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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 15 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

Monday 15 June 2026

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we begin, I would like to pay tribute to Lord Hattersley, who died yesterday. Roy was a giant of the Labour movement, holding the role of deputy leader as well as serving as a Minister. He was a long-serving and dedicated Member of both Houses, working alongside my father Doug. He represented Birmingham Sparkbrook as its MP for more than three decades before being appointed to the House of Lords, where he served for two decades. Roy devoted his life to politics, public duty and writing. I am sure the thoughts of the whole House are with his family and friends.

Oral Answers to Questions

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

High Streets

1. **Dr Danny Chambers** (Winchester) (LD): What steps he is taking to support high streets. [900396]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed): I associate myself with Mr Speaker's comments about Lord Hattersley.

I gently remind the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) that the Liberal Democrats had many years in government with the Conservatives in which they chose austerity. That speeded up the decline of our high streets, but this Government are committed to rejuvenating our high streets. Later this year, we will introduce a comprehensive high streets strategy, backed by £300 million of support, to transform the high streets that are most in need. That funding will be used to support the creation of high street innovation partnerships to reimagine and revive the country's most struggling high streets.

Dr Chambers: It is Independent Bookshop Week, and we are fortunate to have some fantastic independent bookshops in Winchester, including P&G Wells, which I visited recently. It is possibly the longest-running bookshop in the country—it has been running continuously for over 300 years, and Jane Austen and John Keble used it. Not only is it important for our local economy and our high street; it is an important part of our historical culture and a real community hub. What is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that independent bookshops, which provide so much to communities, can cope with energy costs and business rates?

Steve Reed: Speaking as a former publisher, I am very committed to the success of bookshops, and I congratulate the bookshop in the hon. Gentleman's constituency on its many years of service to the public. This Government are bringing in long-overdue reform to rebalance the business rates system, which should support independent bookshops, and creating certainty by replacing a temporary relief with permanently lower taxes. We are looking to support such independent shops, because they are the kinds of businesses that give high streets identity and that local residents like.

Mr Speaker: It gives me pleasure to call Dame Jessica Morden.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Two thirds of businesses in Newport city centre are independent businesses, and it has been brilliant to see businesses such as Kingsway Market, Rock and Scallop and Banc open in recent weeks. However, this is undermined by shops selling illegal cigarettes, illegal vapes and counterfeit goods. What more can Ministers do, working with Home Office colleagues, to help trading standards—which does an excellent job in Newport; it shut two shops last week—tackle the issue of shops opening up again after being shut?

Steve Reed: I congratulate my hon. Friend on her very well-deserved recognition. She raises an extremely important issue, which I am sure is of concern to Members right across the House. That is why it will be welcomed on all sides of the House that the Home Office has announced a high street organised crime unit to tackle organised crime where it is operating through high street shops and bringing down the high streets that residents want to see returned to vibrancy, as places that symbolise the life and heart of the communities they are part of.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): I know the Secretary of State will agree that access to cash and banking services is an important part of vibrant high streets, particularly in market towns in North Yorkshire such as Stokesley. Will he join me in thanking Link for agreeing to representations by me and the local community to install a banking hub after the closure of the last bank branch in Stokesley? It will make an enormous difference to the local community. I know this is something that the Secretary of State is also passionate about, and we are all delighted to have that banking hub coming to Stokesley.

Steve Reed: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the work he has done in his constituency on this issue, as well as those residents who have been advocating for the banking hub. Many businesses—particularly smaller businesses—and many older people who prefer not to access banking services digitally need a physical bank where they can go to hand in the money they are making or to take money out. We need banking hubs, and I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on the work he has led.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Cornish towns such as St Austell and Redruth desperately need support for their high streets, but Pride in Place criteria such as those on community cohesion and green spaces count against such towns. It is virtually impossible to be

in Cornwall and not be close to green spaces. As those criteria are starting to be used across Departments, will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how they are currently counting against areas such as Cornwall?

Steve Reed: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend, and indeed we do meet regularly. I am happy to continue doing that. We want to see high streets everywhere succeed. Pride in Place is a highly targeted programme, but we need to make an offer for high streets everywhere. I am sure he will welcome, as I do, the high street rental auctions programme that we are bringing in, backed by Government funding, to support communities to buy and use empty units. In that way, they can be put to purposes that the community wants to see, rather than lying empty as a blight on high streets.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): The Government came to office promising to support our high streets with a permanently lower regime of business rates, but the Department's answers to written questions indicate that the Government expect a 22% rise in the business rate take over this Parliament. Can the Minister tell the House whether the 100,000 job losses in hospitality since the Government took office, or the 74,000 job losses in retail since the Government took office, have been impacted by the rise in business rates, or are they solely down to the Chancellor's massive hike in national insurance?

Steve Reed: The shadow Minister will be aware, as I am, that high streets went into steep decline under the previous Conservative Government. It is this Labour Government who are having to support those businesses and communities that want to fix them. We are carrying out long-overdue reform to rebalance the business rates system, and we have replaced the temporary relief that they offered with permanently lower tax rates that will support high streets to succeed into the future. As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon), the high street rental auctions scheme, which includes Government funding, will support communities to bring empty units back into use so that they can be valuable places where communities can gather and meet, bringing footfall and therefore life back to our high streets.

Leasehold Reform

2. **Michelle Welsh** (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reform the leasehold sector. [900397]

15. **Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reform the leasehold sector. [900413]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government continue to implement those leasehold reforms that are already in statute and to progress the wider set of reforms necessary to end the feudal leasehold system for good. In respect of the latter, the King's Speech confirmed our intention to introduce the substantive commonhold and leasehold reform Bill, which will include fixes to the small number of specific but serious flaws in the previous Government's Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024.

Michelle Welsh: I met residents of the Hucknall colliery development in my constituency who have been left frustrated by high estate management charges, a lack of transparency and the appalling performance of managing agent FirstPort. Many cannot understand their bills or how they are calculated. Some are paying different amounts for similar properties, and many were led to believe that roads and public spaces would be adopted, only to find themselves facing ever increasing charges. They have been misled and ignored. Does the Minister agree that homeowners should not be trapped in these so-called fleecehold arrangements? Will he set out what action the Government will take to ensure that managing agents, such as FirstPort, are properly regulated, transparent and accountable to the residents who are ultimately funding them? My residents continue to be treated with contempt.

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for her advocacy on this issue. Homeowners should not be subject to unfair management charges or poor standards of service at the hands of managing agents, and I commend her for bringing this case to the House's attention. Our recent consultation on enhanced protections for homeowners on freehold estates closed on 12 March, and we are analysing the feedback received alongside continuing to develop plans to strengthen the regulation of managing agents.

Justin Madders: I thank the Minister for coming to speak to the all-party parliamentary group on leasehold and commonhold reform and setting out so comprehensively his vision for ending fleecehold for good. He has explained many of the things that need to be done to get us to that place, including fixing some of the flaws in the 2024 Act, which will enable enfranchisement to proceed. There is a great deal of interest in this issue, so can he set out when we will see the long-awaited consultation on valuation rates for enfranchisement?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend has considerable expertise on leasehold reform, and he is right to press for clarity on this important matter. To commence the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act's enfranchisement provisions, we unfortunately do need to fix the flaws he refers to through new primary legislation, and we will do so in this Session. In the interim, we will need to establish what capitalisation and deferment rates to set, and I am pleased to tell him that I am aiming to launch a consultation on those in the coming weeks.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): A couple of weeks ago at my constituency surgery, I met my first victim of FirstPort. He and his wife live in a sheltered accommodation flat on the third floor, and the lift has been out of use for months. They are paying exorbitant management fees, and recently his wife had to negotiate three flights of stairs to get to an appointment while on bottled oxygen. This is not just a rip-off, but an accident waiting to happen. Will the Minister meet me and other concerned MPs to sort out what we can do about FirstPort?

Matthew Pennycook: As you will recall, Mr Speaker, this is not the first occasion on which I have had to mention FirstPort at the Dispatch Box. We need to drive up standards across all managing agents. I shall be

more than happy to meet the hon. Lady and a group of other Members, as she suggests, to discuss this particular provider in more detail.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Shortly after becoming the MP for my constituency, I was contacted by Jeremy in Wimborne, who lives with his wife in a leasehold flat. In 2023, all the funds from the management company were fraudulently stolen. I have been working with the Financial Services Authority, but have been told that such issues are not covered, and that there is no route to redress via the financial services compensation scheme. While I welcome the draft Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill, will the Minister commit himself to developing it and working with the Treasury to bring property management companies into scope?

Matthew Pennycook: As the hon. Lady is—hopefully—aware, the last Government asked Lord Best to chair a working group to look at the regulation of property agents in the round. We are giving careful consideration to the recommendations in its report, with a view to strengthening the regulation of managing agents. If the hon. Lady will write to me with more details about that specific case, I will look into it.

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

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for allowing my Committee to have a really good look at the draft Commonhold and Leasehold Reform Bill before it was laid before the House. I also thank my Committee colleagues and our specialist Clerk, Jack Edwards.

I was pleased to read in *The Times* that the Government may be willing to accept our recommendation of the implementation of a £250 cap on ground rents by late 2027. Can the Minister confirm that? Will he also update the House on when the Bill will finally be introduced? As he has heard from Members on both sides of the House, this continues to be a pressing issue for many leaseholders. People continue to be ripped off. The earlier the Bill is put before us, the sooner we can bring this leasehold nightmare to an end.

Matthew Pennycook: I commend my hon. Friend, the other members of her Committee and its officials for the thorough piece of work that they have done in scrutinising the draft Bill: that will make for a better Bill when it is introduced.

My hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not comment on press speculation but merely build on what I said in my letter to her of 8 June, namely that the Committee and the Government are of one mind when it comes to the necessity of making progress with the substantive Bill as quickly as possible so that we can transform the lives of leaseholders. While I remain committed to ensuring that any Bill put forward is robust so that we do not have to fix problems in primary legislation, as we had to in the case of the 2024 Act, I am seized of the urgency of both presenting the Bill and commencing the ground rent provisions as quickly as possible.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the measures introduced in England and Wales through the 2024 Act to improve the transparency of service charges. Unfortunately, however, in Northern Ireland leaseholders

have limited control over service charges imposed on them, and under the current legislation they have limited means of challenging the underlying justification for those charges. The Minister is always a very good Minister who always gives me a very good response, so I am looking for one today. Will he liaise with his colleagues in Northern Ireland to support the introduction of similar protections in Northern Ireland to ensure that leaseholders there are not left exposed to unjustified charges?

Matthew Pennycook: The hon. Gentleman is as charming as ever, but all I can say to him is what I say in respect of this and many other issues: I am more than happy to help our counterparts in Northern Ireland to learn from the very good work that this Government are doing in relation to leasehold reform.

Mr Speaker: I welcome the new shadow Minister to the Front Bench.

Lewis Cocking (Bromley) (Con): Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Like millions of people across the country, I am a leaseholder. We have been waiting nearly two years since the Government promised to improve the system. While the Government dither, leaseholders are being ripped off with higher service charges from companies such as FirstPort. We need action, not words, to take on these bad companies. Every MP in this House is aware of the situation, so can the Minister tell me why the leasehold Bill does nothing to hold management companies to account?

Matthew Pennycook: As I have said to the hon. Gentleman on previous occasions, I have a great deal of respect for him, but he has some front in standing up and accusing this Government of dithering when it comes to leasehold reform. The Conservative party had 14 years in which to end the system, and did not do it. It raised expectations, and let leaseholders down. We are going to end the system within a Parliament. We are going to strengthen the regulation of managing agents. We will respond to the Select Committee, and will set out further details in the near future.

Fire Response Times: Poole

3. **Neil Duncan-Jordan** (Poole) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help improve response times to fires in Poole constituency. [900398]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Samantha Dixon): My hon. Friend will be aware that response standards and resource decisions are set locally by fire and rescue authorities, which understand their risks and communities best. We will continue working with Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service to support the delivery of improved services for Poole through national reform, stable funding and stronger co-ordination.

Neil Duncan-Jordan: My hon. Friend will know that Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service has received an 11.8% increase in core spending power. Despite that, there are plans to merge Hamworthy fire station with the one in Poole. Not only will this increase response

times, but it fails to take account of specific challenges in the area, such as flooding, heathland fires and seasonal increases in traffic. Will the Minister consider what more can be done to keep Hamworthy fire station open?

Samantha Dixon: I recognise the very real concerns that my hon. Friend raises, including heathland fires, flooding and seasonal traffic. The variable nature of those risks is exactly why such judgments must be informed by local fire and rescue authorities, using local risk and operational evidence. As he set out, Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service has received an 11.8% increase in core spending power, giving local services a stronger foundation. The Government are committed to wider reform to improve outcomes for the public, but it is not for central Government to intervene in local operational decisions.

