. Some Government Members may believe that change to local government boundaries is small fry, even inconsequential. They should look at our constituents' strength of feeling on this issue. The people of Mid Leicestershire certainly do not believe that it is trivial.

Many constituents from villages such as Birstall tell me that they left Leicester city precisely because they wanted to be part of a village community away from the hustle and bustle of city life. They say they no longer felt safe in a city increasingly associated with crime and decline. They wanted their children to grow up where they could walk safely in the streets and feel part of a close-knit community. They simply do not want to be back within the Leicester city area.

Similarly, residents in Glenfield, and particularly those who live beside the former Western Park golf course, a picturesque and ecologically diverse and rich reserve, fear that the expanded Leicester city council would concrete over it in an attempt to push development still further out into Glenfield's green and pleasant land, rather than repurposing the abundance of brownfield sites already within the existing city council area.

Furthermore, my constituents in Leicester Forest East and Kirby Muxloe tell me that they fear that their rural priorities will simply be overlooked in an urban-focused administration if they are absorbed into the city. Frankly, who can blame them? Perhaps most damaging of all, a constituent from Braunstone Town, who already lives beside the city's boundaries, told me that they had seen at first hand the decline of the city and want nothing to do with it.

My constituents should be under no illusion: I will not accept, under any circumstances, an attempt by the Government to force our beautiful villages into the Leicester city council area. That is why Leicestershire Conservatives, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston mentioned, launched a petition on that matter. Indeed, he and my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns) presented that petition with more than 10,000 signatories from the villages surrounding the Leicester city council area, showing the strength of feeling across our communities.

That is also why I tabled an amendment to the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 to ensure that, before any local government reorganisation takes place, residents must be consulted via referendum. That was not taken up by the Government. I did that because decisions about local government boundaries should be made by local communities, not by Ministers or civil servants in Whitehall who have very little understanding of the character and identities of our local communities.

Let me be absolutely clear: if this Government seek to place any of the villages that I represent under the remit of Leicester city council, I will fight tooth and nail to oppose that. While other parties not here today are silent on the matter, I want my constituents to know that I am on their side on this immensely important issue.

10.16 am

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) on securing this important debate.

Like the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), I served for 26 years as a local councillor, 14 of them were on the former Grimsby borough council. I then served for another 12 years on what became North East Lincolnshire unitary authority. I tend to favour unitary councils on the whole, and I have some sympathy with elected mayors—I can see the value of them in the big cities—but how we balance their powers and look after the interests of provincial towns and larger rural counties is open to debate. I am not yet convinced of the need to have a mayor for a vast rural county such as Lincolnshire.

The Minister will know that the Government, in proposing any form of local government reform, are opening a can of worms of local rivalries—civil war within the Labour party, I am sure, and other issues. The Minister is too young to remember the local government reorganisation of 1973-74; I think I am probably the only one who can remember it but, in many respects, it turned out to be a disaster.

My former Grimsby council was pushed into Humberside county. County Humberside was a complete and utter disaster. The identities north and south of the river are completely different. If Humberside is mentioned on the streets of Grimsby nowadays, the response is—shall we say—not polite, to say no stronger than that. It was a complete and utter disaster. The previous Government tried to create a Humber local enterprise partnership, which failed because it was cross-river. We still have Humberside police and Humberside fire authorities and so on, but even now I would say to leave those well alone.

We all tend to favour devolution because it means that local people are making decisions. That is good but, of course, it leads to a postcode lottery, because different councils will make different decisions. My appeal to the Minister is about local government finance. When I was first elected, way back in 1980, local government was still a really powerful force in the local community and could embark on some very important projects of great benefit; but over the years I have seen the powers and responsibilities whittled away, and local authorities, to a great extent, are tools of central Government. That will always be the case to some degree, because central Government relies on local authorities to deliver many essential services, but local pride and local identity play their part.

I keep talking about Grimsby—I only have one ward of Grimsby in my new constituency, but I am a resident there, and that gives me some right to speak about it. We have had a mayor since 1201, apart from a few months when Grimsby was abolished and we merged into North East Lincolnshire, and we had a chairman.

[*Martin Vickers*]

Thankfully, we got a new royal charter and ended up with a mayor, because local identity is important. People like the mayor turning up in the red robes and chains of office to open the church bazaar and those sorts of things. It creates identity, something that is sadly lacking. If we go into any northern town and look around the central square, we will see vast town halls and great civic buildings, mostly constructed in Victorian and Edwardian times. They knew how to project local identity, power and responsibility, and I would like to see something of a return to that.

My particular plea is on the financial basis of local authorities. Many are in debt, and unless local government reorganisation is linked to reform of local government finance, we are in desperate straits. Many authorities have already issued section 114 notices, and others are teetering on the edge. As the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), who is no longer in her place, mentioned earlier, many of the new authorities do not have a financial foundation on which to build. We urgently need local government finance reform. The poll tax—community charge—from the 1980s now frightens us. It was a mistake, but the fear of reorganising the finances lingers on. Unless there is a firm financial foundation, new authorities, as well as some of the existing ones, will flounder.

North Lincolnshire council has an excellent Conservative-run administration. North East Lincolnshire council sadly now has a Reform leader, but that is hopefully only temporary. My plea to the Minister is this: “Please leave Lincolnshire as it is for the moment and look at the finance of local authorities.”

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Last but by no means least, I call Lewis Cocking.

10.23 am

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. May I congratulate you on the 25th anniversary of your election to this House, which happened a few days ago? I also congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O’Brien) on securing this important debate.

For the past few months, I have worked closely with the local election candidates in my constituency, and I am pleased to say that their hard work paid off: they were elected on to Broxbourne district council and it remained under Conservative control, with no change to our majority. During that campaign, I spoke to hundreds of local residents, and not one person said to me that they wanted to see Broxbourne council abolished. If they were aware of the Government’s plans to do just that and force us into a large unitary authority stretching 40 miles from top to bottom, they wanted to know what I was doing to stop it.

I suspect that when the Minister replies to the debate, we will be told that local councils were knocking down the door of MHCLG, saying, “We want to reorganise. We want to go into large unitary councils.” Well, I have seen the letter that the Government sent to my council, and councils had no alternative but to reply to that letter. This is forced local government reorganisation, no matter what people say.

The people of Broxbourne instinctively understand what Ministers continue to deny: that large councils are remote from the people they serve, with decision makers naturally less concerned about towns and villages that they have no connection to. Moreover, the big new authorities will cost towns and villages money, not save it. There will be no savings from reorganisation. I am yet to see any evidence that unitary councils provide better government than the two-tier system that we have in place. I am yet to see those councils that have been through reorganisation—whether North Yorkshire or Somerset—come forward and say, “D’you know what? We’re awash with cash. We’ve got so much money now that we’ve saved so much through reorganisation.” I have not seen that.

In fact, when Somerset council went through reorganisation to become a single, large unitary council that the Government accepted, it increased council tax by 10%. There were no savings. If the Government are hellbent on doing this and want to move forward with it, they should show us the evidence that that type of council serves its residents the best, is cheaper and provides better services.

Last year we learned that the Department did not even carry out its own cost analysis of the reorganisation. Do not get me wrong—Broxbourne council is not perfect, nor is any district council—but, given its reasonable size and proximity to residents it at least has a chance to make a positive difference, if run well. It is no secret why Broxbourne residents voted to keep the council the same, as they do year after year. Council tax is lower than anywhere else, while services such as waste collection and leisure centres are run better than in neighbouring councils that charge more council tax. We all know that, when reorganisation comes, the new authority will provide the bare minimum in services and hit residents with the highest rates that it can get away with. From day one residents in the new authority, which my constituents will be forced into, will pay more in council tax but get less back. For those reasons, I fundamentally oppose the reorganisation.

The process we have seen so far should also make us doubt the Government’s ability to achieve what they have promised. As already mentioned, just last week the County Councils Network sent a damning letter to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State, pointing out that the top-down imposition of local government reorganisation, as we have seen in Sussex, goes against the wishes of local councils without the evidence to back it up.

Many right hon. and hon. Members have made this point, but I too say, “Please show us the evidence. Show us where big unitary councils cost less and deliver better for residents, then we can at least understand and argue about the nuances of what the Government want to achieve.” It is difficult to do that when I have sat in a number of debates on this issue—I was on the Bill Committee for the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026—and not seen one shred of evidence that the new authorities will deliver better services and charge less in council tax. The majority of councils in Hertfordshire, including Broxbourne, support the proposal to create four unitary councils, rather than two or three, as they know that councils operating as close to the people as possible serve their residents better.

When it comes to making future decisions on reorganisation—and let me be crystal clear for the avoidance of doubt, though it will be no surprise to the Minister, I do not want any local government reorganisation in Hertfordshire—I hope that the Department will listen to what councils are saying and act on that. I urge the Minister, as I do every time in such debates, “Please review the policy, please make sure that future decisions are made with our constituents in mind and please ensure that whatever system is forced upon us will deliver outstanding local services and cheaper council tax.”

10.28 am

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O’Brien) for securing this important debate. It is obvious that LGR is the Government running before they can walk. On so many issues, we Liberal Democrats push the Government to go further and faster—but not on this. Even McLaren, from my constituency, would think that the Government are going too fast and too furious.

Local government reorganisation has charged ahead without listening to councils and while ignoring residents. A layer of our local democracy is being removed and silenced. It very much feels as if Labour is reorganising local government for the sake of it, without rhyme or reason. Severe funding pressures are pushing local services to the brink. Vulnerable children, the elderly and the safety of our roads are suffering because of years of Conservative mismanagement and neglect, but rebranding and changing the face of the problem does not affect the way that something works—or, more importantly, the way it does not work. The Liberal Democrats believe that we need to fix our public services first and involve local people before we even think about redrawing lines on the map.

Of course, we still do not know why the Government have chosen to push ahead with LGR. Organisations, whether charities or businesses, always have a fully costed business case; they do not change the way they do things without one. I sit on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, and it was clear from yesterday’s meeting that the Labour Government simply have not outlined their business case.

What we have here is an overly ambitious plan to reform all local government by 2028. There seem to be no reason other than creating “efficiencies”. In the meeting yesterday, when I asked the Minister how much money reorganisation would save, she said, “It is challenging to answer that question,” and, “Unitary councils tend to be more effective. I can’t give a direct answer.” I was surprised to hear that. That was the answer for a flagship Labour policy that would involve the largest change to local government for over half a century.

Lewis Cocking: I, too, sit on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the reason the Government are struggling to answer that question is that local government reorganisation will not save a single penny?

Mr Forster: We missed the hon. Gentleman at yesterday’s meeting. I agree; I fear that it will not save any money. The lack of evidence and a business case is a concern

for me and the Liberal Democrats, and we expressed that at the Committee yesterday. I am sure he will be able to do the same next week when he joins us.

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): Would the hon. Gentleman like to continue with the rest of what I said?

Mr Forster: I can do, but obviously I am going to pass over to the Minister in a bit.

If there are to be such monumental changes to the way we operate and run our society, we need to consult local people. Repeatedly, through this entire process, local views have been disregarded. Back in April, hundreds of people staged a protest against plans that would split the New Forest area into two mega-councils, as has already been referred to. More than 13,000 unhappy residents signed a petition calling for New Forest district council to take legal advice and pursue a judicial review. Local government reorganisation should be driven by councils and local areas, not dictated to by London. We are told that LGR is about efficiency and a fresh start, but the reality on the ground looks like absolute chaos. If anything, it is a setback.

We need look no further than Woking. Surrey county council was planning to make Arnold Road and Eve Road in Maybury safer and nicer, but the scheme has been kicked into the long grass and the council will not engage with me or the local residents it consulted about the plans. It has been palmed off on West Surrey council, which is being created next year. That is shocking. The situation is a prime example of how local government plans are grinding to a halt. Essential infrastructure is on pause as Ministers and civil servants reshuffle the system. LGR is causing delays and frustrating the lives of local people, who should not have to watch their community services decline while councils try to guess the future. That is all happening with no leadership or direction from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

The issues are rife elsewhere too. Shropshire council spends 80% of its budget on social care. It is a prime example of the financial pressure facing local services. Alongside underfunding, it has also had its funding cut. Care for the elderly is such a huge burden, because 25% of its population is over 65, and the lack of transport and other local services makes the provision of social care even harder.

The Government’s LGR is making it more difficult for areas to build homes, as councils are having to concentrate on LGR rather than the national housing crisis. My local authority, Wokingham borough council, has just started to draft a new local plan where local people get to decide where we build the homes we need. But next year it will be abolished. Labour’s manifesto pledged to build 1.5 million homes. Now it is making it more difficult for local areas to build and risk renegeing on that manifesto promise.

Alongside the local plan, since coming to power in Woking, the Liberal Democrats have been trying to fix the mess left by others. Last year I helped secure a £500 million debt write-off from Woking’s debt that we inherited from the Conservatives.

Damian Hinds: Half a billion pounds?

Mr Forster: Half a billion pounds. We have had that debt write-off and we have also had exceptional financial support—known as EFS. The lack of understanding of that issue was apparent in yesterday's Select Committee. The Minister says that they want to get through the fair funding review so that they have a better idea of what money local councils need, to fully enable local authorities to have multi-year funding settlements. I am fine with that, but it does not get rid of the need for cash and being aware of the lack of it. Referring to my earlier point that the Minister did not know how much money could be saved from reorganisation, it has already been mentioned by the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) that the Government do not have an assessment of how much this will save. That is not acceptable.

Councils need money, but we cannot put the money we save from local government reform back into services if we do not know how much will be saved in the first place. Councils have not been properly supported for the transition and, try as they may, they are without leadership from London, mainly because, as the Minister says, Labour is not in full possession of the information that it needs to make a success of it.

In Surrey we are the canary in the coalmine. The elderly, vulnerable and children are already suffering and Surrey county council is refusing requests under the guise of LGR. The whole system is breaking. The Minister and Government are making all this effort with these changes, yet are not actually addressing the problem. Ministers do not know how much to invest or what the savings will be. That is not solving a problem; it is creating new ones.

I understand that they have their work cut out—it is a big job and it is never easy. However, in that discussion yesterday, there are critical questions that needed answers. Looking ahead, addressing those challenges will be essential for anyone hoping to secure a role under Andy Burnham. If the Mayor of Greater Manchester becomes Prime Minister, he will be looking for a Local Government Minister who can answer these questions. I was disappointed with the Minister's answers yesterday, but we still do not have an answer on how much money local government reorganisation will save, or why the Government have bulldozed through local democracy. I wonder if the Minister will tell Parliament the answers to those questions right now.

10.37 am

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I also share my congratulations with my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) on securing today's debate. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) on his appointment as a Parliamentary Private Secretary in the Department. We all know that he has been a champion for local government and we all recognise that his constituents—like mine—benefited from an enormous vote of confidence in their local Conservative council at the recent elections. I am sure that he will be once again sharing the insights of benefiting from that in his role at the Department.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers), my right hon. Friends the Members for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar), my hon. Friends the Members

for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking), for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston and for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford), my right hon. Friends the Members for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), my hon. Friends the Members for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) and for South West Hertfordshire (Mr Mohindra) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) all shared valuable insights about the impact that the local government reorganisation process is having on the communities that they represent. A lot of those frustrations reflect the simple fact that at the start of this process, the Government—perhaps because it was not in their manifesto—did not ask what, in their view, local government is for.

Essentially, this is an instruction to do what is being done at the moment, but a bit less of it, at lower quality and at a higher rate of tax. That is certainly something borne out in the local government reorganisations in places like Somerset, which a number of Members used as a reference point for the concerns that their constituents have.

As a country we already have the fewest elected representatives for our constituents of any major democracy. Our constituents have less elected representation in the decisions that affect their lives than their counterparts in the United States, France, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Yet we have a Government bent on a path of reducing that local democratic voice even further.

Just last week the Government announced that, in a planning system where 98% of decisions are already made under delegated powers, even fewer of those decisions will hear the community's voice, whether local councillors, planning committees or a public forum where people can express concerns—as Members have proudly expressed today—about the impact on towns of overspill and concreting over green spaces. They will further lose the opportunity to share those concerns.

That is based on a policy that is underpinned by no independent financial analysis. My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire referred to the PricewaterhouseCoopers report commissioned by the County Councils Network to support its case for county-based devolution. That was an entirely reasonable exercise to undertake. One would expect that central Government would then say, "If that is the case being made by one side, let's see what the case is for unitarisation, for district-based and for reorganisation along some other lines." None of that has happened, which is perhaps why there is a high level of concern in places such as Leicestershire that the impact will be higher taxes, poorer quality of services and less ability for local people to share their concerns.

In a moment I will put specific questions that I know the Minister will want to consider, but let us reflect on where we are. The streets of Belfast are on fire and last week there was a massive rise in community tension in Southampton. Last year, my local authority of Hillingdon had to deal with a murder on the street of a local individual walking his dog, by an asylum seeker housed in the local area. The ability of credible local leadership to respond to those challenges is critical at such moments. We are all learning the significance of that.

This is not purely about the administrative convenience of Whitehall. This is not, in the words of a former Local Government Minister, about councils as a delivery mechanism for central Government policy. It is about

the leaders of those communities and neighbourhoods having a powerful and credible voice locally and the ability genuinely to affect the decisions that make a difference in that area. By failing to ask what local councils are for, the Government are setting up the new authorities to fail.

As a number of Members highlighted, housing is one of the most obvious examples. The Government have set a target of 1.5 million new homes to be delivered over the course of the Parliament. Those 1.5 million new homes already have planning permission. Local authorities have been granting those consents over many years. In Broxbourne, Leicester and South West Hertfordshire there are sites ready to go. They have been designed, laid out, and discussions have been had with utility companies. Yet the economic conditions created by the Government mean that that development is simply not happening.

Rather than addressing those economic conditions, the focus is on removing a bit more local democracy from the planning system. That risks a situation, highlighted by the impact of the expansion of Leicester and Southampton, where many treasured green fields will have planning permission for unbuilt homes, while old mills in city centres remain undeveloped. That is due to a failure of leadership by a local Labour city mayor and a Government not creating the economic conditions for housing development to happen. When there are so many challenges, to which local government delivering on average 800 different services to local residents could be the answer, whether in public health, education, housing, transport and the environment, the fact that we have what is essentially a reductive exercise about how can we do this, but a bit worse at a higher cost, is simply not the answer.

I will conclude with these questions. At the heart of much of this debate has been the fact that elections were promised and cancelled, and mayors committed to and their elections deferred. It would certainly help us all to understand the decision making in the Department if the Government were willing to release the correspondence between the Secretary of State and the local authorities about the cancellation of elections. That has been the subject of freedom of information requests and questions in the House. The Minister, who I know is committed to local democracy, will understand that it would build confidence if the Government were willing to share how the Secretary of State gave local government leaders a steer in that controversial process.

Secondly, will the Minister commit to a full and independent financial analysis of the impact of the reorganisation process? That analysis should not simply rely on something written specifically to support reorganisation, but should be independent and say what is in the interests of the whole country. Will she tell us why it is not appropriate, in her view, for local residents to have a say at any point in the process? There will be debate about whether this is a matter for referendum, local election or mayoral election—there are various ways for it to happen—but a number of Members have shared the sense of frustration felt by local people about the absence of a route by which they can have their say.

Sir Julian Lewis: There is one point that I should perhaps have mentioned to emphasise how united the community is. When I wrote initially to the Minister's

predecessor, the letter was co-signed by the leaders not just of the Conservative group on New Forest district council, but of the Lib Dem group, the independent group and the Green group. When there was a vote on supporting the New Forest Together campaign, every single member, including the sole Labour member of New Forest district council, voted in favour. This is a unified community howl of protest against what is being imposed on us.

David Simmonds: My experience, unlike that of my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham, does not go as far back as the Redcliffe-Maud report, but what has been described over the years, as we have just heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East, is people's frustration about things being done to rather than with them. This is not about local community leadership growing up from those neighbourhoods; it is about administrative convenience in Whitehall.

I will finish with a question at the heart of building a sense of community confidence. Residents in Leicestershire and Hampshire feel that this is about enabling cities to dump their housing targets—which they have failed to achieve within their own boundaries—in the neighbouring area. We have seen that issue around the fringes of London, historically in south-west Hertfordshire in places such as St Albans. That has been the subject of legal action and Government intervention in the past. We need absolute transparency from the outset.

What do the Government want the new councils to do? When they go to the ballot box, and when they engage in consultation and talk to their Members of Parliament, residents need to know that the new councils will exercise the functions that they are there for, and they need to know what it will cost them and what it will mean for their neighbourhood. It is not too late for the Government to pause the process, listen to the concerns that have been expressed powerfully today, including by the Minister's own Back Benchers, and look at how lessons can be learned, so that we have a local government system fit for the future.