National Planning Policy Framework: Proposed Health Inequality Duty

4. Dr Becky Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential merits of adding a health inequality duty to the national planning policy framework. [900399]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): As you are aware, Mr Speaker, the Government recently consulted on a new national planning policy framework. That consultation included proposals designed to promote healthy communities. We are currently analysing the extensive feedback received and will publish our response in due course.

Dr Cooper: Health inequalities are driven by social determinants such as access to green spaces, which is directly associated with higher life expectancy. In my constituency of Worthing West, we have the lowest amount of green space per person in the country—less than a snooker table. Could the Minister set out how the Department is working across Government to ensure that this essential health determinant is being secured and increased across all areas of our country?

Matthew Pennycook: I am in full agreement with my hon. Friend on the importance of local green spaces. Such spaces are vital community assets that provide significant benefits, not only for physical and mental health but to mitigate growing challenges, such as the urban heat island effect. Although I cannot speak for other Government Departments, the new NPPF recognises the importance of safeguarding local green spaces and ensures that such spaces are excluded from the definition of grey-belt land.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): On adding things to the NPPF and the importance of green spaces, may I urge the Minister to consider adding greater protections for our national landscapes? There have been two outrageous decisions by the planning inspector in my constituency in the last month: one is about a car park north of Whitchurch, and the other is about a large solar farm just above St Mary Bourne, towards Andover. Both are within the national landscape, and they run the risk of setting a precedent for large-scale industrial development in our “once lost, gone forever” beautiful parts of the country. If we can persuade the

Minister, will he strengthen those protections? If not, can I please bring the National Landscapes Association to meet him to discuss the problems we are facing?

Matthew Pennycook: If the right hon. Gentleman would not mind sending me details of the two cases in question, I am more than happy to sit down and have a conversation with him about how he thinks those decisions interact with the proposals set out in the recent consultation.

Local Plans

5. Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): What steps he is taking to support local authorities in creating local plans. [900400]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The plan-led approach is and must remain the cornerstone of our planning system, and we have been very clear that we expect all local planning authorities to make every possible effort to get up-to-date local plans in place as soon as possible. To support LPAs seeking to protect their communities from piecemeal and speculative development by getting up-to-date plans in place, we distributed £19.8 million following the publication of the revised NPPF in December 2024. We recently supplemented that funding with a further £15.7 million through our local plan implementation fund to support nearly 200 local planning authorities to progress plan development.

Mr Forster: My local authority, Woking borough council, is doing exactly as the Minister asks: it is creating a local plan, which is where our democratically elected councillors decide where we will build the homes that local people need. Is there any point in local authorities pursuing local plans if planning reforms will render them toothless?

Matthew Pennycook: I am afraid I refute the assertion the hon. Gentleman makes about what the NPPF will do to local plans. We do need local plans in place, and as I have said, the plan-led approach is the cornerstone of the system. The NPPF kicks in where in certain instances authorities do not have an up-to-date local plan in place, which is the case for far too many. I am very pleased that his local authority has taken the steps necessary to get one in place as soon as possible.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): In Suffolk, many villages need new affordable houses, so what can be done to make the rural exception sites more attractive to developers?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We have spoken before about the importance of rural exception sites and what more can be done. In the NPPF consultation, which I have referenced, we set out proposals to strengthen rural exception site policy. As I have said, we are analysing the feedback received before we can set out the next steps.

Housing Developers: Accountability

6. Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): What steps he is taking to increase the accountability of housing developers. [900402]

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed): The Government expect all developers to build high-quality homes, delivered in line with their planning consent, and to treat customers fairly. The Government are actively considering mandatory standards of warranties for all new build homes, and we are committed to introducing a statutory new homes ombudsman to improve redress when things go wrong.

Tom Gordon: Constituents of mine living on the Kingsley Farm development have spent months chasing the developer, Stonebridge Homes, to finish elements of the estate that were agreed and outlined in the planning permission when it was granted. Residents of The Willows now find themselves in the exact same situation with the same developer. This is an issue not just in North Yorkshire, but across the country. My mum, a councillor in the neighbouring local authority, has outlined issues in her patch—in both Knottingley and Normanton—where developers are clearly taking residents and customers for a ride. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to give local authorities the additional powers they need and to ensure that they use them?

Steve Reed: I am sure many Members across the House recognise the situation the hon. Member describes. One of the reasons building control in local authorities became so weak is that so many of them were underfunded for so long. Following the fair funding review, councils have funding in line with levels of deprivation, so local authorities have additional resources to beef up their building control functions and take action against the kind of organisations he refers to. Longer term, we are bringing in a new homes ombudsman, which will be a better and a fast way for people to seek redress in those circumstances.

Rosie Wrihting (Kettering) (Lab): Little Stanion in my constituency is a brilliant community with lots of first-time buyers who moved there to put down roots, but they have been let down time and again. The developer went into administration and the management agency connected to the developer continues to ask for more money, with no transparency in how it is spent. When the roads fall apart, they have no one to turn to; when the community centre still looks like a building site, they get no update; and when the play equipment starts to break, the Little Stanion Farm Management Company becomes hostile. Will the Secretary of State outline what more we can do for new build areas such as Little Stanion, so that they do not keep getting let down?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend raises incredibly important issues, and it is incredibly difficult for people buying their first home to find themselves in those circumstances. She will have heard my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing refer to changes in leasehold, including a consultation due to end within weeks, which for the first time will allow for far greater transparency in charges for leaseholders. We have also changed the regulations under the national planning policy framework, which will change the way that some of the problems she has mentioned can be dealt with; and the new homes ombudsman, when that comes on line, will provide a new form of much faster redress for her constituents in those circumstances.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): What many people see as the Government's developer-led planning approach is draining local communities' trust in the planning system. The new national planning policy framework proposes the most centralising changes in planning in my lifetime. It will mandate granting permissions under wider than ever presumptions in favour of sustainable development, which for the first time will overrule local plans. With no statutory protection available to them, even the most precious green spaces—not just national landscapes, not just land around railway stations—and the nature they support are under threat, including land at the Wellington monument in my constituency. As the National Trust launches its Nature equals Future campaign, will the Government allow this House to debate and vote on the proposed new national planning policy framework, which according to the Town and Country Planning Association signifies an “unprecedentedly permissive planning regime”?

Steve Reed: I am very disappointed to hear the Liberal Democrat spokesperson arguing the case for nimbys, because in other circumstances I have heard Liberal Democrats recognise that we have a housing crisis, recognise that the number of families in temporary accommodation doubled under the previous Government, and recognise that the number of people left sleeping on our streets doubled under the previous Government and that young people cannot find anywhere they can afford to rent or buy. We fix that by getting a fair balance between the rights of people who need a home to buy and the rights of local people over their local area. They need local plan proposals to give local people the framework within which they can express their views, but we have to speed up the slowest planning system in the western world if we want to get people the homes they deserve and have a right to live in.

Gideon Amos: People will have heard the Secretary of State referring to people wanting to protect the most precious green spaces as nimbys. They are not nimbys; they are trying to protect the most important nature in our country. If the Government will not allow a debate on the NPPF in relation to green spaces, will they allow a debate on the NPPF in relation to the expected 430,000 mortgage prisoners that the UK Sustainable Investment and Finance Association has identified from houses that will be at risk of flooding under new NPPF policies? If they will not allow a debate, will the Government meet the Association of British Insurers, which wants to discuss its objections to the NPPF?

Steve Reed: Just to be clear, I was not calling people who care about the green belt nimbys; I was calling the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues on the Liberal Democrat Benches nimbys. We have retained protections for the green belt, but we need to get new homes built. I am sorry if the Liberal Democrats want to deprive young people of the chance to find somewhere they can afford to rent and deprive young people who want somewhere to buy to get that vital first foot on the housing ladder. They used to support aspiration; now they are slamming the door shut in the faces of young people who want to get on in their lives.

Acoustic Design Planning Requirements: Workplaces

7. **Lauren Edwards** (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the adequacy of acoustic design requirements for workplaces in the planning system. [900404]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): National planning policy makes clear that planning decisions should minimise potential adverse impacts resulting from noise. Associated planning practice guidance sets out that good acoustic design needs to be considered early in the planning process.

Lauren Edwards: Sound Certification is the UK's first accreditation for spaces that are audio-inclusive and comfortable for neurodivergent people, spaces such as Oscar Acoustics innovation centre in my constituency. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the benefits of incorporating measurable acoustic performance and audio-inclusivity standards into building regulations or guidance to support more inclusive spaces?

Matthew Pennycook: Building regulations already require protection against sound or reverberation in houses, flats, buildings that have residential rooms and schools, but I am always open to considering how sound insulation standards might be improved in new builds. I would work on any further information my hon. Friend might send to me about the referenced projects in her constituency, including the Oscar Acoustics innovation centre.

Building Safety Regulator: Critical Infrastructure

8. **Anneliese Dodds** (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): What recent assessment he has made of the potential impact of the time taken by the Building Safety Regulator on critical infrastructure. [900405]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Samantha Dixon): We are working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England to make sure the Building Safety Regulator aids the delivery of critical NHS infrastructure. That includes introducing a dedicated team within the BSR to focus specifically on hospitals, as well as producing targeted guidance for NHS trusts.

Anneliese Dodds: I am very grateful to the Minister's Department for its work with me on unblocking a major housing scheme in my constituency. The Minister rightly mentions challenges with the BSR and major health facilities. I am pleased to hear what she says, but will she work as closely as possible with the Department of Health and Social Care? We need new NHS buildings to be built, just as we need new homes to be built.

Samantha Dixon: I am sorry to hear about the delays and problems in my right hon. Friend's constituency and I want to reassure her that we are taking serious action on that particular matter. I will work closely with the Department of Health and Social Care, as well as the BSR, to try to improve the situation for her.

Road Adoption

9. **Alex Mayer** (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to expedite road adoption. [900407]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): My Department is working closely with the Department for Transport to consider reforms to adoption and highways frameworks. We also recently consulted on reducing the prevalence of private estate management arrangements, including proposals to increase the adoption of estate amenities such as roads on new developments. That consultation closed on 12 March and we are analysing the feedback received.

Alex Mayer: Residents in Fossett Grove have been battling for 10 years for the adoption of a piece of land that is strewn with litter. Elsewhere in my constituency, roads are not gritted during the winter months, in Bidwell West we have an area where they cannot get a post box and, where a car crashed into a house, we cannot get any speed humps. What can the Minister do to put pressure on the council to hurry up?

Matthew Pennycook: Those cases sound particularly egregious, and I am sorry to hear about them. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the detrimental consequences of declining road adoption rates. The Department for Transport is reviewing barriers to adoption, with a view to identifying improvements and informing future reforms, alongside the consultation that I referenced. When it comes to individual local authorities, to put it mildly, some are better than others—we know that—and Central Bedfordshire obviously has some ground to make up. That is one of the issues we are considering as part of the policy development process in respect of that consultation.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): In my constituency, we have to deal with increasing numbers of unadopted roads, either because the developer wants to leave the road with an estate manager, which means an annual charge, or because the road does not meet the construction standard to satisfy the local highways department. Both issues are ripe for the exploitation of residents. Will the Minister consider issuing guidance to control those abuses?

Matthew Pennycook: We will do better than that. As part of our consultation on ending the prevalence of those arrangements, we specifically consulted on what more we can do on common adoptable standards, and we are exploring mandatory adoption for certain public amenities in certain circumstances. If the hon. Gentleman has read the Competition and Markets Authority report into the issue, he will know that the two are essential; we cannot mandate local authorities until we have common adoptable standards. If that is the route we go down, we have to do them at the same time.

Short-term Lets: Licensing

10. **Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the introduction of a licensing scheme for short-term lets. [900408]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government engage regularly with ministerial colleagues across Government in relation to a range of housing policy matters. We continue to consider what additional powers we might give local authorities to enable them to respond to the pressures created by short-term lets, as well as second homes.

Alison Hume: In my constituency, Whitby is being hollowed out by short-term lets. Bordered by the sea and a national park, house building cannot solve the problem of a lack of affordable housing for residents. We must also release more existing homes for families in the town. Will the Minister commit to legislating on licensing for short-term lets at the earliest opportunity in this Parliament? Registration schemes, while welcome, will not be robust enough to tackle the problem.

Matthew Pennycook: To be clear, there is no credible solution to the housing crisis that does not involve significantly boosting housing supply, but my hon. Friend is absolutely right to argue that the distribution of homes in any given area has a significant bearing on housing availability and affordability. As she knows, the Government have already made changes to the tax system to reorientate the housing markets away from second-home owners and investors and towards local people looking for homes to live in. While I cannot commit to future legislation, I assure her that we continue to consider how best to ensure that local planning authorities have the full set of tools they need to manage challenges of the kind described by my hon. Friend.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Last week I met representatives from 22 town and parish councils who were all deeply concerned that new Government policies are curtailing their power over planning decisions, and concerned at the lack of truly affordable homes for locals. I understand the Government have a house building target, but the housing crisis in South Devon is exacerbated by the spread of second homes and holiday lets, removing even former council homes from the market and leading to a shortage in rental properties. However, we do not know the true extent of the issue without the short-term let registration scheme. When will the Department introduce the register, so that we can control short-term holiday lets in our rural and coastal towns?

Matthew Pennycook: My Department is not responsible for the national registration scheme for short-term lets. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is responsible for that and is committed to implementing it as soon as possible. When it is implemented, the scheme will capture any property used as short-term rental accommodation, importantly including second homes that operate as short-term lets.

Pre-candidacy Donations: Safeguards

11. Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): What steps he is taking to implement safeguards for pre-candidacy donations. [900409]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Samantha Dixon): We have introduced the Representation of the People Bill, which will close loopholes that could allow foreign

money to enter UK politics and undermine trust. Alongside those measures, we are considering the Rycroft review's recommendations, including on candidate donations, and we will set out our full response shortly.

Lloyd Hatton: What if I told you, Mr Speaker, that just before the general election, a soon-to-be MP had pocketed a £5 million cash gift from a crypto billionaire who lives halfway across the world, and that soon after receiving that lucrative gift, the very same politician announced a new policy of slashing taxes for the crypto industry? You might think that something concerning was going on. Does the Minister agree that no British politician should be for sale to the highest bidder, and will the Government commit to using the elections Bill to slam the door shut on secret cash gifts to senior politicians?

Samantha Dixon: The Government are clear that the integrity and transparency of our political system must be protected. The rules we have in place are designed to ensure that political donations come from legitimate sources and are properly declared. However, we recognise the need to ensure that our rules remain effective and address emerging risks. We are already delivering a package of reforms through the Representation of the People Bill; we will also consider the recommendations from the Rycroft review and work with the Electoral Commission and others to ensure that the system remains resilient for the future.

Retirement Home Exit Fees

12. Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): What recent assessment his Department has made of trends in the level of exit fees for retirement homes. [900410]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Event fees should be fair, transparent and communicated effectively. The Government continue to give careful consideration to the recommendations set out in the final report from the older people's housing taskforce, including in respect of implementing the Law Commission's 2017 recommendations to regulate event fees.

Edward Morello: A constituent of mine has been unable to wind up his late uncle's estate since 2023. The shared ownership retirement flat, managed by Abri in Poundbury, is incurring £15,000 in service charges; even if they find a buyer, those charges plus the exit fees will effectively wipe out any value from the sale. What steps are the Government taking to tackle excessive service charges and ban exit fees in the retirement housing sector?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question—this is a really important issue. We consulted on a package of measures last year to strengthen leaseholder protections, including on the use of event fees, and will hopefully be responding to that consultation in the near future. More broadly, resale values are influenced by a range of factors, but the older people's housing taskforce commented on resale values and on what might be done, and produced a series of recommendations, which we are carefully considering.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Unfair terms on retirement village leases are leaving grieving families in Derby trapped, facing huge exit fees while extortionate service charges rack up on their empty properties. Will the Minister support those families by addressing the unfair terms that they face when a parent or loved one passes away?

Matthew Pennycook: As I have just made clear, we are looking carefully at resale values and the recommendations made by the older people's housing taskforce in this area. I wonder whether both my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) might send me some of the examples they have referenced, as any evidence we can get on how this issue is affecting homeowners and their families across the country would be incredibly useful.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): The Minister should also consider the impact of the conveyancing process on this important issue. I have heard many complaints from older people in my constituency about the lack of transparency from solicitors, with families then hit with huge fees at the worst possible time. I am sure if people knew what they were signing up for lots of these properties would never be sold. Will the Minister commit to going further than the older people's housing taskforce report and look closely at the entire conveyancing process?

Matthew Pennycook: It was remiss of me not to welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place, and I do so now. He has diligently pursued the issue of conveyancing and buying and selling over many months, not least in his role on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. I cannot go further at the Dispatch Box than saying that we are carefully considering the recommendations from the older people's housing taskforce, but I am more than happy to sit down with the hon. Gentleman and discuss this issue if he would like to do so.

New Social and Affordable Homes: Blaydon and Consett

13. **Liz Twist** (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): What steps is he taking to build more social and affordable homes in Blaydon and Consett constituency. [900411]

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Me again, Mr Speaker. We remain focused on implementing the five-step plan we published in July last year to deliver a decade of social and affordable housing renewal. We received incredibly ambitious bids for our £39 billion social and affordable homes programme and are in the process of assessing them with a view to a timely announcement of allocations. As Members will know, our Social Housing Bill, which will give affordable housing providers the clarity and confidence they need to build more social homes, is also making good progress in the other place.

Liz Twist: For 14 years, the Conservatives presided over a house building crisis that locked a generation out of home ownership and left social housing in short supply.

In Blaydon and Consett, my constituents have been calling for years for more social and affordable housing to be built. Will the Minister say how this Government are going the extra mile to ensure that we deliver on the calls of my constituents for more social homes?

Matthew Pennycook: My hon. Friend is right. I would go further than she did: I think the previous Government deliberately set out to engineer the decline of social rented housing, not least through the reforms that they made to the right to buy, which we are reversing through the Social Housing Bill. As I made clear, we received ambitious bids from affordable housing providers across the country, including in the north-east. That will allow councils and housing associations to start using the grant to build at scale once again.

Tenant and Resident Management Organisations: Regulation

14. **Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to improve the regulation of tenant and resident management organisations. [900412]

Mr Speaker: Minister, you're very busy!

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The Government remain committed to the principle of tenants and leaseholders taking over certain management functions from their landlords, and following a review of arrangements for the oversight of tenant management organisations, we intend to take steps to make it easier to do so. Statutory guidance sets out a process for intervening in cases of mismanagement, but as part of our reform agenda, we will strengthen governance and oversight, including by providing stronger safeguards in cases in which tenant safety is at risk.

Helen Hayes: Residents on the Loughborough estate in my constituency have suffered years of appalling service from their resident management organisation, the Loughborough Estate Management Board. It has a failing repair service; dangerous chemicals were being stored in the community centre; there were allegations of threats and harassment; and more than £350,000 of its funding was spent on overseas trips and gifts. Eighteen months ago, residents voted overwhelmingly in favour of not renewing the board's mandate, yet it is still operating, and there appears to be no straightforward mechanism that the local council can use to close down this failing organisation. Will the Minister work with me to bring this scandalous situation to an end, and to ensure that the Loughborough estate's residents receive the housing services that they pay for and deserve?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this alarming case to my attention. We are clear that as we look to make it easier to establish TMOs—we want to do so; there are some very good ones out there—we must strengthen governance and accountability. I assure her that as part of that effort, the Secretary of State and I will be giving specific consideration to how extreme cases of mismanagement might be brought to an end, as a mechanism of last resort.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) for raising this issue, which is part of a wider issue that many hon. Members will have heard about from constituents. Through legislation passed by the Conservative Government, with Labour Members' support, and the legislation that is being consulted on, what concrete steps do the Government intend to take to prevent rip-off fees, and unfair arrangements that shuffle costs on to private tenants—or council tax payers, in the case of social housing tenants—so that people can have confidence that the homes that they need will be provided, and will be fit for the future?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank the shadow Minister for that reasonable and apt question. We do need confidence in the system. Many tenant management organisations provide excellent resident-led housing services, but it is right that councils can intervene if things go wrong. Powers to intervene in cases of serious failings are included in the management agreement between councils and TMOs, but as I said in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), we are reviewing where we can go further on governance and accountability to ensure that the right safeguards are in place.

Pride in Place Programme: Community Cohesion in Aldershot

16. **Alex Baker** (Aldershot) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of Pride in Place funding on levels of community cohesion in Aldershot constituency. [900414]

Mr Speaker: Minister, welcome.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nesil Caliskan): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I am delighted that Cherrywood in my hon. Friend's constituency will receive up to £20 million over the next decade through the Government's expanded Pride in Place programme. The Government have committed significant sums of money to equipping communities with the resources and power to drive local change, so that they can bring people together and restore a sense of pride in their area.

Alex Baker: Having campaigned hard for investment in my community since becoming a Member of Parliament, I am really proud that the Government have invested £20 million in Cherrywood ward. Will the Minister set out how this Pride in Place funding will help strengthen community ties, give local people a voice in shaping the place they call home, and make a difference to families living in Farnborough?

Nesil Caliskan: I commend my hon. Friend on her strong campaigning to secure investment for her area. She asked an important question about local people having a say over their areas—because they know best. The Pride in Place programme represents a break from the micromanagement approach taken with previous regeneration funds. Local boards are provided with the power of intervention and the autonomy that they need

to pursue the change that their communities want. Youth centres, libraries, green spaces, cultural venues and help for families, including family hubs, will all be in scope of support for more cohesive and resilient communities.

Topical Questions

T1. [900421] **Lauren Edwards** (Rochester and Strood) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed): Yesterday marked the ninth anniversary of the Grenfell Tower fire—a day for remembrance and for sombre reflection. The 72 residents who so tragically lost their lives will never be forgotten. My thoughts are with the survivors, bereaved families and all those affected, and I know that they have the deepest sympathies of the whole House. We accepted the inquiry's findings last year, and we will take forward action on all 58 recommendations. We are determined that nothing like this will ever happen again.

Lauren Edwards: I thank the Minister for his comments about Grenfell. I welcome the legislation that the Government have introduced to lower the voting age to 16, and to make it easier for people to register to vote, but has he considered the benefits for increased participation in elections of adding a “none of the above” option on all ballot papers? This change could be made without primary legislation.

Steve Reed: The Government are very interested indeed in increasing participation in elections, and I know from personal experience that the biggest way to do that is to increase campaigning, because that increases turnout. Beyond that, the Government have already piloted flexible voting pilots at the May 2026 elections; we tested early voting, and the use of non-traditional places to vote. Also, the Democratic Engagement Fund is providing £2.5 million to support local projects that encourage more people to vote. Of course, we want to look at all proposals for getting people voting, because that is central to the efficiency and effectiveness of our democracy.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State, Sir James Cleverly.

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): May I echo the words of the Secretary of State, nine years on from the terrible fire at Grenfell? It is incredibly important that we learn the lessons from that tragedy and ensure that people are protected in their home.

Labour says that 16 and 17-year-olds are mature enough to vote, but in a written answer to me, it also says that 16 and 17-year-olds are not mature enough to serve on juries, because that is “an adult duty”. It says that 16 and 17-year-olds should vote, but should not play on their phone after the Government-defined bedtime of 8.30 in the evening. These are just two examples from the list of inconsistencies triggered by Labour's “votes at 16” policy. The only consistent thing about that policy is the blatant party political self-interest, isn't it? [Laughter.]

Steve Reed: I am not sure about the right hon. Gentleman's last point; I think the laughter across the Chamber probably answers that one for him. Of course, 16 and 17-year-olds were able to vote in some elections in parts of the United Kingdom while he was in government. If he had really felt that 16 and 17-year-olds should not be able to vote anywhere, he would have done something about it. It is only right that we standardise the system, so that people of that age can vote in all elections across the country. I, for one, welcome the increase in the franchise, and the encouragement of more people to participate. It is their country too, and they deserve a say. I hope that young people under the age of 18 see the Conservatives who are trying to deny them the vote, and will remember that at the ballot box in the future.

Sir James Cleverly: Travellers built an unauthorised development in Willows Green in my constituency over a bank holiday weekend. I wrote to the Secretary of State about this, and his reply amounted to little more than a hand-wringing word salad. If he is serious about ending the abuse of retrospective planning in Essex and elsewhere, why will he not take up the proposals that we have put forward and end the "build first and apply later" culture?

Steve Reed: That is exactly what the Government are doing. We are looking at how we can tackle those developers who go ahead and build and then seek planning consent retrospectively. It is not acceptable. We have put more money into councils, so that they can fund building control functions, which were severely underfunded by the Government when the right hon. Gentleman was in office. That gives councils more power to take precisely the action that he is calling for. He had 14 years to do this, but he did not—so we are doing it for him.