10.49 am

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): It is, as ever, a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison, and I add my own congratulations on your important anniversary. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien) for securing this debate on local government reorganisation. I know that he has strongly held views on the future of his constituency, as we have heard today. For reasons of time, I will not repeat the names of all those who have spoken, but it has been a joy to hear so many Members describe their communities.

I say to all Members that I know we disagree on this topic. The point of this House is disagreement, so our disagreement is not only expected but welcome. However, someone listening to hon. Members might think, "There is no problem in local government and everything is okay—if only we were not proceeding with local government reorganisation!" I simply say to Members that the problems in local government, particularly those related to finance, have arisen because of the age of our population, the burden on local government in

[*Alison McGovern*]

adult social care and other things, and a suite of failing policy areas, including special educational needs and disabilities, homelessness, adult social care and children's care, which have meant that local government has carried the can for policy failure in this place. It now falls to those of us in this House to try to put that right.

Lewis Cocking: Will the Minister give way?

Alison McGovern: I will make some progress.

The hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) mentioned £0.5 billion of debt write-off for his community. The words he was looking for were, "Thank you". He is perfectly at liberty to quote me selectively, as is any Member of the House, but selectively quoting a Minister is not an argument—it is not a case to be made. This Government put £5.6 billion of grant funding into local government at the spending review. We have committed £4 billion to SEND as part of the White Paper. We are investing in local government to try to get it out of this situation.

As I did yesterday, let me repeat what I have said before to the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds): although the Department's analysis of the finances of this change is important, given the high and spiking costs that local government currently faces, the priority must be to deal with those cases. I challenge anyone to come up with a perfect cost-benefit analysis in this environment. That is what I said yesterday, and I repeat it again for clarification.

That said, I will do as a number of colleagues have asked by setting out why we are ending the two-tier system of local government. In two-tier areas, services and functions are split across county and district councils. That slows down decisions as different councils try to agree, and it leads to fragmented public services, meaning that it is unclear who does what and who is responsible. In Leicestershire, the area of the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston, the county council reported that 140,000 people called the wrong council when trying to get help and support.

The Government are committed to local government reorganisation, for clarity and other reasons that I will set out, and to the timetable that we have set out. We want stronger local councils, equipped to work with strong mayors and strategic authorities, for the purposes of economic growth, improved public services and empowered communities. That is the point of reorganisation: councils that match the real economic footprint of our cities and towns, rather than lines drawn on a map 50 years ago.

I might not have been alive in 1974, but I was born in 1980 into the relatively newly created area of the Wirral. At the time, it was part of the county of Merseyside. We subsequently became part of the Liverpool city region. Of course, administrative boundaries change, as Members know, but the identity of the place I am from—the village of Bebington, where I was born in hospital, and the village of Bromborough—is still as strong as it ever was, and we take part in the Liverpool city region with all the benefits that it brings.

Edward Argar: Will the Minister give way?

Alison McGovern: I am short of time, but I will give way.

Edward Argar: Can the Minister confirm that only the three proposals for Leicestershire—from the boroughs and districts, the county and the city—will be considered, and that no new fourth proposal that has not been put forward locally will emerge from officials?

Alison McGovern: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's question, but I cannot respond directly on Leicestershire because the decision has not yet been taken. To clarify, the Secretary of State can modify submissions or reject them entirely, and he can invite proposals for councils, which is what we have done, but he does not have the power to draw up completely new proposals from scratch. I am happy to engage with the right hon. Gentleman to make that absolutely clear, but that is the position.

Local government can help councils to play a much clearer and stronger role in building our economy and ensuring that everywhere and everyone is part of our national growth story. Reorganisation will speed up house building, get vital infrastructure projects moving and attract new investment. It also has social and public services benefits. Most of the Government's key objectives, whether to get more young people into work or lift children out of poverty, rely on co-operation and integration between our public services. I have heard from hon. Members about how the split in the two-tier system is preventing their councils from working together on homelessness, for example. That is why we want to bring services such as housing, public health and social care under one roof, with one council able to see the full picture and spot problems early—for example, supporting a family in need of housing and then supporting the children to stay in school.

I am pleased with our progress so far. Decisions on councils for five areas have been announced and elections have been held for the new councils in Surrey. On the Leicestershire council areas of the hon. Member for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston, we remain on course to announce decisions before the summer recess in July. We are on track for the councils to go live in April 2028, as planned. That applies to all areas awaiting an announcement.

I listened to the debate with interest, as I always do. Members have put their views on local government reorganisation in their areas on the record, and I will try to answer their questions, but I am conscious that I have little time, so I ask them to bear with me.

The shadow Minister asked about local consultation and listening to people. We do that. Members should consider this debate to be part of the consultation process; I will ensure that the Department is aware of their concerns. The shadow Minister also asked about considering the interests of the whole country. He will know that the previous Conservative Administration introduced the Office for Budget Responsibility for the purposes of transparency on related matters. We take decisions based on the evidence in front of us. He will also know how advice given to Ministers in that way is treated by all Governments for the purposes of FOI and other things.

Hon. Members were keen to ensure that their constituents have the opportunity to participate in the consultation. I reassure them that decisions on the appropriate option

for each area will be judgments in the round, having regard to the criteria and the statutory guidance.

Some hon. Members made a point about bigger being better. There are good councils of various sizes, and the evidence we have is that the primary factors in council failure are governance, leadership and culture. It is not the case that bigger is always better; councils of various sizes can perform well or less well.

We are confident that the decisions we announced before the Easter recess will enable strong, sustainable local government that is connected to the community it serves. I accept that reasonable people can and will disagree on our decisions; I also recognise the work that is now required to ensure that the transition to new councils is done safely, especially in those key social care services on which some of our constituents rely. I reassure hon. Members that the Department is working very hard, in lockstep with councils, to ensure that the transition goes well.

I will have to leave it there, but I know that hon. Members will be in touch with me directly on further issues.

11 am

Neil O'Brien: Thank you for your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. The irony of all this is that the Minister's only argument is that we must avoid a two-tier system, but what the Government want is to replace one two-tier system with a completely different two-tier system that has a mayor and unitary authority. It is an exercise in the utmost futility.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Child Contact Arrangements

11.1 am

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): I will call Alison Hume to move the motion; I will then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they may make a speech only with prior permission from the Member in charge of the debate and from the Minister.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered children in child contact arrangements.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison, and to lead a debate on putting children first in child contact arrangements, an issue that is of great importance to me, to my constituents and to other Members of this House.

When parents have separated and children are involved, they often turn to the family court. Family courts are at the centre of a child's right to safe family arrangements. However, so many are not functioning in the child's best interests. Allegations of domestic abuse are estimated to occur in up to 62% of private law cases under the Children Act 1989 in family courts in England and Wales, and counterclaims of parental alienation are increasingly being made in response to allegations of abuse.

So-called parental alienation syndrome is when one parent undermines or destroys the child's relationship to the other parent through a pattern of manipulative behaviour. It is a pseudoscientific concept with no basis in law or medicine. However, accusations of parental alienation have been made on multiple occasions by unregulated experts appointed to assess the family and provide recommendations to the court.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate on a very complex issue. There were elements of the Courts and Tribunals Bill that were impossible to support, but it also sought to address the issue of a child's consent in contact arrangements and, importantly, the need for the child's opinion to be a consideration that is given weight. Does she agree that the child's desires must be considered, not simply overlooked, and that the Government must make these changes outside the Bill if it falls?

Alison Hume: I completely agree that the child's voice must be heard and is too often overlooked.

Some of these so-called experts lack proper qualifications and are not regulated by the Health and Care Professions Council. Changes proposed in 2025 to address the issue of unregulated psychologists have been criticised as too weak and do not affect experts who are registered with the HCPC. HCPC regulation is also limited, with complaints taking up to seven years, during which experts can continue to practise. The proposed changes will not do anything to address parental alienation experts who are successfully registered and regulated. I am concerned that if any reviews or reform focus only on unregulated experts, all that will do is drive more business into the hands and pockets of experts.

If parents do file a complaint, that in itself can be used as evidence against the parent alleged to be practising parental alienation, as proof that they are entrenched and unable to accept professional opinions that do not align with theirs.

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to the House and for mentioning the so-called experts. We know that accusations of so-called parental alienation are too often used against mothers who are trying to protect their children, but because so few family law cases are publicly available, we do not know the true extent of the problem. The campaigns led by Right to Equality, Women's Aid and Hague Mothers are important, but does my hon. Friend agree that when a mother says, "My child is not safe," the court should hear her and believe her rather than using the guise of parental alienation to dismiss her?

Alison Hume: I thank my hon. Friend for her work on the issue. I completely agree that unfortunately we are seeing far, far too many mothers who are disbelieved and have had their children removed from them without any basis for doing so at all. Lives are being destroyed.

If a parent complains, there is a very significant risk that that will be used against them. Ultimately, it should not matter whether an expert is regulated or unregulated if regulated and unregulated experts both rely on the same harmful pseudoscience and inflict equally devastating consequences, particularly on mothers and their children. The advice provided by experts can have a significant influence on the judge's decision about child contact arrangements: the Ministry of Justice's 2020 harm report highlighted the fact that allegations of parental alienation are often accepted by the family court without robust scrutiny. Evidence from survivors continues to show that counter-allegations of parental alienation are taken more seriously than those of domestic abuse. In many cases, claims of alienation can lead to the child being removed from the survivor parent, despite existing evidence of abuse. A constituent of mine had her children removed in an alienation case when the theory was introduced after she alleged domestic abuse.

The non-profit Right to Equality has conducted a large-scale survey of mothers whose children were removed from their care in private law proceedings. The survey reveals concerning patterns around child removal, including the role of parental alienation allegations, limited fact-finding on abuse and the influence of expert recommendations. In total, the 217 mothers had 342 children removed from their care. That is quite clearly not in the best interests of those children and is deeply traumatic for their mothers.

I have heard countless seriously concerning stories about children put into high-risk arrangements by the family court. Julia Margo, the co-founder of the charity Fair Hearing, with which I have been working closely, had a traumatic experience with the family justice system. After discovering that her former partner had been convicted of child sexual abuse, she endured years of legal battles, during which he took her to court 37 times demanding access to their children. Meanwhile, she felt dismissed and disbelieved by the system. She said that the court seemed more concerned about the risk of parental alienation than about the safety of her sons being left alone with a paedophile.

In another case, a child was taken away from her mother without warning at 10 years old. That day, a social worker came to the house and told her that she had half an hour to pack her things. The child recalled:

"I stuffed my favourite outfit in a bag—this blue shirt and leggings—along with a photo of me and mum. And then I got this bunny, my favourite soft toy, and I left it on her bed. It is what mum would do for me if she ever had to go away."

The young girl later discovered that that simple goodbye had been used to criticise her mother, who had been her main carer since her parents had separated two years earlier. She said:

"The social worker said to my mum that no child should be worried about their parent's feelings, and it was a sign of abuse."

At 12 years old, the child wrote to the president of the family division, England's most senior family judge, seeking the representation that she was previously denied. A district judge had found abuse from her father and found that her mother harboured a great deal of anger against him. A consultant psychiatrist, Dr Mark Berelowitz, was then brought into the case and claimed that the reason she was opposed to seeing her father was that she had been subjected to her mother's

"unresolved angry feelings about the breakdown of their relationship."

The judge then ordered that the child should move to live with her father, as her mother was not giving her emotional permission to enjoy a relationship with her father.

It is clear that in this case, as in so many others, parental alienation allegations represented the complete disregard of a child's wishes during the court process. In the child's words:

"I was removed from my mother's care within hours of a court order being made...I spent the ensuing five years faced with professional after professional who refused to believe me. They said I was repeating my mother's words and that, despite findings of domestic abuse, it was better to have a relationship with the person who frightened me."

Parental alienation is a harmful ideology that profoundly impacts children. However, there are signs that the winds of change may now be moving through the family courts. In February this year, the president of the family division handed down a landmark judgment dismissing findings of so-called alienation against the mother. She had been prohibited from seeing her children for five years after alleging abuse in private family law proceedings. Lawyers have since characterised the initial ruling as draconian and extraordinary.

In December 2019, the court ordered that the children, who were then aged nine and 12, be removed, and it granted the father sole custody. The evidence was given by an unregulated psychologist, Melanie Gill. In overturning court findings informed by Gill's reports, the president of the family division's ruling could open the door for other families assessed by Gill, who has acted as an expert witness in up to 200 cases. Guidance published by the Family Justice Council in December 2024 says that experts should not be appointed to look for alienation; instead, judges should take a factual approach to identifying specific alienating behaviours. It was this new information that enabled the mother to bring her case back to court.

In a historic part of the judgment, the president of the family division has recognised the significant barriers that mothers face when seeking to appeal and has asked the Family Justice Council to consider an alternative procedural approach proposed by the legal team representing the mother and her son. I urge the Family Justice Council to consider that proposal as a matter of urgency, so that children and their parents who have been wrongfully separated because of pseudoscientific claims can finally have their cases reviewed.

However, there is still more work to be done. Hundreds of children and mothers have been wrongfully separated by family courts in England and Wales. This is a matter of national shame. Although the 2024 guidance and recent judgment from Sir Andrew McFarlane are clear and consistent, there is a risk that by themselves they will not be able to prevent the underlying error. As a route to justice, such judgments depend on the protective parent securing legal representation, identifying the procedural defect and bringing a part 18 application to set aside, years after the original order.

As I have mentioned, the president of the family division himself has acknowledged that mothers in this position face significant barriers to appeal. That is why I have been working on an amendment to the Courts and Tribunals Bill; I am grateful to Baroness Levitt KC, the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, for the time she has taken to discuss it with me. Through the amendment, I propose to introduce a statutory presumption operating at the front end of proceedings, before findings of fact are made and before residence is disturbed. That would effectively prevent harm, rather than relying on a remedial route that few will successfully be able to navigate. We need to ensure that the family justice system is reformed so that the voice of the child is always put at the centre of proceedings, and so that allegations of alienation never take precedence over allegations of abuse.

I welcome the fact that, thanks to timeless campaigning by the indomitable Claire Throssell and by my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball) the Courts and Tribunals Bill will repeal the presumption of parental involvement set out in the Children Act 1989. This is a long-overdue correction to the pro-contact culture identified in the 2020 harm report and will address what the court must presume about contact in general. I also welcome the Government's rolling out of child-focused courts nationally, which will put children at the centre of proceedings and resolve cases quicker.

An important question remains unaddressed, however: when a child resists or refuses contact with a parent against whom abuse is alleged, what weight should the court give to that response as evidence? That gap is currently doing significant harm. Too often, in current practice, the answer has been to reframe that resistance as the product of so-called alienating behaviour by the protected parent. Doing so risks reinterpreting the child's voice not as a possible indicator of harm, but as evidence of manipulation.

I am also aware of cases in which a child discloses abuse by their father, particularly child sexual abuse, and those disclosures are then used as evidence of alienation against their mother, meaning that when a child makes a disclosure it can work against the mother, who risks losing the child. My simple amendment would effectively prevent the use of counterclaims of alienation to undermine or distract from allegations of domestic abuse, and would ensure that the child's evidence has the weight that it deserves.

Does the Minister agree that for many of the hundreds of children and mothers who have been forcibly separated, the route to justice through appeal is hard to access? Does she agree that further reform is urgently needed to ensure that children's voices carry the evidential weight that they should carry in family court proceedings? Does she support strengthening the Courts and Tribunals

Bill further so that if a child has experienced or witnessed abuse, the child's not wanting to see the perpetrator is first assumed to be a reasonable reaction in the family courts?

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): I completely endorse the hon. Lady's calls. I have talked about how we need reform to the family courts. Will she support my calls for the Government to support family contact centres? In my constituency, the Woking Family Contact Centre has been run by volunteers for 25 years, which is an amazing achievement. We need to ensure that children are well supported after a traumatic incident. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government need to do much more to support family contact centres?

Alison Hume: I have raised with Baroness Levitt not only the lack of access to child contact centres but the cost of access. It appears that many of them are unregulated, so I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that issue.

To conclude, everybody wants to see the family justice system evolve to better recognise children's lived experiences, support safer and more effective participation, and make decisions that promote long-term recovery and healthy outcomes. I ask the Government to seize the opportunity presented by the Courts and Tribunals Bill to totally discredit the use of experts who subscribe to parental alienation and to enshrine the rights of the child in law, to ensure that those speaking their truth are properly heard.

11.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Catherine Atkinson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) and commend her for securing such an important debate.

I want to start by reflecting on the stories that she shared—stories of children feeling unheard and of families in anguish. No one could listen to them and fail to be moved. As a mum, I find them really difficult to hear, but people do not need to be parents to understand the pain that they describe. Anyone who cares about children, their safety, their wellbeing and future, as all of us here do, will recognise the profound responsibility carried when decisions are made about their lives. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her determination and persistence in bringing these issues to light.

I know from my hon. Friend's previous speeches in the main Chamber, as well as from the meetings she has held with my colleague Baroness Levitt, just how deeply she cares about ensuring that children's voices are not lost in family court proceedings. She is right; no one could disagree that children must be at the heart of any decision that the court makes about contact, or indeed any decision that has a profound impact on their lives. Whenever we seek to reform the family justice system, it is these children we work for. It is their welfare, experiences and futures that matter. They are who I have in mind when I speak today.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby spoke powerfully about the work she is doing in the context of the Courts and Tribunals Bill and the need for children's voices to be heard and believed when they say that they have experienced abuse. The question is, are we listening when a child tells us that something is wrong?

[Catherine Atkinson]

The family courts often deal with the most complex, painful and emotionally charged circumstances imaginable. Throughout those proceedings, the child's welfare must be the guiding principle. I assure my hon. Friend that that is precisely the approach enshrined in section 1 of the Children Act 1989, which makes it clear that the child's welfare will be the court's paramount consideration when the court is making a decision about the upbringing of a child. It is also why the welfare checklist set out in section 1(3) of that Act requires the court to consider, among other things, the clear wishes and feelings of the child concerned. Those requirements reflect a fundamental belief that children are not bystanders; they are individuals with experiences, views and voices that matter.

My hon. Friend also raised the issue of so-called parental alienation—I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle), who also raised that issue. I reiterate the Government's position clearly: we do not recognise parental alienation syndrome. We do not believe that it can be diagnosed.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): It is true that the Government do not recognise parental alienation and the syndrome, but courts too often do. In fact, a report released just yesterday by the campaign group Right to Equality that analysed language used in family court judgments found that over 70% of those judgments used victim-blaming language. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to open up the Judicial College to some scrutiny if those are the kinds of judges that it is producing?

Catherine Atkinson: I was discussing that report with Baroness Levitt yesterday, so it is one that I am conscious of and one that we will be looking at.

The Family Justice Council has published guidance to assist courts in handling cases of this nature. Importantly, the guidance recognises that there can be entirely justified reasons why a child might fear or reject contact with a parent. Those reasons can include domestic abuse, a parent's limited involvement in the child's life and poor parenting. The guidance is explicit that where findings of domestic abuse are made, a child's rejection is a justified response to that abuse. That behaviour should not be characterised as alienating behaviour. That is incredibly important because children who have experienced abuse have already shown extraordinary courage in speaking about what has happened to them.

The justice system must be capable of hearing those voices fairly and with compassion. Taken together, the legislation and the Family Justice Council's guidance are clear: children's voices must always be central in those cases. I also acknowledge the important point made by the hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster), as well as the fantastic work that contact centres undertake. That work is so important to the relationships of parents and their children and wider family relationships as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby also raised the experiences of families who believe that they have been wrongly separated from their children following allegations of so-called parental alienation, and their difficulties in accessing an appeal. As I have said, she is absolutely right to highlight those

cases, and the families affected have my deepest sympathies. The human reality of that is of a parent and child being torn apart, and a family living with uncertainty, grief and deep distress, with seemingly no straightforward means of resolution.

That is why I welcome the important work being undertaken by the Family Justice Council at the invitation of the former president of the family division to consider whether an alternative and more appropriate procedural approach is needed in cases where unregulated parental alienation experts have been instructed. Although it would not be appropriate for the Government to pre-empt the outcome of that work, I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby that we recognise the importance of the concerns and are closely monitoring the work as it progresses.

My hon. Friend also raised an important question: what more can we do to ensure that children's voices carry weight in family courts? That is the most important question for our system to consider, and it is right that we continue to ask it. I assure her that there are already encouraging signs of progress. In March, the president of the family division released a toolkit to guide judges on how to write to children so that they better understand the decisions that affect their lives. The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service and CAFCASS Cymru continue to strengthen the way that their staff engage with children. The Family Justice Board brings the voices of children into the heart of the Government's work in this area by including representatives of the Family Justice Young People's Board in its meetings. That means that those responsible for driving improvement in the system hear directly from children and young people, but we know that there is more to do.