T4. [900425] **Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): New towns such as Tempsford should offer an opportunity to ease development pressures, not add to them, so I thank the Minister for listening to my representations, and ensuring that if Tempsford comes forward, it will be included in Central Bedfordshire council's housing target, rather than being in addition to it. Across Central Beds, lots of developments have come forward without the right infrastructure. As we explore the vehicles required to bring forward new towns such as Tempsford, how can we ensure that we do everything possible to get infrastructure right from the outset?

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his constructive engagement on the new towns programme, and on Tempsford in particular. It helped to inform our approach, including to the decision that new town proposals will contribute to meeting the identified housing need of relevant authorities in all instances. We are assessing options for delivery vehicles across the proposed sites, with a view to ensuring that each is best placed to drive delivery and secure essential infrastructure in a timely manner.

T2. [900422] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): The Government's proposed high-value council tax surcharge will be collected by councils but retained by the Treasury. If councils neither control the charge nor keep the revenue,

why is it being called a council tax? Will the Minister commit to changing this misleading policy title? Given that most of the revenue from the surcharge will be raised in London, will the Government ensure that a fair proportion is reinvested in the capital?

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): I thank—[*Interruption.*] I can assure the shadow Secretary of State that I was very busy last week. Most people are bothered about the fairness of the council tax system, and that is why it is right that the Chancellor introduced this policy. Rather than debating what it is called, it is important that we get on with it and introduce fairness into the system.

T7. [900428] **Tom Collins** (Worcester) (Lab): The Department for Education has recently released new guidance for local authorities on the role of family hubs. It describes a significant departure from conventional delivery models; there will be a high degree of network and partnership delivery, not only with public bodies, but with the voluntary sector and businesses—a change in culture that will improve all areas of local authority delivery. What measures might the Department consider to foster and facilitate networking and best practice across local authorities, and will the Minister meet me to discuss how the all-party parliamentary group on family hubs, which I chair, might help to deliver that culture change?

Alison McGovern: Yes, I will.

T5. [900426] **Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): The old British Home Stores building in the heart of Stratford-upon-Avon lies disused and crumbling—a blight on the beauty of our high street. Does the Minister agree that it must be made easier for communities to tackle eyesore buildings by imposing harsher measures on offending landlords, and by strengthening measures to allow local authorities to bring them back into productive use?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nesil Caliskan): I thank the hon. Member for raising that important issue. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 goes some way towards addressing it, but I highlight that the Government are pushing ahead with high-street rental auctions, which are helping to bring long-term empty shops back into use.

T9. [900430] **Jayne Kirkham** (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): The King's Speech contains proposals for an overnight visitor levy. The decision on whether to introduce it is to be devolved to mayoral strategic authorities and, potentially, foundation strategic authorities. Most coastal and rural areas that struggle with the impact of tourism are not in mayoral areas—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, Hear!"]—so can the Minister confirm that FSAs will also receive the power to use the levy, and will she and Treasury officials meet me to discuss this?

Nesil Caliskan: The cheer across the House is a second reminder for me of the importance of coastal communities; the first reminder came when I responded to the Adjournment debate in the week before last. The Government are committed to mayoral strategic authorities having the fiscal tools to drive good growth in these areas. We have recently consulted on extending those power to FSAs, and will publish a response shortly.

T6. [900427] **Ian Sollom** (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): The Government have described the recently announced greater Cambridge development corporation as “infrastructure-first” development, so will the Minister set out what new infrastructure it will have the responsibility for delivering, and by when it will deliver it?

Matthew Pennycook: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we are in the process of establishing the greater Cambridge development corporation. We will set out further details, as we did just a few days ago, about its development management powers, its planning powers and the specific sites that it will look at.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): Rural housing availability is in crisis, and all the tenants of an estate near Haltwhistle in my constituency, many of whom are elderly tenants in their 70s and 80s, received section 21 notices a week before the Renters’ Rights Act 2025 came into effect. In a rural community like that, there simply is not similar housing nearby. It is the dismantling of a rural community. Will the Minister therefore meet me to discuss the support he can offer for constituents and the further steps we can take to stop rural communities being victimised by these practices?

Matthew Pennycook: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter. I appreciate fully his concern about the potential mass eviction of his constituents. It is precisely so that private tenants can enjoy greater security, including the growing number of older people who now rent their homes, that we abolished section 21 no-fault evictions. I am happy to meet him to discuss the case further and what more support we might provide.

T8. [900429] **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Ind): Whitstable’s latest drought was a few weeks ago during a heatwave, leaving many residents and local businesses high and dry. South East Water tells me and my neighbours that it cannot guarantee meeting current demand, so it will be unable to guarantee meeting additional demand from new homes. Has the Secretary of State met South East Water or Canterbury city council to discuss this issue?

Matthew Pennycook: We meet a range of stakeholders through the water delivery taskforce. I understand that, in response to Canterbury’s local plan consultation, the Environment Agency has recommended close liaison between the local authority and South East Water to ensure that planned housing growth is located where additional water is available to supply new development.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): In 2022, my constituents at No. 1 London Road in Newcastle-under-Lyme were told that urgent action was needed due to fire safety concerns over the building’s cladding. It is now 2026 and, four years later, that urgent action is yet to begin. Can the Minister set out what steps she will take to ensure that the Building Safety Regulator functions effectively and does not create greater risk through significant delays—delays that have a huge impact on those directly impacted in Newcastle-under-Lyme and across the country?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Samantha Dixon): I know that my hon. Friend has been working hard to support his constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme on

these important issues. I am happy to meet him, but let me also reassure him that work to improve the performance of the Building Safety Regulator is ongoing and is bearing fruit.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Many councils, especially Brighton and Hove, with hundreds of acquisitions since 2017, are doing their best to buy, as well as build, their supply of new council housing. More family homes can be provided, and the speed of the benefits gives it a different Treasury business case. Will the Secretary of State help me win the Chancellor’s support for the idea of a massive, new dedicated “buy the supply” fund for councils?

Matthew Pennycook: Funding is already available for councils to acquire new market homes for social and affordable housing through our social and affordable homes programme. They can obviously also rely on section 106 contributions and the local authority housing fund, the fourth round of which makes £950 million available for councils to acquire homes for better-quality temporary accommodation.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): National parks and natural landscapes provide huge benefits to people’s health and wellbeing, and to biodiversity and the economy. Can the Minister tell me what steps we can take through the next iteration of the national planning policy framework to ensure that the aforementioned benefits are not undermined when infrastructure projects must be progressed?

Matthew Pennycook: We continue to target a win-win for both development and nature. I am more than happy to sit down with my hon. Friend to discuss how the NPPF contributes to that objective.

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): Outrageously, today the Government have stripped Epping Forest district council of the sole local right to determine major planning applications. That means that my constituents will have major planning decisions taken by central Government and not by our local council. Epping Forest district is largely green belt, and we are already under threat from speculative housing applications, farmland being sacrificed for solar plants and the Labour Government arbitrarily reclassifying green belt as so-called grey belt. Will the Secretary of State step in and reverse this awful planning policy decision, which is a complete affront to local democracy?

Matthew Pennycook: I do not intend to reverse the decision; I made the decision. The hon. Member’s local authority is one of nine that have been designated for poor performance, just as the previous Government designated local authorities when they fell below the required standards in their planning processes.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Sadly, the recent closures of family-run businesses, such as Scent from Dudley, Black Star Ghanaian product and Family Bargains hardware in Dudley, are symptomatic of a wider trend of high street shopfronts closing. What steps is the Minister taking to speed up high street regeneration by bringing empty shops back into use, and will he visit Dudley town high street to see what else we can do?

Nesil Caliskan: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that important issue. I will point to two things: first, later this year we will bring forward a high street strategy backed by at least £150 million; and secondly, as I said earlier, we are pushing ahead with the high street rental auctions programme, which is already seeing empty shops being brought back into use.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): How will the Minister stop developers using viability assessments to wriggle out of providing affordable homes for communities such as mine in Westmorland, where an agreement for 12 affordable houses to be delivered in Allithwaite near Grange-over Sands has been torn up and the council has no power to stop it? Will he help us?

Matthew Pennycook: We think it is right that developers can use site-by-site viability assessments, as the alternative where viability challenges are acute is that we get no homes coming forward at all. We have consulted, in the recent consultation on the NPPF, on standardised inputs to viability, and we will set out further steps in due course.

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): Leaseholders at Southend's Meridien Point are trapped in an unbearable financial situation, as a result of an internal defects bill of £3 million, and a £450,000 fight against the building developer. Their block is 18 metres in height, and they are not entitled to funding for the support that they desperately need. They have been offered just £50,000 towards their legal fees by Homes England. How can we look at existing funding criteria for mid-rise buildings, and encourage Homes England to fully support leaseholders in taking on well-resourced developers?

Samantha Dixon: Buildings between 11 and 18 metres may be able to enter the cladding safety scheme, but I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this matter further.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): How can it be justified for a unitary authority to be formed that rips the waterside away from the New Forest, and places it under the control of Labour-dominated Southampton, when the building blocks of the new unitary authorities were stated by the Government to be the existing areas covered by district and borough councils?

Alison McGovern: The Secretary of State took the decisions about local government reorganisation according to the criteria that we set out, but I hear the right hon. Gentleman's comments and will take them into account as we move forward.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his decision about the continued and ongoing failings by Cherwell district council regarding a major planning application. Given that Banbury has a huge and desperate housing need, will he agree to meet me to discuss how we can fix that, despite the council?

Matthew Pennycook: I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the housing challenges in his part of the country.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): I am leading the campaign to have Eastbourne pier registered as an asset of community value in order to safeguard its future. Will the Government back the campaign to ensure that Eastbourne pier continues to stand strong?

Nesil Caliskan: Having served as a council leader, I know just how important community assets are, and I am happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss the matter further.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know how enthusiastic I am for a Thames Valley foundation strategic authority covering Berkshire, Oxfordshire and Swindon, but he will also know of my concerns about a spatial development strategy being imposed on us using a different, larger geography. Does he share my concern that that would undermine devolution before it even started?

Matthew Pennycook: I am aware of my hon. Friend's robust views on this matter. There are a range of views about the right geographies for spatial development strategies. The Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Barking (Nesil Caliskan), and I are looking at all the consultation responses we have received, and we will make decisions on the full basis of having those fed in.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): Further to the Minister's answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), will he take the opportunity of the new NPPF to make it absolutely clear that if someone wilfully ignores—not inadvertently, but deliberately and wilfully—the need for planning consent, they will not subsequently get retrospective permission?

Matthew Pennycook: We will not rule out retrospective planning applications of any kind—I think residents across the country who build a conservatory and then make an application, having forgotten to submit the paperwork, would take issue with that. There is a specific issue of intentional unauthorised development, and we are looking at that through the NPPF. I recently had a meeting with a large group of Members from across the House, including Front-Bench Members, and we discussed possible options that we could use to bear down on the practice we are seeing, which is a new business model that exploits a particular set of challenges.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Last week we held interviews for the chair of our Pride in Place neighbourhood board in Redditch. Will the Minister join me in thanking all those who put their name forward and encourage all residents in Greenlands and Woodrow to take part in the scheme, which will see the largest single financial investment in my town in my entire lifetime?

Nesil Caliskan: I join my hon. Friend in recognising the significant investment for his area. The Pride in Place programme, rolled out by the Government, is our commitment to devolution, and we are investing in areas that have been ignored for far too long.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Will the Minister for Housing and Planning review the 2,500 square metre threshold for edge of town centre and out of town centre planning applications and conduct an assessment of their impact on the high street, particularly through the lens of supermarkets setting up things like

key cutting and shoe repair kiosks, which decimate our high streets, as has recently happened in Princes Risborough?

Matthew Pennycook: If the hon. Gentleman would like to write to me with further details about the matter, I will of course consider it.

Defence Investment Plan

3.40 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the effect of the delay in the defence investment plan on our armed forces' ability to defend the United Kingdom.

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): Before I turn to the matter before us, the whole House will want to join me in recognising the remarkable work of our armed forces this weekend. In the channel, UK forces bordered a sanctioned vessel from Russia's shadow fleet to disrupt the flow of funds to Putin's illegal war in the Ukraine. The Defence Secretary will be making a statement on that shortly.

These are extraordinary times for defence. The threats are real and they are increasing. It is no secret that I worked in lockstep with the former Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey). He is a friend and mentor. I was his deputy and I am still standing at the Dispatch Box because he asked me to stay and because we need continuity in this complex and difficult operational environment.

The DIP will be published before the NATO summit. Do we need to spend more on defence? Yes. Do the Prime Minister and the Chancellor agree with that? Yes. Are we spending more? Yes. This year the defence budget is £11 billion more than it was in the final year under the Conservatives. Are we learning the lessons from Ukraine? Yes. Are we retiring old kit to invest in new capabilities? Yes. Are we backing our people? Yes, with the biggest pay rise in 20 years and a £9 billion plan to fix the defence housing crisis that we inherited. It is working: intake is up 11.6%, outflow is down 8.9%, and morale is up.

To answer the Leader of the Opposition's question directly: if asked to fight tonight, could our forces defend the UK? Yes, and they already do every single day. Are we planning to increase their capabilities to deter and defend the UK and our allies? Yes, we are. Would I like to go further? Of course.

The new Defence Secretary has stepped up to serve, as he has done before, sleeves rolled up and determined to meet the moment to get defence the best deal. Let me say plainly that I know the Prime Minister is committed to do so as well. He said in Munich:

"To meet the wider threat, it is clear that we are going to have to spend more faster."

And at the weekend, he said

"3% in the next Parliament...defence will be the number one priority at every spending review, including the next spending review."

The disagreement in recent weeks was never about whether we should fund our forces; it was about how fast we increase the spending for defence and on what capabilities. That is a serious argument to have—I make no apology for pushing hard within the Government to win it, because that is the job. But the job is also a team sport, and that is why the Ministry of Defence, with the new Defence Secretary, is working with the Treasury, other Government Departments and No. 10 to get this right.

Mrs Badenoch: It speaks volumes that a junior Minister has been sent to answer this question today. If the new Defence Secretary is too scared to face tough questions at the Dispatch Box, waiting for an easier statement later, then I do not have much confidence in him facing down the threats from Russia.

It has been two years since Labour paused the Conservatives' plan to fund our armed forces, and a year since Labour's strategic defence review. [*Interruption.*] We have been warning that the delays to the defence investment plan—

Mr Speaker: Order. Those who have recently got on to the Front Bench should not bring their Back-Bench habits with them, please.

Mrs Badenoch: We have been warning that the delays to the defence investment plan are making our troops and our country less safe. Last week, the Defence Secretary and the Minister for the Armed Forces quit the Government, because they knew that those warnings were true and they were no longer willing to defend the indefensible. They have done the honourable thing by resigning. It could not have been easy for the former Defence Secretary—a Labour man through and through—when he said that

"I am being forced to make decisions that would...increase the risk to personnel on operations, and could make the country less safe."

That is absolutely shocking. What on earth are the Government playing at?

The statement that the Minister has just given shows that the Government are still in denial. He did not say that there would be extra money for the defence investment plan, as his former mentor—so he says—asked for. The Prime Minister needs to tell the Chancellor to find the money. The answer is to cut the welfare budget, and I am willing to lend the Government 116 votes to do just that—I know Labour Back Benchers will not do it—with the proviso that the defence investment plan meets three simple tests.

First, the Government must at a minimum find the £28 billion that the Chief of the Defence Staff has said is needed. Will they? Secondly, the funding must be provided before 2030. Will it? There is no kicking into the long grass here. If the answer to both of those questions is no, the Minister should have resigned along with his colleagues. Thirdly, the funding must ensure that we are ready to fight the wars of the future, not the past.

I am sure the Minister will now stand up and try to blame the situation on Conservative Governments, forgetting that these are new threats, not past threats. This Government need to stop wasting time and do what is necessary to keep the British people safe today.

Luke Pollard: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question and for the tone in which she asked it. We often have a lot of shouting from Members on her Front Bench, but I appreciate the professionalism and calm with which she asked those questions—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I think there are two Members who want to spoil it, but I am sure that they will not.

Luke Pollard: Let me be very clear. The Defence Secretary is currently with His Majesty the King, and he will be in the House this afternoon to make a statement on the operations over the weekend.¹

I recognise that the right hon. Lady got her revenge in early by saying that I will seek to blame the situation on the Conservatives. Let me be very clear. She will know that we inherited forces that had been hollowed out and underfunded by the Conservatives. We inherited defence housing in which families were being asked to sleep in bedrooms with black mould, leaky roofs and broken boilers. Of the major defence programmes we inherited at the general election, 47 of 49 were overbudget and unfunded.

However, we have been very clear that we are increasing defence spending. I appreciate that the right hon. Lady had her pre-scripted questions, but, if she had listened to what I said at the start, she would know that we are increasing defence spending. We have an extra £11 billion—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Order. I think Members have just proved my point. When you request an urgent question and it has been asked, you must allow the Minister to answer without comment and without two of you—on either side of the Leader of the Opposition—chipping in. I do not need it, and you do not want it. I am not being funny; this issue affects all our constituencies and our constituents.

Luke Pollard: We are increasing defence spending. The budget this year is £11 billion more than the budget in the last year of the Conservative Government. We are ending the hollowing-out, but of course I want more money in the defence budget. We continue to make that case as the profile of defence spending increases. I would welcome a debate that says, “What capabilities will we spend that increasing defence funding on?”

The right hon. Lady is right; we need to fight the wars of tomorrow. That is why we are investing in more autonomy, more drones, a hybrid Navy and the increased stockpiles that we need to deter Russian aggression. There is more work to do, and the new Defence Secretary is working with his sleeves rolled up to deliver the best deal that we can. We will publish the defence investment plan ahead of the NATO summit.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): For the past 18 months, I have been talking to the former Defence Secretary and Ministers across Government as part of my campaign for the UK to co-found the Defence, Security and Resilience Bank. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey) noted in his resignation letter, we need to find different ways to finance our defence industry, and that should include standing with our allies and working internationally. Will the Government listen to calls from across the House to join this world bank for defence as a matter of urgency? We cannot afford for the British defence industry to be locked out of this bank. The charter will be signed at the NATO summit, and the clock is ticking.

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for her work, and not just on lobbying for the DSRB—as an MP for a military town, she champions not just the Army but local businesses in her patch. We are looking at what

multinational mechanisms would best deliver for defence and, importantly, for the defence supply chain, enabling us to finance the growth we expect in that supply chain. That work is continuing, and I encourage my hon. Friend to continue having conversations with the Treasury, which leads on that aspect.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): With the defence investment plan now nine months overdue, I hear almost daily from small and medium-sized defence enterprises that face a funding precipice. Many are warning that without certainty from Government, they will be unable to invest, hire, or—in some cases—continue operating. Will the Minister tell the House what assessment has been made of the financial impact on the UK defence industry of the continued delay to the defence investment plan?

The Government’s national security adviser has said that our armed forces need a minimum of £18 billion extra—and likely a lot more. Given that his former colleagues resigned on principle over the Government’s failure to fund defence properly, will the Minister resign if he fails to secure at least that minimum allocation? In the spirit of constructive opposition, may I suggest a way for him to avoid that fate entirely? Will he consider backing Lib Dem defence bonds, which would raise £20 billion over two years and give our armed forces the immediate injection of funding they need for certainty?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. He will know that since the general election, we have signed 1,400 major defence contracts, which have supported thousands of SMEs. He will also know that we have stood up the Defence Office for Small Business Growth, a single doorway to increase the Ministry of Defence’s direct spend with SMEs by 50% by 2028. We will continue to work on that, and as someone who was a defence-focused MP before I was a shadow Defence Minister, let alone a Defence Minister, I am proud of my advocacy for Devonport, for Plymouth and for our armed forces. I will continue to make that case from within Government, to give our forces the funding they need and the increase in defence spending that we need. The Government have already set out an ambition to deliver that.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): My hon. Friend may know that Aeralis, a British aerospace company seeking to develop a replacement for the Red Arrows, has gone into administration, and the company is in part blaming the delays to the defence investment plan for that terrible outcome. I thank my hon. Friend for the time he has taken with me, looking for opportunities to invest defence spend in my constituency, but can he do more to ensure that the defence investment plan creates good-quality jobs across the country?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for his question—we have discussed Aeralis in the past. We are committed to the Red Arrows, and there will be a competition to replace them, as well as the Hawk T1 and T2 training system, which provides the pilots of the future. That will be a competitive process, and it will be up to

1.[*Official Report*, 22 June 2026; Vol. 788, c. 71.](Correction)

[*Luke Pollard*]

companies to provide a design, an option, and a training system to support it. That competition will launch in due course.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): When the nation is at risk and the Leader of the Opposition asks a question, it is frankly cowardly for the Secretary of State not to turn up. His duty is to be here in our House of Commons.

Mr Speaker: Order. I say to the Father of the House that the King has summoned the Secretary of State, and he is with the King at the moment. The language he has used about the Secretary of State being cowardly is not called for, and I expect better from the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh: I am sure the King would have understood, but we will leave it at that.

The Minister constantly blames the previous Conservative Government, but the fact is that times have changed. Let us look at history. We were in the same situation in the 1930s—in 1935, we were only spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, but when we increased it to 9%, the whole nation came together. The Leader of the Opposition has offered the Minister a deal: we will combine with the Government to slash the huge welfare budget. We will help them to deliver what the previous Secretary of State wanted. Why did the previous Secretary of State resign?

Luke Pollard: First, let me be very clear with the right hon. Gentleman—who I have a lot of time for—that the new Defence Secretary is someone who served our country in uniform. He served in the Parachute Regiment and was awarded an MBE for his work in uniform. He is someone who I am very proud to serve alongside, and I am working alongside him now to ensure we can deliver a defence investment plan with the funding that is required to renew our forces.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that times have changed. That is precisely why the capabilities in the defence investment plan aim to retire old kit and bring on investment in new kit, particularly drones—one-way effectors, the hybrid navy and autonomy. We are learning the lessons from Ukraine; because we are there, standing alongside our friends, we can see how Russia fights and what works. Not only are we using that knowledge to support our friends in Ukraine, we are bringing it back to create capabilities for the UK armed forces. When the DIP is published, which it will be shortly, the right hon. Gentleman will be able to see that.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a member of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. I find it remarkable that the Conservatives have raised this urgent question, given that under their watch, real-terms defence spending fell by 22% and their own former Defence Secretary admitted that they had left our armed forces "hollowed out and underfunded". We should also reject the framing of this debate. Pitting welfare against security is divisive and corrosive, and we should call it out for what it is. This

Government are already spending £62.2 billion on defence this year, rising to £73.5 billion by 2028-29. Can the Secretary of State confirm that when the defence investment plan is published, it will maximise spending with British industries so that every pound spent also strengthens—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Minister has got it.

Luke Pollard: I remember sitting where the Leader of the Opposition is now when the then Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, described the hollowing out and underfunding by the Conservative Government. Let me also be clear, in answering my hon. Friend's question directly that, I want more of a rising defence budget spent with British companies. An increasing defence budget spent with British companies is more jobs and more opportunities for our young people. Defence spending is reindustrialisation of our communities. It is an engine for growth and that is why we are investing in skills, in our small and medium-sized enterprises and in innovation. If we do all of that right, we will give our fighting forces the equipment they need to deter and, if necessary, defeat aggression. I welcome the debate on how much we spend and how quickly. I will continue making the case for more defence spending. The Prime Minister and the Chancellor are aware of that and are increasing it.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): The House will be aware that we spend £333 billion a year on the Department for Work and Pensions. We spend less than a fifth of that on defence, at £62 billion. In his speech this morning, the Prime Minister talked about government being "a choice". Is this the right choice?

Luke Pollard: I have a lot of time for the hon. Gentleman, and he will know that much of the DWP budget that he describes pays pensions and benefits to those who cannot work. Where people can work, we are giving them support to get back into the economy and back into work. That is an important part of a Labour Government's mission to help everyone to work if they can. The case that he makes for increasing defence spending is part of this debate. As well as the total figure, I am equally interested in the capabilities we are spending it on. It is not just about a calendar day when a document gets published, but about what capabilities, what drones and what ability we need in our hybrid Navy; what do we need to invest in to create the deterrence to increase our warfighting readiness? That is a good debate to have.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): This Government are not year zero. The 2.5% target has not been hit since 2010—the end of the last Labour Government—and there has been an extra £11 billion since the end of the last Conservative Government. I met my ex-husband in the Fleet Air Arm in 2003, just in time to witness some of the hollowing out of the armed forces, with the loss of capability and good people. I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for providing the continuity needed for these detailed negotiations.