My hon. Friend rightly highlighted the child-focused model. Following a highly successful pilot, we are rolling that model out nationally over the next three years. It is a significant change in approach. Too often family proceedings become focused on the conflict between parents—between adults. The child-focused model centres on the needs and views of children at the start of every case through the introduction of the child impact report. That report represents an assessment of risks and issues through direct engagement with the parties, with relevant agencies and, crucially, with the children themselves in most cases. That means that judges receive better information earlier and can make orders that are safe and sustainable, sparing many children the trauma of their cases repeatedly returning to court. The impact is already clear: cases operating under the model were resolved about twice as fast as the national average, which means that children can get on with their lives rather than being stuck in the limbo of family court proceedings. Importantly, children who have experienced the model consistently report feeling listened to; one young person described feeling as though a weight had been lifted from their shoulders. That speaks volumes.

My hon. Friend also spoke about wider reform, including the case for a family justice Bill. I understand that ambition but would point to the significant programme of reform already under way. We are repealing the presumption of parental involvement from the Children Act 1989. As my hon. Friend mentioned, that is testament to the brave fight of campaigners such as Claire Throssell, my hon. Friend the Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Dr Tidball) and many more. Through the Victims and

Courts Act 2026 we are restricting the exercise of an offender's parental responsibility in cases of serious child sexual abuse and where a child is born of rape. My colleague Baroness Levitt has confirmed that we will implement Jade's law by the end of the year. Taken together, those measures will protect thousands of children each year.

My hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby also rightly raised the problem of unregulated parental alienation experts. Families facing family court proceedings are often navigating some of the most difficult parts of their lives. It is absolutely essential that experts are suitably qualified, properly regulated and held to appropriate professional standards. So-called experts on parental alienation are practising the kind of pseudoscience that we do not want to see in family proceedings.

I again thank my hon. Friend for securing a debate on such a crucial topic and for her determination in championing these issues. Every child who comes into contact with the family justice system is already navigating the most difficult circumstances. They deserve a system that protects them, that listens to them, and that puts their welfare above everything else. I believe that every hon. Member in the Chamber shares that goal. We want children to be safe, to be heard, and to have the chance to move forward with stability and hope. That is what this Government are determined to achieve.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Glasgow Commonwealth Games 2026

[DEREK TWIGG *in the Chair*]

[Relevant document: Oral evidence taken before the Scottish Affairs Committee on 20 October 2025, on Glasgow's Commonwealth Games 2026, Session 2024-26, HC 1308.]

2.30 pm

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for the Glasgow Commonwealth Games 2026.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. Today marks 43 days until Glasgow hosts the 23rd Commonwealth games. The games will happen from 23 July to 2 August, and the city will welcome about 3,000 athletes from 74 nations and territories across the Commonwealth, who will compete in 10 sports and six para sports. The event offers a fantastic opportunity for Glasgow to host world-class athletes from across the Commonwealth, competing at the highest level, showcasing Scotland on an international stage and providing an exciting cultural and economic opportunity for the city.

Glasgow will become only the third city in history to host the games twice, following its success in 2014. This is a source of great pride for our city, but as hon. Members will be aware, Glasgow was not intended to be the host city in 2026. When the Australian state of Victoria withdrew from hosting the games, Glasgow, with support from the UK and Scottish Governments, stepped in to ensure that the games took place, which for a time was in doubt.

In doing so, there was recognition that these games must be different. The idea needed to be refreshed to ensure a more sustainable model—reducing cost while continuing to highlight and benefit host cities, give our athletes the chance to compete at the highest level, and inspire people across the Commonwealth to take part in sport or be more physically active. For those of us who live in what we might call the devolved nations, the Commonwealth games are the only opportunity that our athletes have to wear the vest of their nation at a world-class event in sport.

The new model for Glasgow 2026 is not funded through the normal methods. The delivery of the games themselves does not really require public funding, but it is welcome that the UK Government have made available £2.3 million as a contingency towards security costs. The Glasgow 2026 “Story of Change” framework provides a way to take a new and innovative approach to the games, focusing on four key areas. First, it seeks to deliver a greener games, demonstrating that major events such as these can reduce waste and carbon emissions. As part of that approach, these games are making use of the legacy of the 2014 games by using four pre-existing venues to host events. We have Tollcross International Swimming Centre, the Scottish Event Campus, the Sir Chris Hoy Velodrome and the Glasgow International Arena, and of course Scotstoun Stadium in my constituency of Glasgow West.

Secondly, Glasgow 2026 will ensure that the games are inclusive and offer opportunities for participation, representation and engagement. With 47 para sport events, Glasgow 2026 will be the largest integrated para sport programme in Commonwealth games history.

[*Patricia Ferguson*]

Moreover, the first medal of the games will be awarded in para powerlifting, making this the first time that a para sport event has opened the medal tally at a Commonwealth games.

Thirdly, Glasgow 2026 is seeking to create a welcoming games in a welcoming city by using the games to bring people across Scotland and the Commonwealth together. This is perfectly evident and noteworthy in the Glasgow 2026 Festival, an exciting 10-week, city-wide initiative, running from 23 July to 9 August. It comprises more than 150 free events, ranging from art exhibitions and cultural events to opportunities to participate in sport and workshops across Glasgow. My constituency will host a number of events: a 3x3 basketball tournament in Mansfield Park in Partick, a five-day children's summer camp at Drumchapel Tennis Club, a family fun day at the Donald Dewar centre, and a Commonwealth community festival organised by Halo Arts and Victoria Park Community Trust.

Finally, in taking on this challenge, Glasgow 2026 Ltd, the organising company established to stage the event in partnership with Commonwealth Sport and Commonwealth Games Scotland, is seeking to demonstrate that a more sustainable model for the games is possible, while still supporting local economies, tourism and community development. Hopefully, the slightly slimmed-down version of the Commonwealth games on offer this year will ensure the continued viability of such a special event, while still providing an exciting and diverse programme of sport.

As I have said, Glasgow 2026 is using the legacy of facilities built for Glasgow 2014 and aims to create a series of different legacies this time. The Commonwealth Sport Foundation, which is the official charity partner of the games, has pledged that all funds raised through Glasgow 2026 will be shared equally between funding sport for development initiatives in the Commonwealth and supporting three city partners in Glasgow: Glasgow Children's Hospital Charity, Scottish Sports Futures, and Team Scotland Youth Trust.

Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech and has contributed so much to the Commonwealth games during her time as a Minister and councillor, and now as a Member of Parliament. She will know that for close to 20 years we have had a Scottish Government who have decimated local government revenue and capital budgets. That has had a significant impact on the fabric of many of our sports facilities and on our wider sports provision. Does she agree that a critical legacy from the games must be a Scottish Government who actually take grassroots sport seriously and support the next generation of athletes?

Patricia Ferguson: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. In fact, one of my bugbears over the years has been that it is far too easy for cash-strapped local authorities to cut back on sport and culture, because they are not part of the statutory services that everyone expects them to deliver. The Scottish Government need to realise that if they are ambitious for Scotland, they need to be ambitious for Scotland's people. Part of that means making us all more physically active, and to achieve that we need facilities, so I thank my hon. Friend for that important intervention.

I recognise that local residents and businesses in my constituency, particularly those near to Scotstoun stadium, will have concerns about possible disruption, which is often associated with large sporting events. I am pleased that the Glasgow 2026 organising body has been engaging with community councils and local residents to understand such concerns, and to seek to minimise disruption as far as possible.

Parking is an issue in the area, so I was pleased to hear that an events permit zone will be in operation, alongside other measures such as defined drop-off and pick-up locations, and the ringfencing of ride-share locations. I am also glad that the organisers have been clear that communications with spectators will provide guidance on local public transport routes and encourage spectators to use them as an alternative to driving to venues.

Furthermore, I encourage residents and businesses in Glasgow West to attend the two "Get Set" hubs in the constituency, in the Annexe Healthy Living Centre on 12 June and at the Heart of Scotstoun on 18 June. These hubs, organised by Glasgow 2026, will allow communities to learn about the games and their local impact, and allow people to ask questions or raise concerns.

There is so much to welcome about these games that it feels a little churlish to mention some of the areas where I feel that things could have been done a little bit better. Those who know Glasgow will appreciate that George Square is the centre point of our city.

Elaine Stewart (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment that when we raised the issue of George Square at the Scottish Affairs Committee, the organisers of the games had not thought about the problems that the closure of the square would cause for people attending the games?

Patricia Ferguson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. For the period of the games, George Square will be fenced off and will be a building site; indeed, it has been for some time now. It is the place where Glaswegians traditionally gather to celebrate events—it was where we celebrated London 2012 and Glasgow 2014—so it is disappointing that it will continue to be fenced off until a few weeks after the games have concluded. It seems to me that, with a little bit of extra thought and planning, visitors to our city could have enjoyed George Square in the way that traditionally we always have done. That is a matter of some regret.

My other disappointment is that no terrestrial broadcaster has taken up the opportunity to broadcast the games. They will instead be shown by TNT Sports.

As I said, I do not want to dwell on the negatives. Glasgow 2026 will award 215 gold medals. Visitors, athletes and officials will be supported by 3,000 volunteers, who will be called Glasgow Legends. When I was a volunteer in 2014, they were called Clyde-siders; but whatever they are called, they will make new friends, learn new skills and have an exciting time along the way.

Credit must go to the organising committee, Commonwealth Games Scotland, Glasgow Life and Glasgow City Council, as well as all the sporting organisations involved in delivering this year's games. Glasgow 2014 was hugely successful, and Glasgow 2026

will have the distinction of heralding in a new version of the games—slimmed down, yes, but just as vibrant, exciting and motivational as the 2022 games.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way on the point about inspiration and aspiration. I hope that some of that comes a little south of the border and inspires residents in Carlisle. In areas such as mine, which are a long way from large infrastructure facilities to support sports, grassroots inspiration is key. Does my hon. Friend agree that these games offer an opportunity to inspire the hopes and dreams of people not just in Glasgow and Scotland, but in communities like mine in Carlisle?

Patricia Ferguson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the wonderful things about the Commonwealth is that it reaches out, and the Commonwealth Games Council and Commonwealth Games Federation have always been good at doing that. The games will be important for Carlisle and Glasgow—maybe the answer is to twin our two cities. As one of the closest cities to Carlisle, Glasgow does have something to offer in that regard. It may not always have been the case historically that people in Carlisle have welcomed people from Scotland coming across the border, but we can leave all that in the past, as we look to the future to ensure that we learn lessons and take that forward.

Although these games will be slimmed down, they will be vibrant, exciting and motivational, just like all the games before them. I hope that everyone involved—visitors, athletes, spectators, family members, Glaswegians, and people from Carlisle or anywhere else in the country—has a wonderful time in Glasgow. I hope, too, that the model for these games might inspire places like Carlisle to consider taking on games, perhaps in conjunction with other local authorities, because this version is much more affordable and will hopefully ensure that sustainability that we all hope for.

2.43 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for bringing this issue to our attention. It is also a pleasure to see the Minister in her place. I am confident she will respond in a positive way, giving the encouragement the hon. Lady needs. I do not doubt for a second that that is her nature. It is also a pleasure to see the shadow Minister in his place. He has a deep interest in all things to do with sport, so that is more encouragement for the hon. Lady. I also see the Lib Dem spokesperson in place, who has been a dear friend for many years.

Why does it mean so much to me, as the MP for Strangford, to see Glasgow host these games? We can see the potential that the hon. Lady referred to in her last couple of sentences. Also, I am keen on speak on this because of the strong historical links between Glasgow and our capital of Belfast. The hon. Lady's colleagues are here in some numbers—I am not sure that there are any Scottish MPs left in the Chamber; they are nearly all here, as they should be, to support her. I say in all honesty and sincerity that I much enjoy the friendship of my Scottish colleagues—my Gaelic cousins. I do that for a number of reasons. I am descended from the Stewarts of the lowlands in Scotland, so the Gaelic blood they have in their systems is the same as I have in

mine. Of course, we are only a short distance from each other—I would say just a stone's throw; you would need strong arms, but it is not too far away. In our blood we have the Scottish traits, cultures and interests. We have the pipes, but maybe not the dancing—if anybody ever saw me dancing, it would be scary. We also have the thriftiness that the Scots have. They certainly gave it to me, because we look after our money in a very kind and powerful way.

The Glasgow Commonwealth games take place in just over six weeks, with the games this year focused on innovation. The hon. Member for Glasgow West set the scene incredibly well. I want to highlight a unique opportunity. The hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) suggested that Carlisle is close, but I tell her what: we are closer. I say that honestly. We have a chance to strengthen co-operation between Glasgow and Belfast and maximise the benefits for the wider UK economy. Belfast is strategically placed to be a support location for the games due to the transport and economic links between the two cities.

The Commonwealth teams who are coming have probably all picked their places to stay by now, but we are not too far away. Belfast has already been recognised as capable of hosting major sporting events, as it was selected to accommodate the 2028 UEFA Euros. Although that did not happen due to extenuating circumstances, it demonstrated recognition of Northern Ireland's capability to hold these large-scale events.

Belfast could be used to accommodate visitors to the games, who would only be a short distance from Glasgow. There are many hotels in Belfast and elsewhere that could provide hundreds of rooms to accommodate them. The city is well positioned to take the pressure off Glasgow's infrastructure by hosting media, officials, spectators and teams. There are excellent transport links between the two cities, with daily flights and regular ferries. In particular, Northern Ireland has the facilities to support athletes' preparation for the games, and could even hold selected sporting events—side events would perhaps be the better way of putting it. That would further reduce pressure on Glasgow's infrastructure while extending the economic benefits.

I suggest to the hon. Member for Glasgow West and those who have not considered it that there is an opportunity to utilise Bangor's Olympic-standard swimming pool. It is a 10-lane, 50-metre pool with two submersible booms and floating floors to facilitate full international long and short-course competitions. The pool was specifically developed to support Olympic, Paralympic and Commonwealth-level competitors, and it is already used for national elite competitions; it could facilitate training for the Glasgow Commonwealth games as well.

Although Glasgow did not report being overwhelmed by the influx of visitors during the 2014 Commonwealth games, the incoming 2026 games have been prepared for at much shorter notice. Hopefully, the potential for those who will visit will be exceptional and boost the economy in Scotland. The originally proposed host had to withdraw due to increasing costs, leaving Glasgow only two years to finalise the arrangements. Partnering with Belfast as a support for the games could demonstrate what a sustainable model for the games looks like in the future, when the costs will be even greater and we may need to spread them a wee bit further to make the games more sustainable and ensure that they continue to unite the Commonwealth nations.

[*Jim Shannon*]

I always think that, in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, we in Northern Ireland and our Scottish cousins—our Gaelic cousins—should play together in every way. No SNP colleagues are here to tell us that they may have a different opinion, but I am a great and proud member of this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland who loves all the people of this great nation, particularly the Scottish people. I believe that work can and should take place between the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Scottish Parliament to ensure that the rising tide of the Commonwealth games lifts the ships not only in Scotland but in Strangford lough in Northern Ireland.

2.49 pm

John Grady (Glasgow East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for securing this debate. A wonderful servant of the people of Glasgow, she is the embodiment of Glaswegian and Scottish values of public service that are shared across our family of nations.

As a Glasgow MP I welcome the Government's support for bringing the games to Glasgow and the cross-party support for the games in the House, in Holyrood and in the city council chambers. I welcome all the work that has been done to bring the games to Glasgow. My constituency of Glasgow East is at the centre of the Commonwealth games 2026, together with Glasgow West. Its venues include the Sir Chris Hoy Velodrome, Glasgow International Arena and the Tollcross International Swimming Centre. The games in 2014 were a great success and our games this year will be too because my home, Glasgow, is a city of warmth and hospitality. A friend is someone anywhere in Glasgow and a stranger is a friend yet to be made.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes an excellent point: Glasgow has always been known as a friendly city. Does he agree that volunteers play a fantastic role in welcoming visitors to the city for our sporting events, such as the Commonwealth games and the 2023 UCI cycling world championships?

John Grady: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The number of volunteers speaks eloquently to the generosity of spirit in Glasgow, across Scotland and across our family of nations. We are excited to welcome great sportspeople. I look forward to the return of a great Australian swimmer, Lakeisha Patterson, who is one of the world's most decorated para swimmers. Some of her most notable swims took place at Tollcross: she made her international debut there when she was just 15, winning bronze, and she won gold at the world championships in Glasgow in 2015.

My constituency has long been a centre of sporting excellence. Sir Kenny Dalglish comes from Dalmarnock in my constituency. I think every hon. Member in the Chamber sends him our best wishes. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Sir Kenny was a brilliant footballer who could sign Peter Beardsley, Ray Houghton, John Barnes and John Aldridge, then come on as a substitute and show them exactly how the game should be played. For his courage in the face of the terror of Hillsborough and all that he did, with courage, dignity and love, for

the Hillsborough families, Sir Kenny is admired greatly as one of Glasgow's finest sons and, I believe, one of Liverpool's finest adopted sons.

One of our most notable clubs in Glasgow is Shettleston Harriers. On the doors I meet many enthusiasts for that wonderful club, founded in 1904. One of its most famous athletes is Lachie Stewart, who won the 10,000 metres gold in the 1970 Edinburgh commonwealth games. The club does wonderful work with young people in my area.

I want Scotland to do brilliantly in the games—of course I do. I wish every member of Team Scotland the best of luck. I cannot mention each team member—I might get into trouble—but I make special mention of Evi Mackie, who is in the swimming squad and trains at Lanark amateur swimming club. I am glad to speak of such a talented sportsperson because her Member of Parliament, my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton and Clyde Valley (Imogen Walker), is a Government Whip and by tradition cannot speak in this place.

In the Commonwealth charter, the core Commonwealth principles include mutual respect and inclusiveness. The games are an opportunity to reaffirm those shared principles. A good place to start is by expressing our immense gratitude to the people from the Commonwealth who have made their homes in the United Kingdom. They have served our communities in our hospitals, in schools, in business and in so many ways. We are richer because our brothers and sisters from the Commonwealth have come to live with us and made their homes with us. Reaffirming our shared values of mutual respect and inclusiveness means that we must do much more to confront and root out racism. It is neither Scottish nor British, and it has no place anywhere in our family of nations, but we must recognise that that poison continues to infect our society and our politics. Rooting out racism is an urgent task for all of us. A society free from racism and a society of mutual respect and inclusiveness is one where we are all richer.

The games are an opportunity for us to celebrate our shared humanity and our equality. There is no better place to do so than in Glasgow, the home of the first black international footballer, Andrew Watson. His last game was in my constituency, at the first Hampden Park in Crosshill. I am pleased to say that Scotland won 5-1. I hope for similar results in the world cup and the Commonwealth games. I say to all our brothers and sisters visiting from the Commonwealth: welcome to Glasgow; we cannot wait to see you.

2.55 pm

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg, and to contribute to this important debate on the return of the Commonwealth games to Glasgow secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson).

The Commonwealth games have always been more than a sporting competition. They are a celebration of friendship, community, aspiration and achievement across the Commonwealth family. That is why the decision to bring the games back to Glasgow is such welcome news, not only for our city but for communities across Scotland and the UK. Glasgow has shown the world how to host a major sporting event. In 2014, the city delivered what many still regard as one of the finest Commonwealth

games ever staged. The venues were world class, the volunteers were outstanding, the atmosphere was unforgettable and the legacy continues to be felt today.

The return of the games is a vote of confidence in Glasgow. It is a recognition of the city's experience, its sporting infrastructure and, most importantly, its people. It will bring visitors, investment and international attention, and support jobs, tourism, hospitality and local businesses, but the impact of the games will extend far beyond Glasgow's city boundaries.

In constituencies such as Kilmarnock and Loudoun, communities have long embraced the values of sporting competition. Young people across east Ayrshire will watch athletes competing for Scotland, the home nations and countries across the Commonwealth. They will see role models who prove that success is not reserved for a privileged few. They will see ordinary people achieving extraordinary things through hard work, determination and dedication. Every sports coach who gives up their evenings, every volunteer who runs a club and every parent who drives a child to training sessions understands the power of sport to change lives. Sport teaches discipline, resilience and teamwork. It teaches young people how to win with humility and lose with dignity.

East Ayrshire has its own proud Commonwealth games story. Through the East Ayrshire talented athletes support programme, hundreds of athletes have been helped to pursue excellence. Over 14 years, more than 700 local athletes have received support, including six special Olympians, two Olympians and two Commonwealth games medallists who have represented their community with distinction. I pay particular tribute to Peter Kirkbride of Kilmarnock. Peter won a silver medal for Scotland in the men's 94 kg weightlifting competition at the Delhi Commonwealth games in 2010. His achievement remains a source of enormous pride for east Ayrshire, and demonstrates what can be achieved through dedication, perseverance and talent. I also recognise Claire Johnston, who won a bronze medal for Scotland in lawn bowls at the Gold Coast Commonwealth games in 2018. Her success, alongside her team mate Lesley Doig, added another chapter to east Ayrshire's proud sporting history, and showed that athletes from our communities can compete and succeed on the international stage.