Can he confirm that there will, by the NATO summit, be a fully funded plan on defence for the first time in a generation?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for her work. She is not only a good voice in support of the armed forces in her constituency, but one of the loudest voices in support of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. It is a key part of our military apparatus, and we are continuing to invest in it. She is right that we will publish a fully funded defence investment plan ahead of the NATO summit in only a few weeks' time. It is the first time in 20 years that we have had a line-by-line review of defence spending. It looks at the capabilities that we need and at investment not just in kit and equipment but in our people and our estates.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Yesterday, at the glorious Princess Alice hospice summer fete in my constituency, I met Glen, a Royal Navy veteran whose last deployment was aboard HMS Broadsword. He said to me, "What are they doing to the Royal Navy? I want you to represent me and tell them that they need to sort it out", so I am telling them to sort it out. Why are our Government ducking the responsible decisions to fund the defence investment plan properly, and why are they disregarding the Liberal Democrat proposals to fund it through defence bonds—raising up to £20 billion over two years—so that Glen and other vets can be proud rather than despairing of the services that they used to serve so well?

Luke Pollard: HMS Broadsword was quite a ship. I remember going on her when I was growing up in Plymouth many moons ago—and that is a good example of what we are doing. We are having to retire old capabilities. The frigate force in particular—the Type 23s—were run on far too long, and should have been replaced long before the orders were placed by the last Government. That is creating difficulties in the frigates that we have. But let me tell Glen and the House what we are doing about it. We are investing in a new hybrid Navy with more autonomous, uncrewed capabilities. We are installing DragonFire, our directed energy weapon system, on Type 45 destroyers. We are addressing the retention and recruitment crisis that saw so much of our Navy personnel hollowed out, in particular addressing the shortage subjects such as marine engineering, and ensuring that we are giving our Royal Marines the latest kit and equipment. The new Kraken K3 Scouts for 47 Commando are a good example of the way in which we are equipping our Royal Marines with the equipment that they need.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): As the Minister will know from his many welcome visits to my constituency, my community is proudly home to MOD Abbey Wood, the centre of Defence Equipment and Support, and many brilliant defence companies of a wide range of sizes. Will he please tell us how he expects the defence investment plan to support important businesses like those?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is right: I have had many good times in Filton and Bradley Stoke, not only with the amazing people who work at the National Armaments Director Group at Abbey Wood—those who work tirelessly to give our people the kit and equipment that they need—but when seeing some of

the superb work that Rolls-Royce is doing, for instance, in supporting not just the global combat air programme but the operational effectiveness of our air platforms today. Other businesses, large and small, in my hon. Friend's patch will benefit from the 10 years of certainty that will come from the defence investment plan, and it will be published before the NATO summit.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): I think we all very much welcomed the amazing work done by Lord Robertson, along with his team, including General Barrons and Fi Hill. How many of their 62 recommendations are the Government still committed to?

Luke Pollard: All of them.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): The Minister will know that Redditch is home to many businesses that proudly support our armed forces. I think he may have touched on this in his previous answer, but can he confirm that when the Prime Minister goes to the NATO summit next month, the DIP will be published in full?

Luke Pollard: Yes, we will be publishing the DIP ahead of the NATO summit, as the Prime Minister has been saying for a number of weeks, and it will not just set out the kit and capabilities. Unlike the defence equipment plans that we inherited from the Conservative party—which were unfunded; there was, for instance, an £18 billion black hole in their equipment plan—the DIP will also deal with the estates, the housing situation, and our people, vital enablers of a whole defence project. A line-by-line review has highlighted the mistakes, such as the lack of support contracts that we saw under the Conservatives. As I have said, this will be a funded plan, and it will be published ahead of the NATO summit.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): The defence funding is obviously very late and it will clearly be inadequate as well, but an even greater scandal is surely the fact that the spending itself is so poorly conducted. Our procurement system is slow, wasteful and outdated. The Minister praised them earlier, but does he not accept that the bureaucrats who gave us the Ajax programme cannot command the confidence of the armed forces? Will he acknowledge that the part of the MOD that he oversees is slow and wasteful, procures outdated equipment, and is the most dysfunctional part of the British state?

Luke Pollard: That sounds like a very good description of the procurement record of the Government of which the hon. Gentleman was a member when he was a Conservative, but let me say this very simply to Reform: where is your defence spokesperson? Reform Members are often missing from defence events. Where are they? Let us make sure that we have the investment, because I want to see armed forces that stand up to Russia, not Reform politicians who accept bribes from Russia.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for coming to the House to reply to the UQ.

It is truly shocking that our armed services have been forced to live in disgraceful, appalling conditions for many years. The Minister is aware that the defence

[*Florence Eshalomi*]

housing strategy was launched last year, and I thank him for giving me a briefing on that. Part of it uses funding from the strategic defence review. Can the Minister confirm that the funding is still secured? We are seeing concerns about the overall defence investment plan.

Luke Pollard: It was a scandal that so many of our armed forces personnel were being asked and required to live in accommodation with black mould, broken boilers and leaky roofs. It directly affected the fall in morale that we saw in every single service for nearly the duration of the Conservative Government, and it led to the retention and recruitment crisis. It is the reason why, when in opposition, we said that we would make improving defence housing a priority, and why in government we have announced a £9 billion programme to improve defence homes. Not only did we have a target of delivering improvements to the 1,000 worst defence homes by Christmas—a target that we achieved ahead of time—but we have completed the next 200 most appalling homes. By the next decade, nine in 10 defence homes will have been either rebuilt or refurbished, giving our people the homes that they should have had for many years, but which they are getting only because a Labour Government are providing the funding.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Does the Minister realise how utterly discredited the Government now look? We all understand that a majority of Members of this House want the Government to take the necessary steps to find the extra money that is necessary for defence, but it is the failure of the Prime Minister to manage his own party that is at the root of the problem. Will changing the leader make any difference?

Luke Pollard: I am here to talk about defence policy rather than the Labour party leadership, I am afraid, but let me be very clear: the Prime Minister has set out his desire to spend more on defence and to spend it faster. I welcome that because I want to see more defence spending. We have a profile that already increases defence spending to 2.5% of GDP in April 2027—something never achieved in 14 years of Conservative Government. I welcome the important debate about how we can go faster on defence spending; I also want to see a debate about what capabilities we are spending on and how much more of the money is directed at UK businesses. That is what I hope will happen in the next couple of weeks.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): The Government have led with a NATO-first approach in the SDR and have worked to strengthen the alliance. At the 2025 Hague summit, the alliance committed to spending 3.5% of GDP on defence by 2035. Can the Minister say what conversations he has had with NATO partners on the DIP, so that we can all work towards that increased spending goal?

Luke Pollard: Working with NATO partners is a key plank of how we increase the deterrence and security of the United Kingdom. In the past few days, I have had conversations with our friends in Norway about how we can build a combined frigate force. I have had conversations

with our French, German, Polish and Italian allies about how we can bring forward more defence investment by working together on a number of capabilities. We will continue to do that, but as my hon. Friend has set out, we are committed to spending 3.5% of GDP on defence as part of 5% being spent on national security by 2035, including 3% in the next Parliament. I will continue to make the case for increased defence spending, and for more capabilities for our armed forces.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): I want to put on the record my respect for the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey) and the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns). Both served in the roles they relinquished last week with the sincerity and integrity that those roles demanded. Each should be commended for putting the needs of our country before their own this past week, citing the Government's underwhelming commitment to defence investment—of course, the rest of us will just have to take their word for it.

I also have great respect for the incumbent Secretary of State for Defence. I know that he is with the King this week and is unable to explain what it is about the Government's approach that inspires him but not his predecessor. In his absence, can the Minister explain when we will see the defence investment plan that he has now been left to front?

Luke Pollard: It is the same answer that I have given for quite some time: the defence investment plan will be published ahead of the NATO summit in only a few weeks' time. I join the hon. Gentleman in his words of thanks to the previous Defence Secretary and the previous Minister for the Armed Forces. Serving alongside two people with a passion for defence has been a real privilege for me, and I share the passion and commitment of the new Defence Secretary. We have a job to get this right. We know that it is important and that it matters, which is why we are continuing to increase defence spending. A debate that asks how quickly we are increasing defence spending, and what more we can do, is a debate that I welcome, but let us also make sure that we are talking about what we are spending on. It is not just about kit and equipment; our people need to get a mention.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): We are talking of spending, but modern warfare, like warfare since time immemorial, depends on the bravery of our fighting men and our fighting women. We also need a nimble and effective industrial base, for we used to have arrows, then there were bullets and shells, and now there are drones and tech. How can we be best prepared for the next war and support small and medium-sized enterprises in places such as Suffolk?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend is assiduous in raising the people involved in tech. I have visited Suffolk, which is an area where SMEs do really well; indeed, I have been to a Ukrainian drone manufacturing company that has set up in that part of the world. We need to learn the lessons from Ukraine, and that means more autonomy, more drones, a more joined-up way of thinking and a change in the way we fight, if only because the way that Russia has fought in Ukraine shows that some of the doctrine we have traditionally followed and inherited

from the Conservatives—the difference between the close and the deep, how artillery and drones work together, and how we can hold ground and take it—have changed fundamentally. That is why we are setting out, in the defence investment plan, the implementation of the SDR: to start the process of getting us to a more lethal force.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I know the Minister accepts that I have criticised successive Governments for not spending anything like the 4.5% that Margaret Thatcher used to spend on defence at the height of the cold war throughout the 1980s, but does he accept that the service chiefs have made an objective assessment of the Government's own strategic defence review, and have arrived at the conclusion that the sum of £28 billion is necessary to implement it over, I believe, a four-year period? If he accepts that, how can he possibly go along with an offer from the Treasury of less than half the total needed?

Luke Pollard: I have a lot of time for the right hon. Gentleman. He and I are on different sides of the Chamber, but we made the case for increased defence spending during the last Parliament, and I am glad he is with me in arguing for increased defence spending in this Parliament as well. We will continue to make the case for that and to look at how we can deliver those increased capabilities.

Gurinder Singh Josan (Smethwick) (Lab): At the beginning of the month, I attended the NATO Parliamentary Assembly spring session in Lithuania with representatives of NATO and other allies, including Ukraine. As you will be aware, Mr Speaker, the Labour party has a strong tradition, going back to Ernest Bevin, of maintaining a strong and effective defence for our nation both within NATO and independently. After 14 failed Tory years, and considering that other NATO countries are well ahead of us in the proportion of GDP they are spending on defence, what will the Minister do to ensure our armed forces receive the transformation they require to face modern-day threats, with an industrial sector to provide support, so that we do not betray Labour's strong defence tradition?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for his work with the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. It is important not just that we have a Labour Government with a NATO-first approach, but that parliamentarians from all parties make the case for UK leadership. We are currently working with a number of our NATO allies on both the coalition of the willing activity for Ukraine, and the UK-led mission to help reopen and de-mine the strait of Hormuz in the future. We are working with our NATO friends to make sure we are increasing deterrence and, where possible, moving from interoperability to interchangeability to ensure that our kit and equipment can be shared. That increases warfighting ability, increases lethality, smooths supply chains and poses a greater deterrent option against Russia, which we will continue doing. We will work with our NATO friends not only on joint procurement projects, but on how we operate, train and deploy more together.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Just when the High North and the Arctic is emerging as one of the world's most important strategic

hotspots, we have witnessed a major UK Government Department disintegrate before our eyes, with the Secretary of State—because of the parsimony of the Treasury—resigning, and taking a junior Minister, the Armed Forces Minister, with him. Why does the Minister think the Prime Minister can convince our NATO allies that he is capable of defending the strategically important Greenland-Iceland-UK gap when he cannot even convince his colleagues that he can?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. It is not normal that the SNP has a very strong pro-defence line, but it is, I guess, welcome. If this is a change of heart from the Scottish nationalists, I broadly welcome it.

The hon. Gentleman will have seen the action over the weekend against Russia's shadow fleet. He will also know of the work we do out of Scotland—for instance, at the Faslane submarine operating base and RAF Lossiemouth, with the P-8A maritime patrol aircraft and the quick reaction response aircraft—to ensure that we work in particular with our Norwegian allies and with our allies across the High North. The defence investment plan only increases the investment in that part of the world, because it is an area where we are seeing increased risk from Russia. We are seeing an increased number of Russian ships in our waters and we know that the threat to our undersea cables and our airspace is real and increasing. I hope that we can find a new cross-party consensus with the SNP, which I hope will start with the SNP Government funding a second defence technical excellence college in Scotland to give our young people the skills they need.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I am proud that Blackpool and the Fylde college in my constituency, which my hon. Friend has seen, has been selected as one of the five DTECs in England. That is part of a major national investment in skills. Given the significant opportunities that that brings to Blackpool, can the Minister confirm that the defence investment plan will support young people into the careers that are needed in the defence industry?