The Commonwealth games have a unique place in our national life because they bring together nations and territories from every corner of the globe in a spirit of friendly competition. They celebrate diversity while emphasising our shared humanity. It is fitting therefore that they remember Her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, whose commitment to the Commonwealth was one of the defining features of her remarkable reign. Across seven decades, she championed the values that sit at the heart of the Commonwealth movement: service, unity and mutual respect. Her dedication helped to strengthen the bonds between nations and peoples, and her legacy remains woven into the story of the Commonwealth games themselves. As Glasgow prepares once again to welcome athletes from around the world, it is worth reflecting on how proud Her late Majesty was of Scotland's achievements in hosting international events and bringing people together through sport.

The return of the games offers us another opportunity to build a lasting legacy. We should use this moment to encourage greater participation in sport, particularly among young people. We should strengthen grassroots

clubs, improve access to facilities and ensure that every child, regardless of background, has the opportunity to enjoy the benefits that sport can bring. The true measure of success will not simply be what happens in the stadiums or on the medal table; it will be whether more young people take up sport, more communities feel connected and more future champions emerge from places like Kilmarnock and Loudoun.

The Commonwealth games remind us that talent is everywhere, even if opportunity is not. Our job is to ensure that opportunity reaches every community. The return of the Commonwealth games is good for our economy, good for our communities and good for the next generation. Most of all, it is a chance to inspire young people, not only across East Ayrshire but across the whole of Scotland and the Commonwealth, to believe that, with hard work and determination, they too can achieve greatness.

3 pm

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) on securing the debate. She is a consistent and effective advocate for Glasgow and for sport in Scotland, and her contribution in this House and elsewhere in public life has undoubtedly helped to shape the strong sporting and events culture that Glasgow rightly prides itself on today.

This debate goes to the heart of something that I have spoken about in this place before: how we use opportunity to deliver growth that is not only strong but shared. In my constituency of Glasgow North sit three of the key venues for the Glasgow Commonwealth games 2026: the OVO Hydro, the SEC Centre and the SEC Armadillo, which together form the Scottish Event Campus—a central part of Glasgow's economic life for over 40 years. The SEC is not simply a venue; it is an essential piece of economic infrastructure for the city. It has developed into one of Europe's leading event destinations, supporting over 5,000 jobs, generating £557 million each year for Glasgow's economy and attracting more than 2 million visitors annually.

Major events such as the Glasgow 2026 Commonwealth games are not simply important occasions; they are economic instruments that can, when embedded within a wider strategy, drive growth. Every major event hosted in Glasgow—whether it is COP26, an international aquaculture conference or a Charli XCX concert—brings with it not just visitors but investment, knowledge exchange and long-term connections. The Commonwealth games bring all that together at scale.

In this debate we are rightly focusing on the Commonwealth games, but it would be remiss of me as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for events not to highlight the consistent economic benefit of the many business events and conferences that take place in the SEC and elsewhere in the city on a regular basis. It is important that the UK Government and the Scottish Government support not only the Commonwealth games and other important sporting and cultural events, but the hugely significant business events sector.

In 2026, more than 3,000 athletes from 74 nations will come to Glasgow, with the SEC hosting the opening ceremony and the basketball, wheelchair basketball, bowls, para bowls, boxing, judo, netball, weightlifting

[*Martin Rhodes*]

and para powerlifting events. The fact that so much activity will take place in my constituency illustrates both the scale of the opportunity and the responsibility that comes with it. Today, Glasgow stands as one of the UK's most important city regions, with world-class universities, advanced industries and a thriving cultural sector. However, as I have said in the House before, it is also a city still marked by inequality, where growth exists alongside deprivation and where opportunity has not been felt across all communities.

This is a key test for the 2026 games. Success cannot be judged solely by attendance figures or broadcast reach; it must instead be measured by whether the economic benefits are felt across the entire city region, particularly by those communities who have waited longest for change. That means linking the games more directly to local employment and skills, and I welcome the work that the games' organisers have done on that. It is also important that local businesses are able to participate in supply chains, and that we invest in the necessary connectivity so that people across the region can access the opportunities created.

The reality is that economic activity in Glasgow now operates at a regional scale, with major events intersecting with transport systems, labour markets and investment decisions extending well beyond the city boundary. That is why we need a more strategic and long-term approach to major events such as Glasgow 2026—one that plans ahead, aligns activity with economic priorities and co-ordinates delivery across the region. It is also why I have consistently argued for greater devolution to the Glasgow city region. This is not about constitutional preference but about practical delivery: local people are best placed to ensure that opportunities such as the Commonwealth games translate into tangible outcomes for our communities.

In that context, Government support must go beyond the successful delivery of the event itself. It must recognise the SEC as a strategic national asset, align the games with wider priorities such as tourism, trade and investment, and support a long-term plan that builds on Glasgow's proven strengths in hosting major events. The 2026 Commonwealth games represent the next stage in that journey: an opportunity to reinforce the city's global reputation, drive further economic growth and, importantly, ensure that that growth is shared more widely across the city region, including by the communities I represent in Glasgow North. What matters now is that we match that opportunity with an even greater level of long-term ambition. If we do, Glasgow 2026 will be not simply a one-off great occasion, but a lasting legacy of change for the Glasgow city region.

3.5 pm

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): It is a privilege to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) for securing this debate on the forthcoming Commonwealth games in our home city.

In just a matter of weeks, Glasgow will once again host the Commonwealth games. The resounding success of our 2014 games put Glasgow at the forefront of people's minds when a location needed to be found for

2026. I am proud that Glasgow stepped up, and I am confident that the games will offer a blueprint for the future, as we approach the 100th anniversary of the first Commonwealth games in 1930.

One of the many innovative parts of the 2026 games is that they are being funded by a mixture of compensation, grant funding and commercial income, resulting in a smaller-scale event with a condensed sporting programme, and, most importantly, no additional public money will be spent. Nevertheless, after visiting the Glasgow 2026 headquarters on Bothwell Street, where I met chief executive Phil Batty and chair George Black, I am convinced that the 2026 games will be a world-class display, thanks in no small part to the substantial public investment that was made in advance of the 2014 games, including for the purpose-built Emirates arena, as it was known, which was commissioned and built by Labour-run Glasgow city council. I am filled with hope at the prospect of the games offering a new way forward, encouraging others to adopt our approach of renovation and reuse.

Often referred to as "the friendly games", this sporting event has been, and can continue to be, an opportunity to bring nations and people together in a spirit of friendly competition. I have no doubt that that spirit will endure at these games. However, less positive differences between the 2026 and the 2014 games will also be on show to competitors and spectators. In the past decade, Glasgow has been subjected to repeated budget cuts, which will be all too visible as we welcome the world back to our streets, with a less vibrant city centre, poor and increasingly expensive public transport and a maze of road closures. Perhaps the most striking change of all is George Square, which featured prominently in the 2014 opening ceremony. That landmark remains under construction and closed off to the public, with calls for its renovation to be expedited for the games having been ignored.

I hope that, just as Glasgow has risen to the challenge of hosting the Commonwealth games once again, the city council and Scottish Government will use the short time we have left between now and the start of the games to recognise the urgency of restoring Glasgow's status as the world-class destination that visitors and residents expect. That is a legacy that many Glaswegians would be glad to see delivered.

3.9 pm

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. It is also an honour to have the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), respond to this debate. She knows Glasgow well and was generous with her time when she was last in the city, visiting Crookston castle, the Nethercraigs sports complex—which is not a Commonwealth games venue, unfortunately, but perhaps next time—and the Pakistani Street Food café. I believe that she is due in Glasgow South West tomorrow, so it is wonderful that she is responding to the debate.

As well as congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) on securing the debate, it is important to thank her, as other Members have done, for her long record championing Glasgow

and sport. As the Minister for Tourism, Culture and Sport in the Scottish Labour Government, she helped to lay the important foundations of what we celebrate today—the ambition, the infrastructure and the belief that Glasgow could stand on the world stage and deliver, all of which was seeded during her tenure as a Minister.

The 2014 Commonwealth games showed what Glasgow was capable of. Under a Labour council that understood what sport could do, and what it could unleash for communities, the city welcomed athletes and visitors from across the globe, and by wide consensus, it did not disappoint. The legacy of those games was lasting, not only in the venues and infrastructure but in the civic pride felt by the volunteers and citizens, and by the young people who watched those games and dared to dream to become athletes themselves. In that sense, Glasgow 2026 does not start from scratch; it stands on the shoulders of giants like my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West—that is a very special thing indeed.

These games are also personal to me and my own Commonwealth story. In 1963, my father came to this country by road from Pakistan, a proud Commonwealth nation. I grew up in the city and was trained as a surgeon by many Commonwealth citizens. I now have the singular honour of being the Member of Parliament for Glasgow South West, perhaps the most diverse constituency in Scotland, and one that has been shaped by its many Commonwealth connections from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and the Caribbean.

I am confident that when the athletes from the 74 nations touch down in Glasgow later this year, they will feel at home, with smells and languages quite familiar to them, thanks to the diverse communities that occupy Glasgow. I hope that, in some sense, they will feel at home during their time here, as one Commonwealth family bound by the shared values, histories and stories that we all carry.

It is particularly important to emphasise those shared values today, because last night we saw some violence on Buchanan Street in Glasgow, under the watchful eye of the statue of Donald Dewar, the father of our nation. That underlines that Glasgow is not immune to the challenges of social cohesion—or, indeed, prejudice. It is therefore timely to remind ourselves that, as a Commonwealth family, those shared values must come to the fore, and we as Members of this place all have a responsibility to articulate those values in these times of stress and turbulence.

When telling the story of the 2026 Commonwealth games and how they came to Glasgow, it is important to re-emphasise that when Victoria withdrew, the games were in danger of fizzling out. In fact, there was even a danger that Commonwealth games as a concept could come to an end. However, Glasgow, the UK Government and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport stepped forward to ensure that the games can once again be celebrated, and that our Commonwealth family can celebrate, too.

Finally, the King's baton, with which the games will be opened, was handcrafted by GalGael, a social enterprise based in Govan in Glasgow South West, using reclaimed wood from Pollok Country Park. I do not think there is a better symbol of Glasgow than Glasgow timber being handcrafted by Glaswegians and travelling to every part of our Commonwealth ahead of these games. Glasgow has earned this moment, and I am confident that it will make the most of it.

3.13 pm

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) on securing the debate. As colleagues have rehearsed very well, with her wealth of knowledge and her experience of the Commonwealth games, she brings great value to the debate.

As part of my West Dunbartonshire constituency falls within Glasgow, and with my home town of Clydebank bordering the city, this is a hugely significant event for the communities I represent—one that I hope will inspire the next generation and showcase the very best of our area to the world. When the future of the Commonwealth games was thrown into doubt after Australia withdrew from hosting them, I was delighted that Glasgow stepped up. I am proud that our nation has helped secure the future of one of the world's greatest sporting events. This summer, the eyes of 74 nations and territories will be on Scotland.

Although it is a shame that fewer sports will be represented this year, I am keen to see how this leaner, more sustainable model works in practice. The traditional model of hosting major multi-sports events is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain. Glasgow's approach will make full use of existing world-class venues, established infrastructure and the expertise gained from the hugely successful 2014 games. If the Commonwealth games are to thrive and survive, they must be accessible, not only to athletes but to potential host nations and cities. If the model succeeds, Glasgow may once again show the way forward. That could be the defining legacy of the 2026 games.

That legacy will differ from 2014. The last games left Scotland with outstanding facilities, which have been mentioned, such as the Tollcross International Swimming Centre, the Glasgow International Arena and, of course, the athletes' village, which became much-needed social housing. Those are tangible benefits that continue to serve communities today.

These Commonwealth games are so important for young people in my constituency. For many, this may be the first time that they see world-class sport in person. We should not underestimate the impact of that.

Jim Shannon: We have referred to sports that will not be at the games for all different reasons. We in Northern Ireland seem to excel at boxing and shooting. I am not quite sure why, but whatever the reason, there will be no shooting sports at the Commonwealth games. Does the hon. Member feel that should be addressed? We have asked for that before, and it has not happened. Maybe it is time to get it right.

Douglas McAllister: I appreciate the hon. Member's intervention, and his point is well made. Glasgow saved the games and we had to use the infrastructure that was there. Perhaps when he secures a future games for Strangford, they will highlight shooting and boxing. We are happy to support a bid from him.

I know the effect that the games can have. I experienced it myself. I remember my parents taking me to the Commonwealth games in Edinburgh in 1986. Some hon. Members may be surprised to hear that I was a decent athlete back in my day—I know it is hard to

[*Douglas McAllister*]

believe. [*Interruption.*] The laughter was too loud there! I still vividly remember the excitement and inspiration I felt as a young person watching athletes compete—including my sporting hero, Steve Cram. That experience stayed with me. It made excellence feel achievable. Today's young people from West Dunbartonshire and communities across Scotland deserve the same opportunity. They deserve the chance to watch elite athletes at the highest level, and to imagine themselves one day on that track, in that pool or on that podium.

However, I have one main concern: the lack of free live television coverage. With coverage of the games now behind a paywall on TNT Sports and HBO Max, many people risk being excluded. If we want these games to inspire the next generation, they must be accessible to everyone to view. That decision limits the reach and impact of the games at precisely the moment we should be encouraging wider participation and engagement.

I also want to know what my constituents in West Dunbartonshire will gain from these games. How will local communities be involved? How will young people be engaged? How will we maximise opportunities for participation, volunteering and sporting development long after the closing ceremony? I hope those important questions remain central to planning and delivery over the coming weeks and months.

Despite those concerns, my message today is one of optimism. I love the Commonwealth games. I believe in the values they represent, which were highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed): international co-operation, inclusion and friendship. Yes, these games may be smaller and look slightly different from previous years, but they also represent innovation, resilience and a determination to ensure that this great sporting tradition survives and thrives.

Glasgow saved these games when their future was uncertain. Now we can demonstrate a model that could secure their future for decades to come. I look forward to seeing Glasgow once again welcome the Commonwealth, and I hope that our young people, from West Dunbartonshire and across the nation, will be inspired.

3.19 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg, and to speak on behalf of the Liberal Democrats today. As the Chief Whip of my party, I seldom get the opportunity to do so, but when the opportunity arose to talk about the Commonwealth games coming to Glasgow, I was keen to participate. I assure Members—just in case there is a pile-on—that I may be an adopted east coaster, but my roots are in the west.

I have cared about sport all my life. I was the first female director of the Camanachd Association, the governing body for shinty, for two years between 2017 and 2019. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about shooting; I think it is unlikely that we will see shinty in any international context any time soon, but it is important for bringing communities together. Sport does that in a very powerful way across ages and generations.

I read the evidence given to the Scottish Affairs Committee—I congratulate the Committee's Chair, the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), on securing this debate. It was interesting to read Billy Garrett from Glasgow Life reporting that, when Victoria stepped back from supporting the games, Glasgow was quickly thought of as somewhere that could be asked to step up, and indeed it was already thinking of doing so. That demonstrates the high regard in which Glasgow 2014 and its delivery was held, but I think it says something about Glasgow as well. "People Make Glasgow" is the best strapline for a city I have ever heard—closely followed by "Glasgow's miles better", but maybe not quite as iconic as "What's it called? Cumbernauld!"

We are going to be seeing 10 days of games, with 215 medals and 3,000 athletes from 74 countries. As the Member for North East Fife, it would be remiss of me not to mention Finlay Allan of Cupar, who is participating for Scotland in the judo. I wish him very well. I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Members for Glasgow East (John Grady) and for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed) in relation to the fact that we are going to be bringing together in Glasgow young people from 74 countries. At a time when it feels that we are becoming more insular, both globally and community-wise, such events bring young people—specifically, those younger than me—together. The power of that must not be underestimated. I certainly remember the emotion of watching 2012, 2022 in Birmingham and 2014 in Glasgow. To quote the late, great Stanley Baxter in "Parliamo Glasgow", I am sure they're going to have a helluva time.

Thinking about funding, there is no doubt that what we are seeing, and the fact that Glasgow has been able to step in, is a result of the down payment in 2014 and the investment that was made then. The hon. Member for Glasgow East mentioned Tollcross, where I have spent a lot of time; I had a sister who swam competitively at junior level for Scotland, so I spent a lot of time in swimming pools. Those community assets, and the power of a venue such as Tollcross to bring international swimming to Scotland, must not be underestimated.

We welcome the funding from Commonwealth Sport and from commercial funders and partnerships, the contingency funding that the UK Government have offered in relation to security, and the £150,000 that the Scottish Government are putting forward for Scotland House. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) talked about connectivity and economic value. I understand that the £150 million of economic value that it is estimated will be delivered by these Commonwealth Games is the same amount as the money that is being put into them. If that is not a return on investment, I do not know what is. That connectivity, and bringing people together, is really important. It is important for sporting events to demonstrate that economic impact.

I should declare an interest in that I sit on the Links Trust, which runs the Old Course and all the golf courses in St Andrews. Recent research by the trust demonstrated £300 million-worth of economic impact that those courses in St Andrews bring to Scotland, but as we look to hosting the Open next year, we know that connectivity and getting people to our beautiful part of Scotland comes at a cost.

The reimagining of the Commonwealth games is to be welcomed, not just because it will enable them to be delivered within the time available, but because—I was

very encouraged to read this in the evidence given to the Scottish Affairs Committee—it looks like it is encouraging other countries to re-engage with hosting the games in the future, which is very important. However, I share the concerns of the hon. Member for Strangford about the sports that will be included. I am going to say something very controversial for somebody who represents St Andrews, but I have my doubts about golf being in the Olympics, in the same way as I do about tennis. If winning a gold medal at the Olympics is not the pinnacle of the sport—I would argue that for both of those sports, it is not; that is winning a grand slam or the Open—I question whether it should be in the Olympic repertoire. We have to think from the athletes' perspective about what is seen as the pinnacle of their sport. There is no doubt that for some athletes whose sports potentially will not be represented at these games, participation in the Commonwealth games would be the pinnacle of their sport. I look forward to the emails I am going to receive from constituents about that controversial view.

I will conclude by talking about volunteering and looking forward to some legislation that is passing through Parliament. My mum is a proud Glaswegian and, like the hon. Member for Glasgow West, volunteered during the Commonwealth games in 2014. We should not underestimate the value of volunteering, not just in what it brings to the event, but in the relationships, friendships and community that it builds afterwards. My mum certainly still meets some of the people she worked with during that time. My husband also worked in spectator safety, so as a family we felt a real sense of pride about 2014 from our place on the east coast.

The Sporting Events Bill was recently introduced in the other place. My party wants to see in the Bill a bidding framework to allow the Government to bring even more world-class competitions to the UK. I think we are all in agreement about their value—not only in bringing people in to see high-class sport, but their economic benefit, which has been well utilised and articulated by these Commonwealth games. We also want to see in the Bill an accommodation and infrastructure strategy. I would hate to think that concerns about George Square and other parts of the city might detract from what will be an incredible event, but it is important that when we bring these events to our cities and communities, we ensure that people can go about their day-to-day lives as well. I hope that the Government will give that consideration, either in the other place or in the Commons.

3.27 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) on securing the debate. As many Members have said, not only is she a great advocate for the city, but she talks with knowledge and sophistication about the topics under consideration—sport and the broader ecosystem, tourism, and so many other areas.

The Commonwealth games occupy a unique place in our sporting calendar. They bring together nations and territories from across the Commonwealth to compete based on a shared affection and history and, as the hon. Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) mentioned, shared values and principles. This year's Commonwealth games will be the first held during the reign of

His Majesty King Charles III as head of the Commonwealth, and they will demonstrate once again the United Kingdom's ability to stage world-class sporting events.

The games have a special place in my heart as, back in 2022, I was the Minister in charge of the Commonwealth games in Birmingham. In fact, four years ago almost to the day, I was running around the country—literally—with the Queen's baton relay. I know well how much effort goes into organising such an event, particularly if it is taken on at late notice. I was fortunate to work with some truly incredible people, including many civil servants whom the Minister will know, as well as the CEO of the games, Ian Reid, Andy Street, Dame Louise Martin, and an amazing creative team led by the inspirational Martin Green. I know that some of the people I worked with are working on the Glasgow games this year too.

Despite the challenges of the pandemic, the Birmingham games were produced on time and on budget, and they provided a £1.2 billion boost to the economy, with more than 1 million tickets sold. They also had a record audience across channels for the official broadcaster, the BBC—something that others have mentioned and I will come to later. Of course, the Birmingham games were run alongside a trade and tourism programme, and their legacy included not only inspiring a generation of new athletes, but physical infrastructure such as a refurbished Alexander Stadium and a new aquatics centre. As we have heard, the 2014 Glasgow games also had a great legacy, including physical infrastructure, and I know there is a dedicated programme to boost tourism with this year's games.

For very understandable and deliberate reasons, these games will be on a different scale, in part because Glasgow so generously and bravely stepped up to the plate following the withdrawal of Victoria in Australia as host. We applaud it for doing so, in particular given that the future of the Commonwealth games was in such doubt. The Glasgow games will be funded almost entirely without UK public money, with £100 million from the Commonwealth Games Federation and money generated from ticket sales, broadcasting rights and corporate sponsorships. The games are therefore deliberately and understandably smaller in size and scale than the Birmingham games, which had a budget of more than £700 million, 75% of which was from central Government. Of course, central and devolved Governments will play a role in other areas, including security provision, visa processing and so on.

Many Members will remember, and have mentioned, the great success of the previous Glasgow Commonwealth games in 2014. They are still widely regarded as one of the best games ever staged. Glasgow showcased itself to the world as a welcoming, vibrant and capable host city. We have every confidence that it will do so again next month. We should all be rightly proud that Glasgow 2026 will feature one of the largest, if not the largest, integrated para sport programmes in Commonwealth games history. The United Kingdom has been a global leader in disability sport. That was a passion of mine when I was Sports Minister, as I know it is of the current one.

We recognise the immense value that major sporting events bring to our country. They inspire participation, generate economic activity, attract visitors, and strengthen Britain's international reputation. From London 2012 to the rugby and cricket world cups, from the women's

[Nigel Huddleston]

Euros to Birmingham 2022, when the Conservatives were in government, Britain built on a global reputation as one of the best places in the world to host sport. I acknowledge that this Government know that major events do not arrive by accident. That is why they are bringing in the major Sporting Events Bill. It takes a lot of planning, investment and, of course, credibility and confidence from international sporting bodies to deliver the games. We will debate that Bill in the near future.

As other Members have mentioned, way too often international attention focuses exclusively on our capital city, yet Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow, Liverpool, Newcastle, Cardiff and Belfast have all clearly demonstrated their ability to host major international sporting events successfully. The legacy of Glasgow 2026 should therefore be more than medals and memories, as I am sure it will be. We also want participation in physical activity to increase, which is where I have a couple of questions for the Minister.

It is important that people have access to facilities and that we invest in sport at all levels. Various announcements have been made by the Government, but too many sports do not know what they will receive from Government and when. The Minister has an opportunity today to give us more insight into sports strategy. We have unfortunately seen funding cuts to grassroots sport and even the recently announced cuts to school sport funding. As the hon. Member for Glasgow West mentioned, all too often, with successive Governments and at different levels, we see that our arts, creative and sports provision is the first to be cut even though they are the things we should invest in most. Investment in sport is not a nice-to-have; it is an essential boost to the economy, our mental and physical health as a nation, and our soft power around the world.

Sadly, for the first time since 1950, the Commonwealth games will not be broadcast live by the BBC. Instead, live coverage will be shown by TNT Sports, with Channel 5 providing free-to-air highlights later. It is disappointing that, despite record-breaking multi-platform viewing figures for the 2022 Birmingham games, the BBC will not show any coverage of this year's Commonwealth games in Glasgow, which I do not think many people have yet realised. That is yet another example of the deterioration in sports coverage from our national broadcaster.

As the next Commonwealth games are in Scotland, the BBC's decision is especially pertinent, given that Ofcom recently approved STV's plans to cut standalone regional news for the north of Scotland. I know that my Scottish colleagues here in Westminster, Conservatives in the Scottish Parliament and others have expressed great disappointment in both those decisions. It raises questions about the role and purpose of our public service broadcasters and of Ofcom. I hope and expect that Channel 5 and TNT Sports will provide high-quality coverage, but the BBC's decision is disappointing and I would welcome the Minister's views on that decision, too.

Finally, as we approach the opening ceremony, I want to place on record our thanks to everyone who has made these games possible, and to all those who will generate very special memories for so many people in the coming weeks. We thank the athletes, who have dedicated years to training; the coaches, officials and support staff, who work so hard behind the scenes; the

organisers, who have worked tirelessly to bring the games to Glasgow; and the important volunteers, who will once again demonstrate the warmth and hospitality for which Scotland and Glasgow, in particular, is so famous.

We wish every success to Glasgow 2026. I hope that the games inspire a new generation to participate in sport, and that they reinforce the message that the United Kingdom remains the world's leading sporting nation and one of the world's premier hosts of major international sporting events.

3.35 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg, and I am really pleased to respond to this debate. I begin by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) on securing today's debate, and on all her hard work and representation. It is brilliant not only to set out what the Government are doing to support Glasgow 2026, but to celebrate the games and to look ahead to what will be a fantastic celebration of sport, the Commonwealth, Glasgow, Scotland and the UK. Before I go into some of those issues, I will respond to some points that hon. Members made, and I will address other points as I go through my speech.

In opening the debate, my hon. Friend set the scene very powerfully. She spoke about the 3,000 athletes who will take part and mentioned that Glasgow is the third city in history to host the games twice. She also referred to the pre-existing venues and the scale of the para games, as well as to the fact that we are a world leader in sport and that the first medal at Glasgow 2026 will be awarded in para sport. A number of Members rightly pointed out the range of community events.

My hon. Friend and other Members made really important points about George Square. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) is a strong champion of his local area and Northern Ireland. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes), who is the chair of the all-party group for events, made some really important points about major events and their wider impact. When I appeared before the Culture, Media and Sport Committee just over a month ago, I was pleased to announce the Government's intention to have a major events strategy.

On that subject, the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), asked some specific questions about the Sporting Events Bill, which we have introduced in the other place. I believe that we will reach out to the hon. Lady about it, and I am very happy to meet her, and indeed, the hon. Member for Droitwich and Evesham (Nigel Huddleston), to address some of the specific points that she put to me about the Bill.

This debate is especially well timed as I am due to travel to Glasgow tomorrow to meet the company organising the games and to hear at first hand how the planning and delivery are progressing. It has been wonderful to support the games personally as Sports Minister, whether through my regular meetings with Commonwealth games organising committee and the Scottish Government, or through the excellent baton relay at Buckingham Palace—my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed) spoke powerfully about the importance

of the baton, and it was a delight to spend some time with him in his constituency last summer—or through marking the games at Edinburgh Castle a few months ago.

A little over a decade ago, Glasgow delivered a fantastic Commonwealth games and now the city has another chance to showcase itself to the world; many Members have spoken about that today. As we saw with Glasgow 2014 and Birmingham 2022, and as many hon. Members pointed out, the games bring world-class sport to our communities, delivering the special heart-stopping moments that only live sport can deliver.

At the 2022 games, I had the great experience of attending the diving finals at the then new Sandwell Aquatics Centre and seeing our country take home medals. It was a particular delight to go to that event, as it was just down the road from where I grew up; I attended with Lord McConnell, who sits in the other place.

The shadow Secretary of State was Sports Minister at that time, as he said, and he showed a commendable commitment to the games then. In his contribution today, he rightly pointed out that the 2026 games will be the first under His Majesty's reign. The hon. Member's speech clearly illustrated how he wants these games to be as successful as possible, and I know that he is a huge supporter. He put a couple of specific questions to me, which I will answer as I progress through my speech.

The games generate significant wider economic and social benefits. They bring communities together, galvanise volunteers and support local jobs and supply chains. Last week, we marked Volunteers' Week, and I pay tribute to the volunteers who are the lifeblood of so much of our sport in the UK. They help to deliver grassroots sport up and down the country every single day, and when it comes to major sporting events, they are a vital and joyful part of the experience.

Ten world-class sports across four world-class venues, 3,000 athletes, 4,000 volunteers, the largest ever para sport programme at a games, a vibrant cultural festival and a city capitalising on the legacy of 2014—we are all looking forward to the show that Glasgow and Scotland will put on. More broadly, the games continue to be a key pathway for elite athletes, a wonderful event for spectators and a fantastic opportunity to bring together the Commonwealth family of nations in a positive and impactful way.

As my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) said, live sport inspires more people to get active than anything else. Glasgow 2026 is seeking to adopt a new approach to legacy and will bring benefits to communities and individuals across Glasgow and Scotland more broadly.

Some points were put to me about grassroots sport, which is a passion of mine and of this Government. We are investing £400 million over the coming years, including £8 million in Scotland this year and £3.4 million in sporting projects in Glasgow since 2024. Inactivity is a story of inequality, which this Government are committed to tackling. Major events such as the Commonwealth games play a hugely important role in that.

When the Australian state of Victoria announced that it was pulling out of hosting the 2026 games in July 2023, the future of the event looked increasingly uncertain. We were at risk of losing a wonderful sporting

occasion that brings nations together and provides an opportunity outside of the Olympics, Paralympics and respective sports' world championships for athletics to shine on the world stage. That is why I am truly delighted that the UK Government stepped up and got behind Glasgow 2026. I am proud of the role we have played in making the commitments required to support the Glasgow project to go ahead and, by extension, helping to secure the future of the games. I pay tribute to Ian Reid and his team at Commonwealth Games Scotland, and I acknowledge the work of the Scottish Government and all partners involved, which has made Glasgow 2026 a possibility.

The Government's support spans a number of areas and was critical in ensuring that Glasgow 2026 became a reality. While the Glasgow 2026 model is predicated on private income, the UK Government were pleased to be able to help the games through a commitment of up to £2.3 million of contingent funding to support the safety and security of the event. That was a key commitment that helped to unlock the original agreement for Glasgow to host the games.

We have provided support in other ways, too. I am pleased that the Home Office has worked closely with event organisers to ensure that bespoke visa processes have been established for the games family, ensuring that the games will benefit from smooth and streamlined visa processes that are appropriately tailored to the needs of athletes and officials while maintaining effective border security and immigration controls.

Operationally, teams at the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and Ofcom have worked closely with the organising company to ensure that the radio spectrum frequencies to be used at the games are available and overseen effectively, supporting the essential communications behind the scenes that enable these major sporting events to go ahead smoothly and safely. Alongside all that, my Department has directly provided a small amount of staffing to support the organising company, helping to ensure that the games are effectively integrating with the Departments and teams in Whitehall that they need to.

As a Government, we have stepped up in the games' hour of need and not only made sure that Glasgow has what it needs to deliver a safe, sustainable and world-class event, but sought to maximise the opportunities that it presents to the UK. I would also like to reflect on the important points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady) regarding racism in sport.

John Grady: Since I spoke, the police have explained more clearly some of the stuff that happened last night. Glasgow central mosque sits in the heart of my seat, and is somewhere that many Muslim brothers and sisters go to pray, as I am sure will visitors in Commonwealth games teams. That mosque had to be locked last night. People were attacked in the streets of Glasgow because of their colour. Police were attacked. I condemn this. Will the Minister join me in condemning it?

Stephanie Peacock: Of course I join my hon. Friend in condemning the appalling violence, and my heart goes out to all those involved. We must stand against this across the House.

[Stephanie Peacock]

Sport unites us all. It transcends boundaries, fosters camaraderie and instils the values of fairness, respect and perseverance. It is a mirror on our society, reflecting our strength and, at times, our challenges.

Dr Ahmed: To develop the point made by my dear hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow East (John Grady), I have been worshipping at Glasgow central mosque since it opened in 1984, and it is timely to remind hon. Members that the mosque was at the epicentre of the last Commonwealth games in Glasgow. As hon. Members will appreciate, a number of athletes were coming from Muslim-majority Commonwealth countries, and it was Ramadan at the time. The mosque became an epicentre for many athletes; it was where they first and foremost found the community of Glasgow. I am also shocked to hear that last night the mosque had to be closed, but I am deeply confident that, in the course of the games, the people of Glasgow will show themselves to be the welcoming, diverse community that they have always been and always will be. Does the Minister agree that the people do make Glasgow?

Stephanie Peacock: I do agree, and I share my hon. Friend's shock. I am shocked and appalled. The Government's stance remains unequivocal: racism has absolutely no place in our society, and it has no place in our sport either.

Let me turn to the issue of accessibility. I recognise and understand the disappointment that many will feel regarding Commonwealth Sport's decision not to partner with a free-to-air broadcaster for live coverage of the games. TNT Sports has partnered with one of our public service broadcasters, Channel 5, to ensure that the highlights of the games will be available on free-to-air television. The deal provides the opportunity for a wider audience to enjoy moments that matter in the games, but I have heard the points made regarding the BBC. I am sure that the BBC will have heard the points made by the shadow Minister and others, which I will relay to the Media Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray). Ultimately, all sports rights holders and UK broadcasters are operationally and editorially independent of Government.

Glasgow 2026 will be an opportunity for all of us to celebrate the unique power that live sport has to bring us together and will deliver a real impact. Once again, Glasgow and the nation are on the biggest stage, and the city's MPs have demonstrated the power of their city today. I congratulate Phil Batty, George Black and all the organisers who are working tirelessly to ensure that Glasgow is a success that showcases the very best of sport and brings about a new era for the Commonwealth games. I look forward to a brilliant event and a bright future for the games movement. I thank and pay tribute to the athletes, coaches, volunteers, organisers and everyone else who makes it possible.

3.48 pm

Patricia Ferguson: I will not be able to respond to all the points that colleagues have made in the time available, but I am grateful to everyone for their speeches, which have all been interesting and informative. They give us all food for thought.

The interventions from my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow East (John Grady) and for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed) are very important. The scenes last night do not demonstrate Glasgow at their best—I would argue that they do not represent Glasgow at all—but it is important that we do not shy away from them, and that we challenge them. I hope that we will collectively do so.

One of the statistics about sport that has haunted me over the years is that, although boys and girls participate in sport at an equal level up to the age of 11, at the age of 11 girls stop participating in sport at a level that men do not get to until they are aged about 40. There are all sorts of reasons for that, and we can imagine what many of them are, but it is just not good enough.

No matter what successive Governments have done, we have never cracked that very important issue. Physical activity and sport are very important; they are important for women and girls and for men, and they should be important to all of us. If any of us can do anything about that, we should. That is one of the reasons why I think the Commonwealth games not being free to air on one of the terrestrial broadcasters is really detrimental. It is not providing the motivation that my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Douglas McAllister) mentioned, and it is not providing inspiration either.

Stephanie Peacock: I would not ordinarily intervene as the Minister, but I thought that it might be helpful to inform my hon. Friend and the House that I will chair the next meeting of the women's sport taskforce, which aims to encourage and tackle some of the issues around women's sport. Indeed, this Government have the ambition to double priority slots for women and girls.

Patricia Ferguson: That is really good news, and I very much hope that my hon. Friend will relay that kind of activity to the Scottish Government and encourage them to do more for young women and girls in Scotland. It is very important.

I could not resist the challenge of responding to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). One of the things I love about the Commonwealth games is that they make a particular point of tailoring the sports featured at individual games, and it varies, to the needs of the competitors. For example, events that are very expensive for participants to take part in tend not to be featured, because many countries in the Commonwealth cannot support that kind of sport. However, shooting and boxing are quite often part of the Commonwealth games. In 2014, we had shooting in Barry Buddon in the north of Scotland, and I remember watching boxing at the games in Melbourne, so those sports are considered for the Commonwealth games. They happen not to be in these games for logistical reasons more than anything else, but the hon. Member should continue to champion them and take them forward.

In my opinion, the good thing about Glasgow 2014 was that it showed not just that Glasgow could host a Commonwealth games, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Martin Rhodes) suggested, that Glasgow can host events—big events. I cannot remember who it was, but someone also mentioned the UCI championships. We can do those events: we have the infrastructure and we are doing well, but we need to do better.

As the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) suggested, sport has the ability to make us all work together and join together; it brings us all together in common cause. At a time when our country is a little more divided than any of us would like—perhaps the world is too—we need to use events such as the Commonwealth games to show that it does not have to be like that. Indeed, it will not be if the principles and values of the Commonwealth games can be taken forward by everyone involved.

I thank everyone in Glasgow who is working so hard: George Black, Phil Batty, Jon Doig—I will probably miss out some people who I really should mention—Ian Reid and Billy Garrett from Glasgow Life. A whole panoply of people make sure that these games are a success, and I hope that everyone who comes to Glasgow to see them very much enjoys the games and Glasgow too.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for the Glasgow Commonwealth Games 2026.

3.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

Myanmar: Human Rights

4 pm

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

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

That this House has considered Government support for human rights in Myanmar.

I have not spoken under your chairmanship before, Mr Twigg—it is an honour to do so. I thank the Minister for attending. We have had meetings with his colleague at the Foreign Office, and I know it is an issue of great interest to the Government.

Ukraine, Iran and Sudan have captured the headlines, but Myanmar is the civil war the world has forgotten. I went as Foreign Secretary in 2018, deeply concerned about the genocide of the Rohingya that had happened a year earlier. I was fobbed off by the Tatmadaw, the Burmese army and the Myanmar authorities. But at least we thought the country was taking tentative steps towards democracy, and following extensive engagement, we did manage to get two Reuters journalists, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, released after they had reported on the genocide. Then things started going backwards.

In 2021 we had a military coup. Aung San Suu Kyi was imprisoned, and since then we have had a vicious civil war with appalling human rights abuses by the military dictatorship. Some 7,000 to 8,000 people have been killed, 30,000 have been arbitrarily detained, 40 political parties have been banned, and there are now 14,000 political prisoners, including nearly all the pro-democracy candidates in past elections. There are daily airstrikes on homes, schools, hospitals, clinics, churches and other places of worship. There is arson, torture and sexual violence, and 4 million people displaced from homes.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way as he is beginning to make a very cogent case about the human rights abuses happening in Myanmar. I intervene because he raised the issue of airstrikes. Since the last sanctions were imposed on Myanmar by the UK 591 days ago, there has been a significant increase in airstrikes by the Burmese military. Does he agree that we need a new round of sanctions, including potentially targeting the military-owned Mytel mobile phone network, as well as vessels and companies identified by Amnesty and Reuters as delivering jet fuel and materials for making explosives, some of it originating in Iran?

Sir Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Gentleman has pre-empted what I was going to say, but I absolutely agree that we have to go further. In terms of the current situation, in nine days' time, Aung San Suu Kyi will mark her 81st birthday. She has recently moved to house arrest but is still unable to contact her family. We must not

[*Sir Jeremy Hunt*]

forget that life under military rule means no freedom of expression, no free press, no free courts, internet restrictions, sham elections and total bloodshed as the Government conduct a vicious civil war with total impunity when it comes to civilian casualties.

Afzal Khan (Manchester Rusholme) (Lab): The genocide against the Rohingya Muslims, which has been ongoing for almost a decade, is one of the most horrifying examples of Islamophobia. Does the right hon. Member agree that the UK should join the EU and the USA in imposing sanctions on the military-controlled Myanmar oil and gas enterprises, which is a major source of revenue for the military?

Sir Jeremy Hunt: I will respond to that as soon as I have taken the final intervention that I am going to take.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the right hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. Since the illegal military coup, the junta has executed a brutal, calculated campaign targeting predominantly Christian ethnic regions in Chin, Kayah and Kachin states as well as Sagaing and Yangon. Reports from Open Doors confirmed that historical Christian communities face unprecedented violence, with churches being bombed via indiscriminate military airstrikes. Villages have been razed to the ground and Christian pastors are being unlawfully detained, disappeared or killed. Will the right hon. Gentleman join me in urging the Government to do all in their power to support those Christians, as well as Muslims and all those persecuted for their faith in that nation?

Sir Jeremy Hunt: The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and I have campaigned for many years on freedom of religion and belief, and I agree that what is happening to Christians in Myanmar is an absolute tragedy. I totally agree with the hon. Member for Manchester Rusholme (Afzal Khan) that we have to do more when it comes to sanctions.

I say to the Minister that I am very aware of the trade-offs and challenges in foreign policy, and that the environment we are in at the moment is far from benign when it comes to human rights. Tempting though it may be to say—although I know the Minister would not—that because the UK has its own problems, we should not get too involved in this, we matter when it comes to Myanmar. That is for a very simple, straightforward reason, which is that, on the Security Council, we hold the pen when it comes to Myanmar, so it is our responsibility to make sure that the UN is aware of what is happening there. Given what is happening, it is a special responsibility for us to galvanise the United Nations to do everything in its power to end the bloodshed and brutal oppression of the Burmese people.

I recognise that sanctions are in place, and I know that the Minister cares deeply about human rights, but we can do more. One of the biggest things we can do is repeat what I did in 2018 and organise a high-level meeting on Myanmar, chaired by the Foreign Secretary, at the United Nations General Assembly in September to make sure that we draw the attention of everyone who attends that vital meeting in New York to what is happening and to the terrible suffering of the Burmese

people. If it is the only thing we do—I do not believe it is the only thing we can do—at least the UK will have made sure that the world knows what is happening in Myanmar.