Luke Pollard: It was a privilege to be in Blackpool for the announcement of the five English DTECs. It is an opportunity, for the very first time for defence, to invest in the skills of our young people. My hon. Friend will have seen not only a Labour Government investing in further education, with the five DTECs in England, one in Wales and hopefully two in Scotland, but, in the last week, our announcement of funding for more further education colleges and universities to provide defence and defence-adjacent skills. To deliver on the increased defence spending we are making, we will need more investment in skills, especially for 16 to 19-year-olds, graduates and—an area that is talked about less—those retraining in mid-career. I know Blackpool has a real focus on that, especially working with BAE Systems on Typhoons at Samlesbury and Warton.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): On 1 July, the Trade Minister is slapping a 50% tariff on steel from many of our allies, much of which goes into the aerospace and defence supply chain. That will affect the cost of the defence investment plan. Will the Minister urgently review those tariffs and their impact on our

[*Dame Harriett Baldwin*]

defence spending? I am sure he will agree that he wants to get the most bang for his money when funding defence.

Luke Pollard: The hon. Lady is right to argue that we need more investment in our steel industry. That is why the defence industrial strategy identified steel as one of the sectors we need to invest in more. It is also why, under this Government, we are seeing more investment in, for example, Sheffield Forgemasters, which has a specialist steelmaking capability that we use in certain parts of defence. I am very happy if she wants to write to me on the particular issue she raises.

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): There has been a lot of talk for a very long time about additional money being needed for defence. What would the Minister do with more money that he cannot do now?

Luke Pollard: Look, I want to see more defence spending, but the way we have drafted the defence investment plan is as a scalable proposition. With more defence spending, we would see more drones, more investment in our stockpile, a faster recovery of personnel numbers, more investment in autonomy and the hybrid Navy, and more investment in housing and the regeneration of our estate, in particular the regeneration of our ports and our naval refit facilities. That would make such a big difference to availability. The DIP is deliberately designed to be a scalable plan to reflect the spending we receive.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The Minister told us that the former Secretary of State had asked him to stay. Had he not been so asked, would he have resigned too? How much persuasion did it take? [*Laughter.*]

Luke Pollard: That is a good one. As someone who comes from a defence family, whose—[*Interruption.*] The Leader of the Opposition sighs. Let us talk about those people who come from a proud military family. I am proud that my old man was a submariner. I am proud of his service. I represent a military city. It has taken years upon years to get a Labour Government. I respect the decision that my former ministerial colleagues made. I decided to stay and I was encouraged to stay. There is a good reason for doing so. Given the activities over the weekend, I am proud to continue to work alongside some incredibly brave and professional people in our armed forces to keep our nation safe.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I acknowledge the service of my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey) and others who worked in his office, and I am sorry to see them go. I thank the Minister for his response, but I have to say that this is one heck of a mess. I know how difficult it can be to work with the Treasury, and that there is much we have to do, but my constituents want to know that we will do whatever we must to keep them safe. When I go home on Thursday, how can I tell them that we will do that?

Luke Pollard: We are already increasing defence spending, renewing our forces, fixing defence housing, increasing the pay of our armed forces, and tackling the toxic culture that existed in our armed forces, to make working

in defence good for every person. I want to see that go faster and further. With more defence spending, we can deliver more and greater deterrents and greater lethality. As someone who feels passionate about defence, I welcome a debate about increasing defence spending. I have a lot of time for the former Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough, and the former Armed Forces Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), and the arguments that they have made. I want to see more defence spending. The new Defence Secretary wants to get the best deal for our armed forces, and the Prime Minister and the Chancellor, equally, are planning to increase defence spending. A debate that says, “How fast, by when, and spending on what?” is one that I welcome.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): I recognise that the Minister has a difficult job to do in answering today, but has he not noticed that even though Labour has three times more MPs, there are nearly twice as many Conservatives present in the Chamber? Is that not because the Minister’s colleagues are voting with their feet and saying that the former Defence Secretary was right, and could not defend the indefensible?

Luke Pollard: As the right hon. Gentleman would know if he was present at more Defence questions, I like defence scrutiny and debate. As far as I am concerned, everyone could go round again, because more questions on defence, especially on capabilities—not on timing or what happened last week, but on the capabilities we need to invest in—are a debate that I welcome.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): The past is a story of the Conservatives hollowing out our defence, the present is a story of this Government spending more than the Conservatives did at any time in their 14 years, but my question is about the future. Our brave allies in Ukraine have revolutionised warfare—[*Interruption.*] The Opposition might want to listen to this, as it is serious. Our allies in Ukraine have shown the effectiveness of drone technology and are turning the tables on the Russians, so how can we learn from them in the defence investment plan?

Luke Pollard: I know that the Conservatives do not like hearing about their hollowing out of the armed forces, but that is what we inherited and are trying to put right. If the Conservatives had spent the level of defence spending that they now argue for when they were in power, only two years ago, perhaps we would not have such a big challenge today. [*Interruption.*] I do not like it when the Conservatives groan about our armed forces; I do not think it is respectful enough or what we need.

As to my hon. Friend’s question, when we look at Ukraine, we see the way in which drone technology is changing in an electronic warfare environment. We are supporting that by buying 120,000 drones this year for our friends in Ukraine, utilising cutting-edge British technology. Some brilliant British companies are working with brilliant Ukrainian companies. We are not only looking at small drones, the EW environment, radars and command and control systems; what I am learning from Ukraine is how we build all those things together.

The former Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak, set out clearly how we can learn from Ukraine. The strategic defence review sets out how we are learning from Ukraine. The defence investment plan sets out how we will buy more drone technology and learn that way. I welcome more investment going into defence. The more that we learn from Ukraine, the greater deterrent capability we have to stop Putin looking over the NATO boundary and thinking he can have a go at a Baltic state, somewhere along the eastern flank, or even at the United Kingdom.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): This year, global arms expenditure will be about \$3 trillion. Every country that is raising expenditure is doing so through taxation, cuts or debt. In drawing up this defence spending strategy, what consideration did the Minister's Department or the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office give to a strategy of multilateral negotiations, détente and peace in the future, as a way for everybody to benefit from a peace dividend of less being spent on arms, rather than more?

Luke Pollard: Of all the people I expected to be arguing for more defence spending, the right hon. Gentleman was not among them. Let me say very clearly to him: NATO is the guarantor of much of our security. This Government are proud to have a NATO-first policy, working with our NATO allies across the Euro-Atlantic area to deter Russian aggression. We can see what happens when deterrence fails; we can look at our friends in Ukraine to see Russian aggression, with attacks on civilian infrastructure, including one overnight—an attack that we correctly condemn for the brutality and illegality of targeting civilian infrastructure.

We can see what happens when deterrence fails. That is why we are investing more in defence to increase our deterrence alongside our allies in order to prevent conflict in the future. This is a really important task—it is the first duty of the Government. I want to see more defence spending because I do not want to see the United Kingdom in a war like the one our friends in Ukraine are fighting now. That is why we must continue to support our friends in Ukraine for as long as it takes and why we must invest in the new kit and capabilities that our forces need to deter aggression. That is what this Labour Government will do.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): At a Falklands war veterans conference last week in Poole, I was asked to reassure our serving personnel that the funding is there for the deterrence we need to keep this nation safe. This Labour Government have already given our armed forces a pay rise, invested in defence housing, increased defence spending and increased retention and recruitment in the Army. By contrast, because there has been a lot of groaning on the Conservative Benches today, between 2010 and 2024 under the last Conservative Government, the size of our Army shrank by 30%. Can the Minister confirm that there will be a fully funded plan to deliver this Government's vision for defence, and can he reassure my constituents that we will always keep this nation safe?

Luke Pollard: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. I also thank all those who served in the Falklands in the 1982 conflict. Yesterday marked the 44th anniversary of Liberation Day, which is celebrated in both the United

Kingdom and the Falkland Islands; it is important that we remember the sacrifice of the people who went to the south Atlantic and never came back. That is one of the reasons that I want to see more defence investment and for us to have the deterrent capability.

I come from a military family, with members of my family having served across the forces, so I know that when serving personnel go away, there is always a question mark over whether they will come home. That is precisely what drives me in my passion for more defence spending. We need to spend on the kit and equipment that keeps our people safe and provides deterrence and warfighting capability. That is exactly what this Labour Government are doing: investing in our people and in our forces. Of course I want to see more defence spending—that is an argument that we are making, and we will continue to do so with the defence investment plan published before the NATO summit.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): I welcome the Minister's response to my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson), the former Defence Secretary, and his reaffirmation of the Government's commitment to all the recommendations in the strategic defence review. Given that reaffirmation, how many of those 62 recommendations currently have the necessary funding fully agreed and committed to by the Treasury?

Luke Pollard: We support all 62 recommendations of the SDR, and they are all in progress. The defence investment plan sets out how we will deliver our equipment, personnel and estates for the next 10 years. I want to see more defence investment—the argument that was made by my former colleagues is powerful. I do want to see more defence spending, and I welcome the argument and debate about that across the House.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his answers. I take this opportunity to welcome the Minister for Veterans and People, my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey), to his rightful place on the Front Bench; his experience in the armed forces will be useful to the Government. He also knows my constituency of Harlow very well, which is particularly useful, as I am sure Members will all agree.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) has stolen my thunder, as I was going to say that the most important part of our armed forces is our people—our soldiers, our naval personnel, our sailors and other staff. Can the Minister reassure me that he will continue to champion our armed forces and ensure that they have all that they need to do their jobs and to keep us all safe?

Luke Pollard: I can confirm that we will continue to invest in our people. I think the last time we had a defence review that did not cut the size of the British Army was in the late '80s. In the strategic defence review published under this Labour Government, we announced that we will increase the size of the British Army to 76,000. We know that the Army's strength fell considerably and that there was a retention and recruitment crisis in our armed forces under the Conservative Government.

[*Luke Pollard*]

That is precisely what we are addressing with the biggest pay rise for our armed forces and by taking action on housing and childcare.

I welcome the new Minister for Veterans and People, but I also want to say that I am really proud of the new Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Sandher-Jones)—another veteran serving in a key role. Both of them will do a good job for our nation.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): In his excoriating resignation letter, the genuinely hon. and gallant Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) made it clear that he was leaving not just because he considered the DIP to be underfunded but, more particularly, because it planned to spend the money on the wrong things, preparing to fight the last war and not the war to come. He was right, wasn't he?

Luke Pollard: I have a lot of time for the former Defence Secretary and the former Armed Forces Minister, and I agree with much of the argument they have made about the importance of increasing defence spending. That is why today I have set out continually from the Dispatch Box that I want to see more defence spending, and I want to see it directed at British companies.

I want to see us prepare to deter the next conflict. To do that, we need to invest more in drones, and that is what the defence investment plan will set out. However, as I have said, the defence investment plan is a deliberately scalable document that can reflect an increasing defence budget. That is what we are projecting over the coming decade, delivering our commitment to 3.5% on core defence by 2035.

Spending more on the new capabilities, though, does mean retiring old capabilities. It means doing something that the armed forces have not done for a very long time: discarding some of that kit and equipment that has been around for many, many decades and investing in newer technologies. That is a difficult argument for Ministers to make—it is difficult for those people who are attached to old equipment in particular—but when we have armour that has been in service since before the Vietnam war and ships that are decades past their decommissioning date, we need to be honest about the need to retire old equipment and buy new equipment. The hybrid Navy is just one example of what we will be setting out in the defence investment plan.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): I have been told from a reliable source that our Prime Minister, in stark contrast to all other previous modern-day Prime Ministers, has never visited our special forces' headquarters in Hereford. Is that a reflection of how low down defence is on his priorities list?

Luke Pollard: I will say two things to the hon. Member. I know that she is relatively new to the House, but it is a really important rule that we do not comment on special forces. We neither confirm nor deny activities or visits to any special forces location. We do that deliberately, because any question that helps define who is where and what they are doing is of benefit to our adversaries. I appreciate that she was looking for a "gotcha" question, but let me take her back to the important thing: we do not comment on special forces.

What I have seen from our Prime Minister and the former Defence Secretary is their meeting the crews of our ballistic submarines when they return on zero day, after many months under the sea. I have seen them support the brilliant service of armed forces personnel. I am afraid that the hon. Member will not get me, or any other Minister, to comment on special forces. I suggest that she thinks carefully before asking questions like that again.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Last week, I was away at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. I thought I had understood why the former Secretary of State for Defence had resigned, but here today according to the Minister it is really unknown.

Where the Minister is right is in talking about making sure that naval procurement does not go through the problems it had in the past—that was one of the consequences of being in power with the Liberal Democrats. On procuring ships, there are shipyards that are worried about whether they can maintain their workforces—without the DIP, they cannot know—and I am concerned to read that the Type 83 destroyer may be postponed. Will all the plans for capital ships currently in place remain—yes or no, or is that up for debate as well?