Myanmar might not care too much about the UK as a country, but it cares about China, the country that is protecting it; it cares about the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, which is sitting on the fence apart from the brave exception of the Philippines; and it cares about the UN, so this is a major moment where we must make sure that we do our duty. There are other things. We all know that the aid budget is being cut, but if the UK finds something to support humanitarian efforts—obviously, without channelling it through a corrupt and merciless Government—other countries will follow. And for the sake of posterity and of future victims, it is essential that we give full support to any efforts to assemble evidence of war crimes, genocide or crimes against humanity, including referring the Arakan army to the International Court of Justice.

Will the Minister commit to the Foreign Secretary chairing a high-level meeting at UNGA in September? Will the Government respond to the final report of the former UN special rapporteur on human rights in Myanmar, Tom Andrews? Will the Government consider invoking article 14 of the Rome statute of the International Criminal Court to request an investigation into mass atrocity crimes in Myanmar? Will the UK sanction military-controlled banks in the way that other countries have?

Sadly, the world's most powerful democracy, the United States, is currently showing little interest in human rights across the world. Partly as a result, some autocrats are beginning to think that they can literally get away with murder, but the US is not the only democracy on the planet. There are us, European democracies, Australia, Canada, Japan, Korea and many other countries that share our democratic values. Britain does not have to stand on the sidelines, Britain must not stand on the sidelines, and I hope that when we hear from the Minister, he will tell us that Britain will not stand on the sidelines.

4.9 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Stepney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I am grateful to Burma Campaign UK for its support, as well as to other non-governmental organisations that have supported the all-party parliamentary group on Burma. Burma Campaign UK provides secretariat support to the APPG, which I co-chair with the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt). I congratulate him on securing this very important debate. I also thank him for his leadership on this issue both when he was Foreign Secretary and my party and I were in opposition, and from the Back Benches, and for his support to those of us who are campaigning on the plight of the Rohingya Muslims. Almost 1 million were expelled to Cox's Bazar in neighbouring Bangladesh, and for seven years they have remained in the camps there. It is a population similar to that of Wales, and they are in horrific circumstances, so I am grateful for the support that the right hon. Member has provided.

Today we are debating the ongoing deterioration of human rights in Myanmar/Burma. Initially it was ethnic groups—the largest being the Rohingya population,

although there were other ethnic groups—but now it is the whole population who face persecution by the Burmese military.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Friern Barnet) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, relative to the other crises in the world, in Sudan, Gaza and other places, the long-running and tragic dispute between the regime and the many people who live in Myanmar/Burma deserves much more attention—not just in this House, which is what we are providing as Back Benchers, but from the Government?

Rushanara Ali: I absolutely agree and I thank my hon. Friend for her work, in both opposition and government, on this very important issue.

It is five years since the military coup, and what we have seen is further deterioration of the situation. Despite the heroic resistance and international condemnation, the military have instituted a regime of repression and violence on a massive scale. Military abuses are widespread, and 3.6 million people have been internally displaced. That is on top of the 1 million who were forced out to neighbouring countries. According to Amnesty International, military atrocities, which include war crimes and crimes against humanity, have escalated as the junta has sought to entrench its rule through abusive military operations and stage-managed elections.

Armed conflict has also escalated further. The Burmese military are also stepping up airstrikes targeting health facilities and civilians, using deadly double-tap airstrikes for the first time. The regime has restricted freedom of speech, the media and the internet. As well as experiencing restrictions on human rights, the people are paying a huge economic price.

I visited Myanmar twice before the military coup, and the situation was already bad, but this is significantly worse. In Rakhine state, we saw massive human rights violations against the Rohingya Muslims, but also other minorities. At that time, 100,000 people were internally displaced. Their circumstances are even worse because of the conflict there. Many international investors have of course pulled out, and the economic circumstances have got worse.

In the UK, over the years before the military coup, a huge amount of work was done from the Back Benches to get our Government to play a strong leadership role. I am proud of the work that we did on a cross-party basis, which led to Britain playing a leading role in ensuring that people spoke up and sought a referral to the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court. Our strong historical ties leave us with not just a special responsibility, as the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash pointed out, but an expectation from the people of Myanmar that we will stand with them in their struggle for human rights and democracy.

Following the 2021 military coup, the UK co-ordinated with global allies on the imposition of targeted sanctions, which limited the access of the Myanmar military to revenue and arms. In the absence of progress on a UN-mandated global arms embargo, which we campaigned for, we successfully lobbied countries to unilaterally impose their own arms embargoes. We joined international justice initiatives such as the Rohingya genocide case at the ICJ and publicly supported the referral of the

situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court. I am grateful to Philippe Sands and others who have been involved with that work.

That did not happen by accident. It happened because Members of Parliament worked together to ensure that the UK Government supported the ICJ referral. However, we are going backwards. We are now at risk of losing that momentum and jeopardising our position of leadership on this critical issue.

Like the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash, I recognise that there are huge pressures on our country, with conflicts raging in the middle east, Ukraine and elsewhere, but we have a responsibility to take action. We have seen that, when we work with our allies, we can make a difference.

Sadly, no new sanctions targeting the Myanmar military have been imposed since 2024 and since my party came into government. That is deeply disappointing and I hope that the Minister will work with us to look at what more we can do on sanctions.

In the following year, the number of airstrikes by the Myanmar military almost doubled. The tactics of the military have also changed. It is moving away from airstrikes mainly targeting frontlines to a greater focus on civilian targets, including health facilities. Tactics have since changed again, with several jets engaging in airstrikes simultaneously, dropping a far greater number of bombs.

Given the escalating human rights violations, the British Government should be doing everything they can to identify and sanction sources of revenue and arms and to encourage our allies to do the same.

I call on the Minister to make sure that we work with our partners. We have not joined Canada in sanctioning the jet fuel sector, despite the humanitarian and economic impacts of airstrikes, let alone the lives lost. We have not joined the European Union and the United States of America in sanctioning Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise—the military-controlled body responsible for oil and gas extraction and a major source of revenue to the Myanmar military. We have not joined the United States of America in sanctioning international telecommunications company, Myanmar Mytel, which is not only a military joint-venture company that provides revenue to the military, but is also used to track and arrest human rights activists.

There are a number of other sanctions that other countries have been party to that we have not. I call on the Minister to look at those areas and to work with our partners on that.

I look forward to working with Ministers in the Foreign Office, as well as the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash and other members of the all-party parliamentary group, to make sure that we take action to stand with the Burmese people and to ensure that they get justice.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): I am delighted to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) for securing this debate. I pay tribute to him and to my hon. Friend the

[Mr Hamish Falconer]

Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali) for their work as co-chairs of the all-party parliamentary group. As a Foreign Minister myself now, though in a lesser position than he occupied, I know that the right hon. Gentleman's choice to prioritise Myanmar during his time as Foreign Secretary was important and made a difference. Both colleagues have helped to ensure that the voices of those in Myanmar suffering grave abuses of their fundamental human rights are not forgotten.

I am also grateful to the other hon. Members who have spoken today to show continued strong concern for the people of Myanmar from both sides of this House. I will endeavour to respond to the points raised.

Decades of impunity and military rule have eroded civil and political rights and left minority groups pushed to the margins. Since the coup in February 2021, the human rights crisis has fed directly into the humanitarian emergency described by the right hon. Gentleman and by my hon. Friend. Sustained international engagement, including by the UK, is essential. We will not stand by.

The military continues to commit serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law. Airstrikes on civilian areas, including schools and hospitals, have become commonplace. Punitive village burnings continue and religious freedoms, which were referenced by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), are under constant threat.

Sexual violence, including the use of rape as a weapon of war, continues to be used as a political tool, particularly against women and LGBTQ individuals. More than 22,000 people are arbitrarily detained, including political leaders, journalists and human rights defenders. The announcement of the conditional release of former President Win Myint and the purported transfer to house arrest of Aung San Suu Kyi fall far short of the widespread and full releases that are urgently needed. The legal system in Myanmar continues to be used to silence dissent, as the ongoing unjust detention of Aung San Suu Kyi and many others makes clear. We are deeply concerned by reports of torture and by restricted access to medical care in detention.

Civic space in the country is immensely constrained, and digital surveillance and repression have turned Myanmar into one of the most restrictive online environments in the world. Registration laws continue to limit the ability of civil society organisations to operate across the country. The recent elections held by the regime were neither free nor fair: all meaningful opposition was excluded, and the elections were accompanied by intimidation, coercion and abuse, including severe sentences under the election protection law.

As the right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash said, the impact of those violations extends far beyond Myanmar's borders. More than 1 million Rohingya refugees remain in Bangladesh, with many more displaced across the region. At the same time, organised criminal networks, including scam centres relying on trafficked labour, continue to thrive in an environment of lawlessness. This poses risks to regional and international security.

Against that grim backdrop, this country must continue to stand in solidarity with the people of Myanmar. We are a leading donor, and are continuing to take practical

action. In the past financial year, we have provided more than £80 million in lifesaving assistance, including emergency healthcare, protection, education and food, delivered through trusted partners. Human rights considerations are rightly central to our programming, with a focus on women, children, people with disabilities and other groups at heightened risk. We work to ensure that more than 65% of our funding goes to local organisations, including faith-based organisations.

Catherine West: Given the decline in the aid budget, will those commitments remain, or may there have to be a reduction in aid to Myanmar?

Mr Falconer: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who did such a good job in her previous guise as the Minister for the Indo-Pacific. We are standing by these commitments. It will be for the current Minister for the Indo-Pacific, my hon. Friend the Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra), to make future determinations about her portfolio.

Over the past year, we have reached more than 1.4 million people with humanitarian assistance and provided 1.3 million with essential health services. We will continue to stand by those who have been most affected.

Jim Shannon: In my earlier intervention, I mentioned the work that Open Doors does in Myanmar and across the world. Has the Minister had an opportunity—I suspect that he has—to contact Open Doors, find out what it is trying to do there, and work in partnership with it, for everyone's benefit?

Mr Falconer: Sorry—I could not quite hear the hon. Gentleman, but I think he was asking whether we have been engaging with faith-based groups in Myanmar. We have, and the Minister for the Indo-Pacific has been focused on those questions. We recognise that the best way of reaching those most in need in these difficult times is through some of the faith-based groups in Myanmar.

Alongside critical humanitarian assistance, longer-term action is needed to end impunity and break cycles of violence. We will continue to support international accountability mechanisms, including the United Nations independent investigative mechanism for Myanmar. That work is already contributing to proceedings at the International Court of Justice and to the important investigations of the ICC. As colleagues are aware, we established the Myanmar Witness project, which verifies evidence using open-source intelligence and trains local actors to do the same.

I hear from colleagues the desire for further sanctions, but I am sure they are familiar with why Foreign Office Ministers are circumspect on such questions. We have imposed 19 rounds of sanctions already, targeting individuals and entities responsible for serious human rights abuses, but of course we keep these questions under regular review.

It is vital to lay the foundations for an inclusive future led by the people of Myanmar. That is why we support efforts to protect civic space, strengthen local civil society and enable dialogue. That includes work to improve women's participation in peace and security, support bottom-up approaches to governance, and reinforce economic and social rights through education, health

and livelihoods initiatives. Through the John Bunyan fund, we have supported organisations working to tackle hate speech, misinformation and online harms that drive discrimination and violence.

We continue to support the Rohingya, who, as many colleagues powerfully set out, have faced decades of persecution. In Bangladesh, the UK is the second largest donor to the Rohingya crisis, and the Foreign Secretary announced an additional £27 million in September 2025. That includes targeted protection and support for women and girls, delivered through local partners. My colleague, Baroness Chapman, visited Cox's Bazar camps in November 2025 and saw at first hand the UK's programmes of support. That reaffirms our commitment to life-saving assistance and the safe, voluntary return of refugees when conditions allow.

The right hon. Member for Godalming and Ash spoke with authority and experience about how central multilateral action is on these questions. As he says, we are indeed the penholder, and we are working to keep the situation firmly on the Security Council's agenda, including through resolution 2669 and regular meetings. At the Human Rights Council and the General Assembly, we continue to lead and support resolutions that maintain international scrutiny and mandate independent mechanisms. We work closely with the UN special rapporteur and the Secretary-General's special envoy. We engage actively with partners in New York and Geneva to amplify Myanmar voices on international platforms. I heard the right hon. Gentleman's suggestion for the Foreign Secretary in high-level week, and I will pass that on.

We also recognise the importance of regional engagement—particularly the leadership of ASEAN and the five-point consensus. Through our international engagement, we consistently push for progress on ending violence, securing humanitarian access and advancing inclusive dialogue—all are essential to improving the human rights situation.

The human rights situation in Myanmar remains grave, but withdrawal or silence is not an option, and we will certainly not sit on the sidelines. Sustained pressure, co-ordinated engagement and targeted support can reduce harm, advance accountability and help lay the foundations for a future that respects the rights of all. The resilience and courage shown by communities across Myanmar, even in the face of extraordinary hardship, demands nothing less. We are committed to upholding international human rights standards and working with partners across the House to support the aspirations of the people of Myanmar for an inclusive and peaceful future.

Question put and agreed to.

Water Supply in Kent

4.30 pm

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): I beg to move,
That this House has considered water supply in Kent.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Mr Twigg. I am grateful to colleagues for coming to the debate, but it is disappointing that we are having to have it at all, after the fourth incident—and the third major one—disrupting the supply of water to South East Water customers in six months. Between November and December, approximately 24,000 customers experienced low water pressure or little to no water supply. When supplies were restored, a boil water notice was issued. In January, about 30,000 customers again had to put up with little or no water supply. In April, around 6,000 customers experienced water supply problems, which South East Water said were “caused by a burst water main.”

At the end of May, as we know, customers had to cope for 11 days with interruptions to their water supply. On that most recent occasion, around 22,000 customers across Kent, including roughly 4,000 in my constituency, were impacted.

Last week, during an urgent question secured by the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale), I spoke about how, like many of my constituents, I have lost all faith in South East Water due to its repeated failures. Access to clean, reliable water is not a luxury; it is a fundamental expectation. When people turn on their taps, they should be able to rely on a consistent supply of water. That is the absolute minimum any water company should guarantee, but all too often South East Water is not meeting that minimum expectation.

The repeated disruptions are not only inconvenient but deeply distressing for residents, who should be able to rely on water. The impact of these repeated failures is evident from the Consumer Council for Water report last week, which showed that trust in South East Water had been “materially weakened”. More than half of those surveyed now store bottled water at home in case of future incidents.

The most recent incident occurred during a short period of hot weather, when the consequences of shortages can be especially acute. It affected households; farmers, whose livelihoods depend on a steady supply of water; and vulnerable individuals in care homes, where continuity of basic services is critical to wellbeing and safety. The wider economic impact must also be recognised. Hotels, restaurants and pubs across parts of the county were forced to close, losing vital income during what should have been a busy period coinciding with the school half-term holidays.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman talked about farmers, who need water to give to their cattle. If they cannot do that, it is almost an animal tragedy waiting to happen. When there are water supply problems, many people suffer, but particularly farmers, who may have to look after 150 to 200 cattle, sheep or whatever it may be. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that farmers need to be looked after as a priority?

Sojan Joseph: I absolutely agree. There are many farmers in my constituency, and I have heard about the

[*Sojan Joseph*]

challenges they face when there are water shortages and they do not know when the water will come back—even the uncertainty is difficult for them.

For businesses, loss of trade is not simply a temporary inconvenience; it can have lasting repercussions. Taken together, South East Water's failures highlight a pattern of underperformance that is no longer acceptable and that demands urgent attention and accountability. I welcome the confirmation from Ofwat that the recent incident will be part of its ongoing investigation into South East Water, but can my hon. Friend the Minister set out what actions the Government are taking to strengthen compensation arrangements for customers and what is being done to ensure that those affected by serious outages receive proper support and redress?

I want to recognise those who did their best during very difficult circumstances, including staff from local authorities, other agencies and the health and social care sector, as well as South East Water's employees on the ground. I would also like to pay tribute to the Water Minister and her officials for the way they actively engaged during the latest incident. In the conversations the Government had with South East Water, did the company give any assurances that lessons would be learned? It is important to have a robust evaluation of the measures put in place to assess what was effective and, more importantly, what needs improving.

According to the company, it used tankers to supply more than 2 million litres of water to its network. More than a week after taps started running dry, I was still being contacted by constituents experiencing supply issues. The company needs to explain why it took so long to restore supply during this and other recent disruptions.

South East Water reported distributing more than 1 million litres of bottled water to customers. However, one constituent on the priority services register did not receive water at her property. After my office intervened on her behalf, we were informed that water would be delivered later that day, by which time the constituent had confirmed that her supply had already been restored. The issue of people on the priority services register being left waiting for water was raised in the House during previous outages, but it continues to arise. In any evaluation that takes place, consideration needs to be given to the location of water distribution stations. Those living in rural areas, elderly residents or those without access to a car cannot travel far to collect bottled water. Provision must reflect need.

Communication is another persistent failure. Constituents received little or no information, and updates were often inconsistent. I know that is something that the Water Minister has raised with the company, but it is simply not good enough for constituents to be left wondering what is happening to their water supply, or when it will be restored.

South East Water's communication with Members of Parliament also needs to improve. During the recent meningitis outbreak, alongside daily updates from the UK Health Security Agency, MPs were offered regular virtual meetings to answer questions. Although South East Water sent out daily email updates, the information I received from constituents often contradicted what

the company was saying. It took direct contact from my office to request a virtual briefing before one was arranged.

Of course, the most important lesson to be learned is how to prevent future water supply disruption in the first place. Each time an incident occurs, a different reason is given, whether that is a plant failure, severe weather, a burst water main or increased demand during hot weather. Those explanations do not change the underlying reality: for years the company has prioritised shareholders' interests over those of its customers, and has failed to make the necessary investment in its infrastructure.

After years of under-investment, South East Water's ageing and leaking infrastructure is struggling to cope. That cannot be allowed to continue. After all, if my constituents have poor service from their telephone provider, they can change their network, but because water companies have a monopoly, South East Water's customers have no choice but to put up with this failing company.

This lack of resilience in our water infrastructure is particularly concerning, given the need for more housing in my constituency and across the county. During the Conservative Government's last year in power, planning applications were at their lowest point for a decade. As we look to fix this problem, it is important that housebuilding takes place with natural resources such as water in mind. That includes ensuring that water companies and housing developers make the necessary investment in infrastructure.

What action can the Government take to give councils, such as Ashford and Folkestone and Hythe in my constituency, and other planning authorities confidence that all water companies make that investment, to ensure that current needs are met and that future growth, including the demand for affordable housing, can be supported? Building on the proposals set out in the water White Paper, will the Minister update the House on what action the Government are taking to deliver a water system that the people of Kent can depend on?

Climate change makes this challenge more urgent. Last week, the Environmental Audit Committee took evidence on the impact of extreme heat, and we heard that we are likely to see more frequent heatwaves and periods of extreme temperatures. Kent and the south-east of England will be particularly exposed, which will have implications for water supply. Hotter weather increases demand, while dry summers reduce availability. As the Environment Agency has pointed out, Kent is already marked by exceptionally low rainfall.

While I welcome the proposed Broad Oak reservoir, South East Water is not expected to submit a planning application until 2028 at the earliest. That will take time to deliver, and even if it is in place, further action will still be required to safeguard supply. In last week's urgent question, the Minister mentioned that the Government are looking at desalination plants as part of the longer-term answer to water supply challenges. Those could provide a reliable source of clean drinking water that is independent of rainfall, particularly during prolonged dry periods. I would welcome further details on the role the Government see for desalination within a balanced, long-term strategy for Kent's water supply.

I would like to ask the Minister one final question. This Government have taken strong action by nationalising the steel industry to protect it for future generations. They have also addressed the failure of rail privatisation by bringing rail companies back into public ownership. Given the steps they have already taken on water, which include passing the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 and giving the Environment Agency more powers to monitor water companies, what consideration have the Government given to taking failing water companies into public ownership?

4.41 pm

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I apologise for the untimely interruption earlier, Mr Twigg—if I had been in the Chair, I would have been shouting at me. I wanted to open my mobile phone because at half-past 4 this afternoon a lady from Herne Bay texted me to say:

“Sewage is being discharged into Herne Bay from a combined sewage overflow”.

That is a common occurrence, and most Members present who represent coastal seats will have had messages like that over and over again. We can go around this circuit as many times as we like; we went around it last Wednesday, and then again on Monday, so I suspect that the Minister will get fed up listening to a cracked record.

Yet again, I have to highlight the fact that we are building hundreds and hundreds of houses in our coastal towns and hinterland, for which there is no water supply and no adequate sewerage. I learned today from one of my excellent local councillors in Dover, Martin Porter, that Southern Water is resisting a planning application for a village, simply because it cannot provide a facility to deal with the sewage the little estate will generate, any more than South East Water can supply the water that will be needed. Yet, as we have discussed in the last few days, the water companies have a statutory duty to provide water to every house built and—Southern Water is the sewage authority for both the areas I have mentioned—to dispose of the sewage, but they simply cannot do it.

Yet again, I make this point: will the Minister please take on board the need to ensure that the water companies are statutory consultees for all planning applications, so that we get a clear steer as to whether water supplies and sewage facilities are available, before yet more houses are built?

4.44 pm

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg. I commend my hon. and caring Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for securing this important debate, which is very pressing for everyone in Kent. As the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) has just said, this issue is causing a lot of anxiety and aggravation for residents across the county.

In my constituency, there are two main elements to that: the supply and the outfall—the sewage. In terms of supply, my constituency is in one of the driest parts of the country—drier even than other parts of Kent, which is already the driest part of the country—because we

are on the north side of the north downs and in the rain shadow. That is great for growing apples and pears, and for a lot of the nature and wildlife that we have, but it keeps our marshes a little drier than they would be otherwise.

However, we have real challenges with the supply of water, even with the large investment coming into the area, particularly to the Isle of Sheppey, which is exceptionally vulnerable. It is connected to the mainland of Great Britain by only a single water main that goes under the bridge. I had the pleasure of going underneath the Swale to see it, and it is surprisingly narrow. The entire island—nearly 40,000 people—is supplied by that very narrow pipe. Other infrastructure on the island is old, weak and creaking, and the cast iron water mains need replacing. I am grateful that the extra investment will mean that the 11 km east-west water main across the island will be replaced.

The fundamental problem, though, is that we have not been building reservoirs across most of the country, to ensure that we can store water in the wetter months of the year. Sittingbourne is an industrial town with huge water users: we have the largest paper mill in the entirety of the United Kingdom—the second biggest in Europe—which uses massive amounts of water, as do other key industries in my constituency’s towns. They are competing with residents—my constituents—for drinking water. Ironically, the water level in Sittingbourne is very high. Since we lost the other water mill, the River Bourne, which runs underneath the town, and the river at Periwinkle are both running high. We have water in the area that is coming off the north downs, but we cannot necessarily access it for industrial use. There is a bit of abstraction, but not enough. We cannot access water for industries that could really benefit the area, such as hydrogen plants and other things that might come online.

There are options for desalination. We are coastal and have lots of marsh areas, so I would appreciate hearing what the options for Kent are from the Minister. Other parts of the world that are even drier manage better than we do, so there is a fundamental question about how resilient we are in Kent. I would also like to hear from the Minister whether we have a clear plan for securing that sort of resilience across the supply by the end of the decade. What does that look like? My local council, Swale borough council, is extremely concerned by this. It has written to Southern Water and South East Water about the supply problems we have been facing and it wants to understand what the plans are for the future.

As my hon. and caring Friend the Member for Ashford said, we want to understand why the communication has been so poor. It is poor partly because we have a hodgepodge of different organisations—multiple water companies, a drainage board and, to some extent, the Environment Agency as well, which is involved in land drainage. Who people need to go to is often confusing, and when crises are happening, it is hard to get through to the right people; it is not joined up well enough with local government. Recently, as the crisis was happening in places such as Whitstable and Herne Bay, we got a lot of emergency supply come into the area, particularly the Isle of Sheppey. Bottled water stations were set up—they thankfully did not need to be used—and water tankers were moved on, but even while that was

[Kevin McKenna]

happening, it was still hard for local councillors and me to find out exactly what was happening and where. I got a lot of agitated calls from residents and councillors saying, “Do you know what’s happening? How likely are we to lose water supply?” That needs to be tightened up.

In terms of the drainage off the land, the sewage that is going into our waterways is a real concern, as the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich said. I am grateful that Sheerness beach recently got its blue flag status renewed—please come to Sheerness for your summer holidays. Lots of local residents have been looking at the water. In Milton Creek in Sittingbourne, Raybel Charters, a group that restored the barge there and are in the water a lot, found that it is dirtier than the River Seine. Open water swimmers have been doing inspections at Queenborough and found bacteria there. National treasure and local legend Danny Dyer, who has been filming on the Isle of Sheppey, has also been investigating, and has found shocking amounts of *E. coli* and coliforms in the water—he does not want to damage the tourist reputation, given his caravan park.

This is a real risk, and I want to understand what we can do about it. In particular, what are we going to do about securing future supply, especially through reservoirs and desalination plants? What is the plan, Minister?

4.50 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for securing the debate.

For people in the Weald of Kent, problems with the water supply have become depressingly common. The most recent outages, last month, left thousands of people without water or experiencing severely low pressure during a heatwave. South East Water, which covers the Weald of Kent, said that it had planned for the heatwave, but thousands of people across the Weald were still once again left without running water, unable to wash, cook, or run their businesses or farms. That followed a larger outage earlier this year, which left tens of thousands of people across Kent and Sussex without running water for days. That time, South East Water blamed a freeze and thaw event and the impact of Storm Goretti.

Come rain or shine, there are clearly serious problems at South East Water. On both occasions, but especially in January, communication was poor or non-existent. South East Water was unable to answer even basic questions, such as, “If I send my constituents to this bottled water station, will there be any bottled water for them when they get there?” The company took days to respond to emails to its supposedly instantaneous email address. It simply had no idea what was going on. For far too many people, this intermittent service and poor communication are part and parcel of life in the Weald of Kent.

Earlier this year, I ran a water survey to ask people about their historical experiences with South East Water. Nearly 3,000 households responded, and it was immediately clear that the catastrophic handling of January’s outage was not a lapse in form. The company has been providing a terrible service for years, and people are absolutely

right to be fed up with it. One disabled resident reported that, despite being on South East Water’s priority list for receiving bottled water during times of crisis, they received no water at all for the duration of the outage. Farmers, who simply cannot afford to have water shut off for days on end, reported that farms and livestock did not even seem to be a consideration. One local farmer reported that, despite many hours on the phone, South East Water were

“totally unhelpful and rude, suggesting [that] I go and pick up a pack of water”.

To put that into context, this farmer pays for 250 litres of water a day. The company told him to go and pick up a pack of water.

The sheer volume of the individual stories was horrific—one woman who had just given birth to children had to take her toddler in the back of the car to the bottled water stations, because she was on the vulnerable list, but deliveries had not been made. Of those who responded to the survey, four in every five said they had been left without running water over the past decade, and four in 10 said that they had been without running water four or more times over that same period. That is absurd in 21st-century Britain.

Those self-reported experiences have been mirrored in recent months by a number of official inquiries into South East Water’s performance, both historically and in relation to the January outages. Ofwat has recently proposed a £22 million fine following supply failures between 2020 and 2023, noting that South East Water “has not taken ownership” of the underlying issues that caused the outages. Given the recent outages, it is clear that it still has not learned a thing.

The report produced by the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee was perhaps the most damning. It described the company as “devoid of proper leadership” and as “an unaccountable clique.” I thank the members of the Committee for their work in scrutinising South East Water’s leadership, particularly my hon. Friends the Members for South Northamptonshire (Sarah Bool) and for Bridlington and The Wolds (Charlie Dewhurst).

In the light of those reports, both the chairman of South East Water, Chris Train, and the CEO, David Hinton, have resigned. That was a long time coming. Given their handling of the outages in January and the way they responded to the subsequent investigations, it was clear that change at South East Water was impossible under their leadership. They had shown no understanding of why they had failed, and no appreciation whatsoever of the harm they had caused to the people who rely on their service.

Although the resignations are very much welcome, the problems at South East Water did not start with Mr Hinton’s appointment as chief executive and will not automatically end with his resignation. As the results of the survey demonstrate, the issues at South East Water are endemic. I hope the company will use the change of leadership as an opportunity for true transformation and to review how it operates, plans and communicates with the public.

I want to use this opportunity to urge the regulator and the Minister, who I know is very focused on this issue, to do everything they can to encourage the company to go through a proper period of transformation. In this place and elsewhere, we will continue to hold it to

account. However, it is important that South East Water is not just punished retrospectively, or after the fact, for its failures. Instead, we must ensure that it is taking the right steps to stop this problem becoming a permanent feature of life in the Weald of Kent.

4.55 pm

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for securing this debate, and I am also grateful for all the other debates that we have had across Parliament on this issue. In addition, I thank the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee for its detailed, scrupulous analysis and for undertaking to meet key stakeholders in the community—I have used some of that feedback for this speech.

In my view, South East Water is manifestly a corporate failure, which has been allowed to metastasise over the last 10 years. That has left customers paying the price for something that is ultimately a basic need in every single household. That failure stems from four key factors. South East Water failed to effectively monitor its management of the only product that it distributes; it failed to maintain its assets, from pipes to supply chains and ultimately the storage areas and the places where water was secured from; it failed to invest in its infrastructure; and it failed to respond to and communicate with not only MPs and council leaders but with other key stakeholders in the region, including the Kent Resilience Forum, leaving people exposed when incidents occurred.

Like others, I celebrate the resignations of key senior managers, but my focus now is on how we drive the company forward so that there is not a repeat of these incidents, which have gone on since before this Government—other incidents occurred from 2020 to 2023. More broadly, it must be said that incidents occur in other parts of the country, albeit on a smaller scale, so this represents a structural failure within the sector. I welcome the Cunliffe review and some of the reforms that we are making to water regulation, so that we can take some of these issues by the horns and deal with them. Fundamentally, though, my constituents want redress.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford mentioned, we know from the statistics that 24,000 customers were impacted in December and that 22,000 were impacted in May. Although we did not have water shortages in my constituency, several key villages—Wouldham, Burham, Eccles and Larkfield—and the town of Snodland were placed in the “at risk” category. Although their water supply was not restricted, in effect they given a warning that it would be and had to prepare for that, and they are next to a key water supply station.

I was inundated by messages from concerned people over the Christmas period—“When is this going to happen?”, “What is going to occur?”—so I would say that the company first needs to fundamentally improve its communications, which I think have been lamentable. Nor do I think that it was particularly effective at communicating with Ministers on how it manages crisis situations, and the way it communicated with local council leaders, local community leaders, MPs and others was absolutely atrocious.

The senior management of the company has now changed, but what processes have been put in place to ensure an absolutely clear line of sight and experience in communication? Indeed, one of the outcomes from 2023 was that South East Water was supposed to improve communication, but it has clearly learned absolutely no lessons.

My second point is about the company’s failure to maintain its assets. I know that colleagues here today will talk about Pembury works, Bewl Water and parts of the supply chain, but water companies are supposed to present to Parliament five-year capital management plans and get support from their shareholders for where that will go in future, so there is a real question about whether shareholders were holding the company responsible. Also, why did the company’s own internal processes not even record some of these events?

It was quite telling that when David Hinton appeared before the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, he said, “Well, we couldn’t have foreseen some of these events.” Possibly not, but that was because the company was not monitoring the very things that it needed to monitor before those outcomes occurred. What is the company doing now, and what are the Government doing to press it to act on this?

Investment is also critical. With all the infrastructure expansion we are expecting in Kent—not only new homes but new businesses and industrial and commercial enterprises—there is clearly now demand for future water supply. Given the company’s questionable financial status in terms of worth, where are we heading on its financial sustainability? What are the Government doing to prepare for any financial outcome around financial market confidence in the organisation? Although this is not a Thames Water situation, in my view we are very close to something similar occurring.

Lastly, in my view—this was also the conclusion of the Committee—the company should be held to account according to the standards of public accountability. When water companies fail, how specifically do we intervene—as any businesses or consultancy coming into a business would—to direct some of that change? I worry that, without leadership, the company will drift and these incidents will repeat every six months or every year for the next three years. We need to know that there is light at the end of the tunnel, and my residents need to know that when they pay their water bill at the end of the month, they will get the service that they expect.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): I will call the first Front-Bench spokesperson no later than 5.09 pm. I call Tom Tugendhat, who I am sure will be cognisant of that.

5.1 pm

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge) (Con): I assure you that will not be a problem, Mr Twigg, despite my known verbosity. Sadly, the Minister has heard many of my points before. However, I am grateful that she is here, as whatever any of us have said about South East Water, the one thing that unites us is knowing that she is doing her absolute damndest. She, through her Department, has been absolutely brilliant. Wherever we sit, it is good to see her here. I congratulate the hon. Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) on securing this debate. Funnily enough, I applied for a debate on this topic—he won on this one—but I will still not speak for the whole eight minutes.

[Tom Tugendhat]

This is not the first time we have been here, nor the first time we have had a water outage in Kent, as we have heard from other hon. Members. By my records, this is the fifth major South East Water outage to hit the community I am lucky enough to represent since the start of last year. We heard that there were water shortages this winter because it was too cold, and we heard that there were water shortages this summer because it has been too hot. Frankly, South East Water is the Goldilocks company: it will deliver water only when everything is just right.

The common denominator is clearly not the temperature, so what is it? Obviously, the answer is South East Water. Edenbridge and the surrounding areas, which are part of the community I represent, are served by SES Water, and the situation is completely different. Despite remarkably similar—in fact, almost identical—weather to that which can be found a few metres over the border in South East Water's area, we have not had a single outage—that is remarkable, isn't it?

Although much of the focus over the winter was understandably on Tunbridge Wells, and this time it has been on Whitstable and the areas around Ashford, in reality an outage could happen anywhere. Each time we have had a water outage, a different community has been affected. Across the five outages I have experienced, there were issues in north Tonbridge, south Tonbridge, Penshurst, Plaxtol, Mereworth, Offham, Platt, West Peckham, Wrotham, Addington and Trosley. Each time, it has seemed to catch South East Water by surprise, and its response has always taken too long.

Last week, my right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) secured an urgent question in the Chamber on this topic, during which I said that South East Water is the worst company I have come across in my 11 years as an MP. I am delighted to say that many people have been in touch on social media to confirm their own impressions of the company, so I can represent that as the view of the whole constituency.

Here is why: South East Water simply does not know where the problems are coming from. It is constantly astonished that it is expected to deliver water—it is almost as though it thought its job was merely to rake in the bills. Now, why has this happened, and how will it recover? It causes so many issues that it is impossible to trust any information that it gives during an outage. Usually, we hear directly from residents first.

Let me explain what happened just a few weeks ago in my own community. At 9 o'clock on 28 May, residents at the top of Mereworth lost water. There was no communication at all from South East Water, and nothing on its website. Very late at night, water bottles arrived and were apparently made available only to those on the priority services register. Actually, many of those on the register did not get them. It was only because of an extremely assiduous local councillor, Sarah Hudson, that any of them were picked up and delivered to local residents. It is fantastic that we have such a great local councillor, but we cannot rely on local councillors every night and every time South East Water fails.

It took until Saturday evening for water supplies to be delivered to Mereworth, 36 hours after the water was lost. Again, it was local councillors, this time Matt

Boughton and Sarah Hudson, who facilitated and unloaded the delivery in a pub car park for residents to use. Even worse, come Sunday it was established that Mereworth did not have enough water. It just could not be pumped to the properties. Why? Because the booster had failed twice at Bough Beech reservoir. Why did it fail? The view of residents is that it is in the wrong place.

I have offered South East Water the chance to take me round to see why that did not work, and to explain it with its engineers. But guess what? It said no. Worse than that, exactly the same issue happened in February, and many of the same properties were without water for the same reason. The alternative provision of water was just as slow. Nothing had changed. How do we stop that happening again? There are things that this company needs to do urgently. Some of it has started, including getting rid of the chairman and the chief executive, but it also needs to improve the list of potential bottled water stations.

There is still much more to do. South East Water's business continuity plan is a joke. Its staff are not empowered to develop local knowledge of each town and village and how to establish the best responses. Given the sheer number of communities affected, one would hope it had started yesterday, but it has never started at all.

South East Water also needs to be bolder and braver. It needs to be forthright about the fragility of our water system. It needs to be clear about its inability to serve our community. I am pleased that has started, and that it has objected to the Government's housing target for Tonbridge and Malling's local plan. That is the right thing to do because, despite many of us wanting more homes in our area, if the water supply to current households cannot be guaranteed, how on earth can we supply 20,000 more households across Tonbridge and Malling by 2042?

I had to debate this in this very room in March, and we debated it in the main Chamber only a few years ago. In the debate with Ministers from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, it was very clear that the planning needed to happen. Either the supply of water has to increase dramatically or the housing targets have to be reduced. I know the council is directly engaged with the water delivery taskforce, but I understand that the promised position statement has not materialised—certainly not to the standard that Tonbridge and Malling borough council needs. That will leave the council with no choice. It will have to stand against the Government's housing targets.

The Government seem to have no answers for the simple issue that their housing targets for Kent are way in excess of what South East Water can provide. I once again thank the Minister for her hard work. It is very gratefully received, but there are many challenges ahead.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): The Opposition spokespeople will probably have around six and a half minutes. That will give time for the Minister to wind up and, of course, for the mover of the motion to reply.

5.8 pm

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Twigg, and an honour to follow so many fellow Kent MPs and constituency neighbours.

In December last year, 24,000 properties in Tunbridge Wells were completely without water for a week. The following week, they had a boil notice, so they were without drinking water for two weeks. The stories that my constituents shared are harrowing. Someone who was incontinent with colon cancer was left to clean with wet wipes. Another lady who had a miscarriage was unable to clean herself, compounding the trauma. People fainted outside kidney dialysis centres and had to have CPR. Schools shut, GP surgeries received no bottled water deliveries and, as we have all spoken about, our constituents who are supposedly on the priority register did not receive any supplies. My office became a kind of crisis cell where people were able to feed requests to us to pass on to South East Water.

It would be funny if it was not so serious, but when Dave Hinton was brought in front of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee in January, as he was speaking the water went off again in Tunbridge Wells for a further week. Local businesses in Tunbridge Wells lost millions over both of those outages, and the sum offered by South East Water was paltry. Working with the business improvement district and local businesses, we presented evidence to South East Water and secured a commitment that it would at least look at the size of the compensation it offered. I hope soon to bring the good news to colleagues that South East Water will increase the compensation, but local businesses lost the critical period before Christmas, which is when hospitality businesses make all of their money for the rest of the year.

As has been mentioned, the chair and the CEO have gone. I am glad that we all united around the calls, originating during the December outage, for the CEO to step down—no change could happen at South East Water without the CEO, in particular, going. I have met the new chair, and I am impressed. There are some small seeds and shoots that we can look at, because although the chair and the CEO leaving is necessary, it is not sufficient.

In Tunbridge Wells, we need to look at investment going into Pembury water treatment works specifically, as well as at the interconnections between all of our constituencies. South East Water was cobbled together from 20 other companies over 50 years, and the interconnections have not been built between those separate water networks.

There is another point about shareholders and accountability. South East Water is owned by three major shareholders: the NatWest Group pension fund, Desjardins and Utilities Trust of Australia. One way they make a return on their capital is by charging extortionate interest rates on loans to the company—in the order of 10%. Putting reputational risk aside, it is effectively a risk-free investment because, in reality, the Government back the water network.

South East Water's debt interest runs at £3,000 an hour, so while my constituents did not have water in December, South East Water's shareholders made £1.8 million in interest from the company. The result is that we have under-invested infrastructure that fails and causes outages, leading to the terrible problems we have been speaking about.

I echo what everyone has said about the Minister being extremely forward-leaning and helpful in these crises. She suffered a personal tragedy during one of the

outages in Tunbridge Wells, and before she went off on compassionate leave, she reached out to my office to make sure I had everything I needed from the Department. That speaks to her approach to the job, as well as her professionalism.

The Water (Special Measures) Act 2025 fixes some of the regulation issues. The Liberal Democrats had been calling for a long time for the abolition of Ofwat and the creation of a regulator that brings together all these myriad regulators and strengthens their power, so we are very glad. However, I gently say to the Minister that there is an issue around the debt that the water companies hold.

The sector is worth about £100 billion in asset value, and it borrowed £70 billion against that. A sector that has a 70% debt-to-equity ratio is not a sector that is able to deliver proper investment, and I have spoken about the high interest rates. We are in this mess because of financial engineering by the likes of Macquarie and other investors. Without looking at that financialisation and solving those problems, particularly around debt, it will be difficult to drive the investment required in companies such as South East Water.

I want to touch very briefly on Ofwat, which recently fined South East Water £22 million. I think I have about a minute left.

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): Just a bit less.

Mike Martin: I would argue that, rather than fining the company after the event, we should be forcing it to invest equivalent or larger amounts in infrastructure. I presented a resilience plan drawn up with water experts for Pembury water treatment works. That fine should be commuted. It just goes to Ofwat and then to the Treasury, but that money should be invested in the water network.

I will conclude by looking ahead. The Water (Special Measures) Act is necessary but not sufficient—a bit like getting rid of the chair and CEO. Without tackling the debt burden and the financial structures of many of these firms, in which bonuses are still paid and part of the corporate structure is in the Cayman Islands or whatever, we will not get to the root of the problems in the water sector.

5.15 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Twigg. I thank the hon. Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for securing and opening this debate.

We have heard powerful contributions from across Kent, including from my right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale). I congratulate him on his urgent question last week about important planning issues. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) talked about water use and resilience. My hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) spoke about the impacts on people and, indeed, on animals—I will touch on that. I congratulate her on her water survey and communication with her constituents on these issues. The hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne) highlighted the failures of the water company. My right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat) set out the detail of the outages and highlighted the importance of local knowledge in the response to such situations.

[Dr Neil Hudson]

Over recent weeks, the House has heard a series of testimonies during debates in which many colleagues will have taken part, including on various urgent questions. Taken together, they show that the South East Water issues affecting our constituents are unacceptable, and they make clear—I know that the Minister has been all over this, as we have heard in powerful testimony—our persistent frustration about that company’s failures.

As we have heard, Kent is served primarily by two main water suppliers: South East Water and Southern Water. The county relies heavily on chalk aquifers and bulk-treated water supplies from Southern Water, which, in turn, provides bulk transfers to South East Water. That has caused issues, as the dependency creates its own vulnerabilities. The Government must consider that moving forward.

Kent experiences unusually dry conditions. The Environment Agency’s April 2026 report noted that Kent and south London faced exceptionally low rainfall, with the area receiving just 4 mm of rain in April—equivalent to just 10% of the long-term average—and decreases in soil moisture, average river flows and groundwater levels. I welcome the fact that the Government are moving forward and talking about reservoirs—a reservoir will be built in Broad Oak near Canterbury, although we are concerned about the time it will take to build it—but I hope that they are considering short-term resilience, too.

South East Water supplies drinking water to 2.3 million people across the south-east, but the recent outages have caused deep and widespread frustration and distress. Many customers have experienced low-pressure water or no water at all during the outages, followed by a boil water notice when supplies were finally restored. The consequences—Members will be all over this—have been severe: thousands of homes left without water, schools and libraries forced to close, hospitality businesses shutting their doors, farmers and horse owners worried about their livestock and even hospital appointments moved online. Water companies have repeatedly claimed that they have no duty to provide water for animals, but a 500 kg horse needs around 25 litres a day, while a lactating dairy cow needs upwards of 100 litres—and more in hot weather. The outages have created human and animal welfare issues.

During South East Water’s most recent supply failures, residents were queuing in hot conditions at bottled water stations. I would be grateful if the Minister set out what measures are in place to protect elderly and vulnerable people during such events. What assessment has been made of the mental health impacts of recurring outages, which are becoming distressingly frequent? The Minister will be aware that the Drinking Water Inspectorate launched an investigation and found that the failure was the result of

“long-standing weaknesses and failures in process control, monitoring, maintenance and operational management.”

The chair and chief executive of South East Water have resigned, but what customers really want is change and improvements now and in future. How will the Minister ensure that the new leadership of South East Water works at pace to deliver the upgrades required to prevent outages? Does the Minister agree that this must be a turning point for the company?

A report from the Consumer Council for Water found that fewer than one in 10 South East Water customers were satisfied with how the company handled the supply issues in late 2025, and I am sure that the figure is probably worse now. Over half of customers in vulnerable circumstances who registered for priority services did not receive the support that they expected. Given the focus of the Cunliffe review on long-term water security, will the Government confirm which recommendations they will take forward to address those structural issues and restore public confidence?

As we have heard, unlike for broadband or other utilities, customers cannot switch water supplier. They have no choice over who provides their water, so there must not be a postcode lottery when it comes to reliable supply. Companies that fail their customers must be held to account, so can the Minister confirm when the clean water Bill will be coming down the track with new checks and inspections, and whether the new regulator will have the powers it needs to hold water companies to account?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich talked about the importance of planning issues. Are the Government considering whether water companies should become statutory consultees, given that we have thousands of homes planned in counties around the country, including in Kent and my own county of Essex? We need to know that both water supply and wastage are adequate moving forward.

Reliable and safe water supply and disposal is an issue that unites Members from across the House. We all want our constituents to have not only a reliable water supply but a safe, predictable and dependable one that meets the basic standards necessary for them to live their lives and for businesses to go about their business. Public institutions such as hospitals and schools depend on it, private businesses depend on it and people very much depend on it. Will the Government hold the water companies to account so that we get that right?

Derek Twigg (in the Chair): If the Minister could leave a minute or so for the hon. Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) to wind up, that would be great.

5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Twigg. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph) for securing this debate, and for his excellent work on the Environmental Audit Committee. I am grateful to everyone who has spoken in the debate.

In the time I have, I will do my best to answer as many questions as possible, but I think we are generally united in our feelings about this company and its performance. I express my sympathy again for all those affected by the recent disruption to supply in Kent, and I echo Members’ concerns about the human impact that it had. We heard the story of the lady who had a miscarriage, and about the people who had to use wet wipes, so we can see the impact that the disruption had on people’s lives. This was more than just a supply outage; it has a fundamental impact on everyone’s lives.

Being without water is always very distressing, but that is particularly true during a period of hot weather and during the school half-term. As has been mentioned, it was the third major outage affecting customers. That is simply unacceptable. We all agree that it is important and right that the chair and CEO have resigned. I met the interim chair of South East Water twice during the incident, and I was clear that we need a focused plan for the summer.

We expect the weather to become hot again, so we expect people to increase the amount of water they use. South East Water needs to work more closely with local partners so that it can rebuild trust. Members highlighted that trust has been broken and needs to be restored. It is good to hear that the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) had a positive meeting with the interim chair. Rebuilding trust will take a long time, but we hope that it is starting to show.

Weather can increase the demand for water—of course, it increased demand all around the country—but increased demand led to a supply outage at only one water company. One longer-term cause is the company's failure to invest sufficiently in maintaining and strengthening its infrastructure. A reliable source of clean water is one of the fundamental foundations of a healthy, functioning society. We are rightly proud that we have some of the safest drinking water in the world, but that is no good if it fails to come out of the tap. The situation demands bold action to deliver fundamental, long-term reform, and that is exactly what I am trying to do.

I will try to answer as many questions as I can. Six desalination plants are planned, largely in the south and south-east. One plant will specifically supply water for Sizewell C. Another is currently in operation in the Thames area, but there are also plants planned for Norfolk, Lincolnshire and the south and east coasts.

Members asked what should happen if a company continues to fail. The ultimate action will be to consider special administration. Of course, there is a high bar for special administration on performance grounds. It requires a serious breach of principal duties or of an enforcement order such that it is inappropriate for the company to retain its licence. I want to be clear that the Government are working with all water sector regulators to carefully monitor the performance of all water companies, and we stand ready to intervene, if required, to ensure the continued provision of a vital customer service.

The hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) was right to highlight concerns about poor communication. I echo her support for a true transformation not just in delivery, but in culture, communication and everything that goes with it. She mentioned farms, as did a couple of other hon. Members. I understand from South East Water and other organisations in the Kent resilience forum, which looked at the risk to water supply for a range of locations, including farms, that in general water companies will look to supply alternative water for animals where they are able to, but that it is important for livestock keepers to have appropriate contingency plans. Obviously, if they are not receiving water, I am keen to hear about it.

I come now to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne). I hear his frustration and anger about this. He is right: we need to change things. The performance improvement regime that we are looking to introduce as part of our reforms is about doing that. Rather than being about intervening

every time companies fail, it is about identifying poorly performing companies and getting in there early to support them in improving—it does what it says on the tin. Rather than waiting for failure in order to act, we say, “Okay, these are the poorly performing companies. We need to intervene early and look at why they are poorly performing. Is the reason leadership? Is it culture, asset standards or resilience? Is it that they have not got enough? What is the problem and what do we need to get in there?” That is one of our key reforms. If we are to build resilience, we have to get in there early and do something about it.

I come now to the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale). It was awful—disgusting—to hear about the sewage. He was right to talk about capacity in respect of water and waste water, as was the right hon. Member for Tonbridge (Tom Tugendhat). What are we going to do about water resources? We have a twin-track approach to improving water resilience that considers urgent action on water efficiency and reducing leaks—that is crucial—alongside investment in new supply infrastructure. We are trying to do both at the same time. The infrastructure includes reservoirs and water transfers, but they will not be ready and available tomorrow, so must consider water efficiency.

MHCLG recently ran a consultation, which closed in January, on reforming the statutory consultee system. MHCLG is considering the role of water and sewerage companies in planning applications as it reviews responses to the consultation.

In the meantime, colleagues in MHCLG are implementing a new plan-making system to ensure better join up between water and development planning processes. That includes prescribing water and sewerage companies in “requirement to assist” regulations so that they are obliged to assist with plan making where reasonably requested, and listing water and sewerage companies as consultation bodies, so that they are made aware of key plan-making consultations where they have an interest.

The right hon. Member for Tonbridge was right to highlight specific failings, and I feel his exasperation. He pointed out the problems around trust. I wholeheartedly agree: it is very difficult to have trust in a company that continues to fail.

On the contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna), it is good that that £104 billion investment is there—that is really important. He made a good point about industry use of water. It is a bit bonkers that we use drinking water for cooling systems. I want to do something about that and about the lack of join up. We must look to the local resilience forum as well.

Have I missed anybody? I hope not. No one is shaking their head to tell me I have. In that case, I thank everyone for raising their concerns. I had better be quiet now!

5.29 pm

Sojan Joseph: I thank the Minister for all her work, and all my colleagues, who are united on this issue. I thank the local authorities that reached out to raise their concerns, including the leader of Ashford borough council, who is here to raise his concerns with us all.

[Sojan Joseph]

Many issues and impacts can be measured, but, as the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), mentioned, when things like this happen, the mental health impact is not measurable, and it is important that all parliamentarians think about that. This is not a small matter for those with small children or animals.

Once again, I thank everyone for their contributions. We need to continue putting pressure on the water company to improve its service.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered water supply in Kent.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 10 June 2026

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Bovine TB Control in England

The Minister for Food Security and Rural Affairs (Dame Angela Eagle): Today, I can inform the House of the publication of the co-designed bovine tuberculosis control strategy for England, developed and recommended by the steering group of the Bovine TB Partnership. It is now available on the Government-industry TB Hub website.

We said in our manifesto that we would work with farmers and scientists on measures to eradicate bovine TB, and that is exactly what this process has done. The recommended strategy reflects the contribution of farmers, vets, scientists, industry representatives, and members of the public, brought together through several dedicated working groups and public dialogue workshops.

I want to place on record my thanks to all those who took part, giving their time, their expertise, and their experience to help shape this work.

Bovine TB remains one of the most difficult and persistent animal health challenges we face. We know the toll it takes, not only on cattle but on farmers, their families, vets, and rural communities. Too many have lived with that burden for too long.

We must also recognise that bovine TB is a deeply contested and often polarised issue, particularly around wildlife and the role of badgers in disease spread. Let me be clear: the badger cull is ending, and no new licences can be issued under that policy, as we instead keep the focus on cattle while also protecting wildlife.

When we announced the co-design of a new strategy in August 2024, this Government committed to end the badger cull by the end of this Parliament, and we have made good on that commitment.

The 2025 culling season marked the final year of industry-led culling in England's high risk and edge areas. Today, just one licence remains in Cumbria in the low risk area. However, no decision has been taken by Natural England to authorise culling under that licence in 2026, and I understand that the licence will be formally revoked by it, with a transition to badger vaccination now under way.

Against that backdrop, I welcome the steering group's recommended strategy. It sets out a clear direction, and what we now need to deliver: reducing TB in cattle, improving early detection, giving farmers and vets more agency to manage disease risk, strengthening biosecurity, and keeping a firm focus on the long-term prize of achieving officially bovine TB free status for England by 2038.

This goal matters. It means lifting the shadow of this disease from farming families, restoring confidence for the future, growing the rural economy, and supporting profitable, resilient farm businesses.

The publication today is an important step forward. It responds directly to the challenge set by Professor Sir Charles Godfray and his panel to increase the pace and urgency of our efforts. Crucially, it also sets a clear

ambition to deploy a cattle vaccine and a DIVA—detect infected among vaccinated animals—test by 2030. A licence application for the vaccine has already been submitted to the Veterinary Medicines Directorate.

The Government will now consider the steering group's proposals carefully, and we will do so at pace. We will continue to work closely with farmers, vets, scientists and industry partners to move swiftly from recommendation to delivery, so that the momentum we have begun is not lost.

Our intention is therefore to translate this strategy into action without delay, through a series of rolling three to five year delivery plans that ensure progress is sustained, transparent, and felt on the ground.

I will update the House further in due course.

[HCWS103]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Orphines: Temporary Class Drug Order

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): Tackling illegal drugs is key to delivering this Government's missions by making our streets safer, improving our nation's health, breaking down barriers to opportunities for all and supporting economic growth.

In the last year orphines, a class of lethal synthetic opioids, have emerged in the UK. The National Crime Agency and Office for Health Improvement and Disparities have reported that in England alone there have been more than 15 confirmed deaths in which orphines were involved since the spring of 2025. The OHID's National Drug Treatment Monitoring System data shows that 12 of these were in the period September to December 2025, including five in December.

I am today laying a temporary class drug order before Parliament, under section 2A of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. This will control seven named orphines. Three of the seven have been identified as being involved in deaths in the UK; the other four were notified by the EU Drugs Agency as being present in EU drugs markets. This is in line with a recommendation from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, for whose recent report on orphines I am grateful.

The TCDO will make it easier for law enforcement to take action against those supplying orphines. It will make it a specific offence to supply, offer to supply, produce, possess with intent to supply, import or export these seven substances. The maximum sentence will be 14 years' imprisonment.

The TCDO comes into force tomorrow, and lasts for a year, unless the substances named within it are, before then, permanently controlled under the 1971 Act. I intend to lay before Parliament in due course a draft Order in Council which would, if agreed by Parliament, enact such a permanent control by making these substances class A drugs.

These substances are not believed to have legitimate uses, but should someone need to make legitimate use of them, for example for research purposes, they will be able to apply to the Home Office for a licence.

We will continue to support law enforcement agencies in taking action against these and other harmful drugs, to protect our communities.

[HCWS105]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Belfast Attack: Further Information

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): In my response to yesterday's urgent question, I committed to provide the House with a further update on the facts surrounding the horrific attack in north Belfast on 8 June.

My thoughts remain with the victim and his family, and with the wider community, who have been left shaken by these brutal events.

The scenes of disorder that we witnessed in some parts of Northern Ireland last night were shameful. It has put innocent lives at risk, injured police officers and caused terror to people—forced to flee their homes by mobs of masked men. I know that the whole House will utterly condemn these attacks, the burning of cars and homes and the other related violence that we have seen. There is no justification at all for this type of thuggery.

I spoke with the chief constable yesterday and have seen him this morning in Belfast. I have extended my full support to the Police Service of Northern Ireland as it seeks to protect the public, and I have wished the officers injured in last night's disturbances a speedy recovery.

The Home Office confirmed yesterday afternoon that the individual is a Sudanese national with leave to remain in the UK until 2028. He entered the UK in 2023 and was granted refugee status the same year. The suspect says that he travelled from mainland Europe to Dublin and then on to Belfast, where he claimed asylum.

The PSNI yesterday stated that it has no information to suggest that this was a terrorist-related incident.

The suspect was charged last night with attempted murder, possession of an article with a blade or point in a public place and threats to kill.

Although nationality, immigration and asylum are excepted matters under the devolution settlement, the Home Office maintains close co-operation with the Northern Ireland Executive. The Home Office operates the same range of immigration functions in Northern Ireland as it does across the rest of the United Kingdom.

Nearly 70,000 individuals were returned or removed from the UK between July 2024 and the end of March 2026. This represents a 41% increase on the number of returns recorded in the previous 21-month period.

Of the total returns in the year ending March 2026, nearly 5,900 were of foreign national offenders—an increase of 13% compared to 5,203 FNO returns in the previous year.

Foreign nationals who commit crimes should be under no illusion: the law will be strictly enforced and, where appropriate, we will pursue deportation.

This attack was deeply shocking and public concern is understandable, but this moment requires calm leadership. We must stand united in rejecting any attempts to use this incident to incite violence, which, as we saw last night, only harms local communities. There is absolutely no excuse for further disorder and the route to justice will be achieved solely through the work of the PSNI and the legal system. I would encourage anyone with relevant information to contact the police.

[HCWS106]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Digital and Technologies Sector Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Kanishka Narayan): I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by my noble Friend, the Minister of State for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear, Lord Vallance of Balham.

I am pleased to update the House on the publication of the "Digital and Technologies Sector Plan: Year One Update". In June 2025, we published the sector plan—the UK's first long-term plan to back the sectors and technologies of the future—as part of the Government's modern industrial strategy. We set out a clear, ambitious, 10-year vision: to make the UK one of the top three places in the world to create, invest in and scale up a fast-growing technology business by 2035. We are working to secure the UK's first trillion-dollar technology company.

The implementation update we are publishing today sets out our progress in delivering on the commitments set out in our sector plan, and where we have expanded our ambition, across the following areas:

Unlocking economy-wide measures to boost digital and technologies growth. The Government are providing end-to-end support for our sector's innovative, high growth companies across the UK to underpin the UK's growth, security and sovereignty. We have announced record public investment in R&D to back frontier technologies at the earliest stage, including committing nearly £4 billion of funding until 2029-30 through UK Research and Innovation. We have launched TechFirst, which has already reached over 100,000 young people, to grow our domestic skills pipeline for our six frontier technologies. We have expanded the British Business Bank's mandate, with a new activist focus on scale-ups to back British deep tech champions, such as its recent £100 million investment in the UK based spinout, Oxford Quantum Circuits. We have introduced tax reforms to encourage frontier technology companies to start, scale and stay in the UK. And we are delivering world-class infrastructure, including the telecoms infrastructure that is fundamental to our digital economy.

Supporting our frontier technologies. The Government are taking an active and strategic approach to grow the UK's technological capabilities. Earlier this year, we expanded and extended the engineering biology mission awards with £20 million of funding and delivered our third engineering biology accelerator programme in collaboration with Science Creates. We have launched Sovereign AI, a new sovereign venture fund which will invest £500 million to scale AI companies in the UK. This week we published the AI hardware plan to back British companies developing the chips and semiconductor technologies behind AI and invest in the scientists, engineers and technicians needed to turn new ideas into products and good jobs in the UK. We have published the cyber growth action plan to boost the UK cyber-security industry and we are scaling the national security strategic investment fund to invest in strategic dual-use science and technology companies. Expanding on our sector plan commitments, we announced up to £2 billion to establish the UK as a world-leader in quantum, including skills and talent, research, and a world-first commitment to procure large scale quantum computers in the early 2030s.

Growing the Digital and Technologies sector across the UK. The Government are committed to maximising the benefits of innovative technologies for communities across the country. We are backing places across the UK to build on their strengths, with support ranging from the local innovation partnership and global talent funds to the five digital and technology technical excellence colleges.

One year into delivery, we can already see this work is paying off. The UK alone has captured 48% of all European venture capital funding so far in 2026. Last

year, digital and technologies companies received £8.3 billion of equity investment and strategic companies are choosing to anchor and scale in the UK.

We have made strong progress in the first year of delivery of the sector plan, but our ambitions do not stop here. Our update publication also outlines our next

steps and where we will go further as we move into year two of our decade-long commitment to the sector. I look forward to further updating the House on our future delivery.

[HCWS104]

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 10 June 2026

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
PRIME MINISTER	257	SCOTLAND—continued	
Engagements	257	Oil and Gas Sector: Employment	252
SCOTLAND	247	Pride in Place Programme	255
Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal	254	Promoting Scottish Interests Abroad	249
Economic Growth	247	Renewables Sector: Employment	256
Economic Growth: Paisley and Renfrewshire		Scotland Defence Growth Deal	256
South	254	Scottish Independence	251

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 10 June 2026

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS.	15WS	NORTHERN IRELAND	17WS
Bovine TB Control in England	15WS	Belfast Attack: Further Information	17WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	16WS	SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY ..	18WS
Orphines: Temporary Class Drug Order	16WS	Digital and Technologies Sector Plan	18WS

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CONTENTS

Wednesday 10 June 2026

Speaker's Statement [Col. 247]

Oral Answers to Questions [see index inside back page] [Col. 247]

Secretary of State for Scotland
Prime Minister

Belfast: Violent Disorder [Col. 271]

Answer to urgent question—(Dan Jarvis)

Defence Investment Plan [Col. 289]

Answer to urgent question—(Luke Pollard)

Railways Bill [Col. 307]

As amended, considered
Read the Third time and passed

Petition [Col. 424]

National Resilience [Col. 426]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Local Government Reform [Col. 133WH]
Child Contact Arrangements [Col. 158WH]
Glasgow Commonwealth Games 2026 [Col. 166WH]
Myanmar: Human Rights [Col. 190WH]
Water Supply in Kent [Col. 198WH]
General debates

Written Statements [Col. 15WS]