Luke Pollard: I thank the right hon. Member for his question. He will know from his time in the Ministry of Defence and on the NATO PA that getting procurement right and fixing the broken procurement system we inherited is important. We have already taken a number of steps to get there. I think he will recall that I gave an answer on the Type 83 last week, at the last urgent question on this topic. If he looks back at that, he will get his answer.

Let me say clearly to the right hon. Member that we inherited an equipment plan that was overcommitted and unsuitable for the challenges we now face. That is one of the reasons we are looking to invest more in autonomy and more in hybrid and uncrewed systems. For the Royal Navy especially—he mentioned the importance of air defence—we are looking at how uncrewed systems can sail alongside crewed systems, providing that air defence bubble. Learning lessons from our friends in Ukraine and from recent activities in the middle east and Cyprus will be an important part of that. He will be able to recognise that immediately when he reads the DIP, on its publication.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Martin from Wimborne contacted me at the weekend to share his suggestion on funding the defence investment plan. He thinks that the Lib Dem idea of issuing defence bonds is a really sensible one and has told me that, in his view, many people with money in cash ISAs might be tempted to invest if the investment were taken out of their inheritance tax liability. Will the Minister confirm whether discussions are happening about innovative ways to access the capital needed to ensure that the DIP can be fully funded?

Luke Pollard: I thank the hon. Lady for her question and Martin for his interest in how we increase defence spending. She will know from our debates in this Chamber that it is not just the defence investment plan that we are working on currently. We are also looking at how, through a defence finance and investment strategy, working with our defence advisory group for City professionals, we can look at accessing new forms of capital, including patient, sovereign and a whole range of capital options.

I know that the hon. Lady and her party are keen on the war bonds option, and I am happy to look at the detailed analysis of that if her party has any, but we do not just need investment in core defence; it is also about investing in the supply chain. That is especially true of those small and medium-sized enterprises with huge growth potential, and we need to ensure that they can compete for contracts. That is one of the reasons we are looking at new ways of procuring through the Commercial X procurement model and learning lessons from the Taskforce Kindred for Ukraine procurement. We are bringing those into mainstream UK armed forces procurement to speed it up, which means that more SMEs will be able to benefit from it. More capital injection into defence—both from the Government, as we are planning, and from private sources—is a good course.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): Last week, the former Defence Secretary said that the Prime Minister was unable and the Chancellor unwilling to fund the resources needed to tackle the threats facing our nation. Does the Minister agree with that assessment, and if not, why not?

Luke Pollard: I have seen the previous Defence Secretary make the case for defence spending, and I have seen the Prime Minister and the Chancellor increase defence spending since Labour came to office. I know that there is a very strong case, to meet the moment, for further increasing defence spending. That is why the new Defence Secretary has been speaking to the Prime Minister and to colleagues across Government about how best we can deliver a DIP that will increase our warfighting capability and end the hollowing out and the absence of funding in the equipment plan. About 30% of the equipment plan we inherited from the Conservatives was unfunded. There is lots of work to do, but we will publish the DIP before the NATO summit.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The sluggish and unambitious delivery of the defence investment plan is not the only threat to our security. Given that we have Russian ships threatening our cables and such like, does the Minister agree that the fact that the United Kingdom is reliant on imports for 45% of its food supply is no longer an economic convenience but a national security liability? Does he also recognise that England is now the only country in the UK, and the only country in Europe, that does not directly support its farmers to produce food? Is that not a threat to our national security, too?

Luke Pollard: When I held the shadow Environment brief, the hon. Gentleman and I were in many debates where I made the case strongly that food security is national security. This is something that really matters. He also mentioned cables, and he will know that we are investing in the operations that Royal Fleet Auxiliary Proteus and HMS Stirling Castle can undertake to support our undersea infrastructure. We need to continue to support those items, and he will see more in the defence investment plan. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs covers food security here, but I agree with him that food security is national security.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): The former Defence Secretary knew what was in the defence investment plan, thought it was inadequate and resigned

as a result. I am sure the Minister would not be so shameless and disrespectful to the House as to spend an hour defending that plan if he himself had not seen it in full, so I have a very easy question for him: has he seen the defence investment plan in full, yes or no?

Luke Pollard: Yes, I have been involved in doing it. Let me be very clear and answer the hon. Gentleman's question in full—*[Interruption.]* His Front-Bench colleagues want to shout at me, but let them listen for a moment. The defence investment plan is a good, scalable plan that provides the capabilities—

Dr Mullan: Have you seen it?

Luke Pollard: I have just replied: yes. The hon. Gentleman needs to listen to the answer. Yes, I have seen it, and I have been involved in writing it. The plan itself is a good plan; the debate is about the funding that goes into it. I am up for a debate about how we increase defence spending, because I want to see more capabilities, I want to see defence housing improve faster, and I want to see more support for our armed forces so that they can recover their strength. That is precisely what the defence investment plan will set out, and it is good to make the case for more funding to go into it.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): If the past few months have taught us anything, it is that military might is no guarantee of security. Trump deployed the full force of his military—dropping bombs and killing thousands in Iran—and it has brought nothing but mounting debt and a far worse deal than the one Obama struck without firing a single missile. In addition, Trump and Netanyahu have wiped more than \$2 trillion from the global economy and brought energy price hikes that are thought to have pushed 100,000 Brits out of work. Of course, that does not mean that we abrogate our responsibilities and do not support our armed forces in terms of personnel and the deterrence that we need, but does the Minister agree, unlike the Leader of the Opposition, that careful diplomacy and tackling the cost of living crisis, especially for the most vulnerable, do more to bring security than any bomb?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Try to keep it short, Minister.

Luke Pollard: I recommend that the hon. Gentleman reads the new defence diplomacy strategy, which we published a few months ago to deliver on what he has just asked me.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): Members of 42 Commando Royal Marines, led by Commanding Officer Tom Quinn, were a key part of the seizure of the Russian shadow fleet vessel yesterday morning. It is clear that our Royal Marines will always deliver for this country. They are world class, and I have had the privilege of seeing them in action at their home in Bickleigh barracks in my constituency. However, their ability to succeed can be sustained only if we invest in our defence and prepare for the wars of tomorrow. The former Armed Forces Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns)—a former Royal Marine himself—said in his resignation letter:

“We are still purchasing capability suitable for the last war while our adversaries arm for the next one.”
Does the Minister agree?

Luke Pollard: As a fellow Plymouth MP, I was exceedingly proud of the Royal Marines from 42 Commando in Plymouth for participating in the action. If the hon. Lady were to look at 47 Commando, another Royal Marines unit based in Plymouth, she would see some of the new capabilities that we have bought to support them, including the Kraken K3 Scouts. The Royal Marines have a bright future ahead of them, and superb professionalism, as we saw on the weekend.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): The Minister said that the defence investment plan will be published following a “line-by-line review”. It is obvious that the previous Secretary of State resigned because he could not review it downwards any further—because of the actions of the Treasury. The Minister also said that the plan is “scalable”. What assurances can he give that the spend is scalable upwards and not downwards, given that the Treasury has already said that it is unable and unwilling to fund it further?

Luke Pollard: We are already increasing defence spending, and we will continue to increase defence spending. The defence investment plan is designed to be scalable to match that increased defence spending. The question is what profile that increase should have. I will always argue for more defence spending, but we are increasing defence spending. That is something that I want to see more of.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): The Business Secretary said on the weekend that a lot of time and effort had gone into the defence investment plan, but when pushed he said that he had not read it. The former Defence Secretary and former Minister for the Armed Forces have read it, and they resigned. The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry said that he had read it in full. Why did he decide not to resign when his two colleagues in the Department did resign?

Luke Pollard: I answered that question in my earlier remarks.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I put on record my thanks to the former Secretary of State and the former Minister for the Armed Forces for their principled stand on defence spending. Over the weekend, a Minister referred on the Laura Kuenssberg show to extra defence funding. I understand that the new Secretary of State, the right hon. and gallant Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis)—I welcome him to his place and wish him well—is also committed to extra funding. I am a DUP MP who represents a region with a proud, historic military

tradition and a thriving defence sector manufacturing base, so what immediate assurances can the Minister give to the thousands of skilled defence, aerospace and maritime workers across Northern Ireland, whose cutting-edge capabilities are vital to reinforcing our sovereign defence industrial base? We must never compromise the territorial integrity of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Luke Pollard: I point the hon. Gentleman not just to the £1.6 billion contract that we have placed with Thales in Belfast for its lightweight multirole missile—supporting our friends in Ukraine—but to the increasing investment we are working with Thales on to support our middle eastern friends, as well as the £50 million Northern Ireland defence growth deal, which is especially supporting SMEs in Northern Ireland to access more of the increasing defence spending. I want to see more defence spending in Northern Ireland, as I want to see more defence spending across the United Kingdom.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Minister will know that we have been stalling on signing the full international contract for the global combat air programme since last year, and in April we signed the interim funding contract for Edgewing, which was £686 million. That runs out in just two weeks’ time. Yesterday the Prime Minister met Sanae Takaichi, the Japanese Prime Minister, Japan being one of the partners in GCAP. Can he confirm that he has signed the full international contract, and can he guarantee that funding will be in place before the money runs out at the end of June?

Luke Pollard: It is unusual for the hon. Member not to be on the money with his questions, but as the media reports on the weekend’s meeting make clear, we will be signing the full international contract by the end of the month. We are committed to GCAP.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): The Minister was clear that the previous Defence Secretary asked him to remain in post; will he be equally clear about what exactly he disagrees with in the letter that the previous Defence Secretary sent the Prime Minister about the defence investment plan last Thursday?

Luke Pollard: There is lots on which I agree with the former Defence Secretary, and he and I have worked together for a very long time on this. I respect his decision and that of the former Armed Forces Minister. I am staying to get this done—to deliver a defence investment plan. I will continue working with our brand-new Defence Secretary to get a good deal for defence, and to support our armed forces.

Social Media Ban for Under-16s

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Before we come to the statement, I must place on the record Mr Speaker's disappointment that the Prime Minister chose Downing Street over this House as the place in which to make the important announcement about banning under-16s from social media. The Prime Minister's very own rulebook states that important policy announcements should be made in the first instance in this House when it is sitting. His approach this morning is symptomatic of a pattern of disrespect for this House from No. 10. The Government have said that they will update the ministerial code on this point, and I urge them to get on with it. In the meantime, they must stick with the rules as they are set out. Mr Speaker wishes to thank the Secretary of State, who is a shining example of a Minister taking the code seriously on this matter and not briefing out her statement before she has come to the House. I call the Secretary of State.

4.47 pm

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Liz Kendall): Today marks a defining moment for our children, and for future generations, as we lay the foundations of a new settlement for the online world. We want to ensure that children have the best start in life and the freedom to be children again, and to put power back into parents' hands.

Up and down the country, parents are grappling with social media—what their children are seeing, how much screen time they should have, who they are communicating with and whether they are safe. Many children love connecting and interacting on social media, but others struggle with their mental health, concentration and self-esteem. The police, children's charities and far too many tragically bereaved families have seen for themselves the serious risks and harm that social media brings.

While these concerns are widely shared, there are different, often strongly held views about the best way forward. We launched our consultation on growing up in the online world to ensure that everyone's voices were heard. The response has been overwhelming. We have had over 116,000 replies, including 54,000 from parents and 14,000 from children. We have heard from charities, teachers' organisations, the police and medical professionals, and from countless Members of Parliament—not only those on the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee and the Education Committee, but my hon. Friends the Members for Plymouth Moor View (Fred Thomas), for Croydon East (Natasha Irons), for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward), for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie), and so many more besides.

The progress report that we are publishing today sets out lots of different perspectives, but our consultation showed overwhelmingly that parents and children are concerned about what children are being exposed to online—harmful content; content that is completely inappropriate for their age; and abuse and exploitation. Parents are worried about the impact on children's sleep, school, physical health and emotional wellbeing. Above all, parents are crying out for change. Nine out of 10 parents who responded to the consultation told us that they want an outright ban on social media, as did

three quarters of parents who responded to our large-scale representative survey and the 113,000 parents who signed Daisy and Joe's Smartphone Free Childhood petition.

Keeping children safe online has been my top priority since day one in this job. I have listened to calls, especially from bereaved families, to act as quickly as possible. Today I announce our first steps, with more to come next month. I can confirm that we will ban social media companies from providing their services to under-16s. *[Applause.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. There should not be clapping in the Chamber or the Gallery. No doubt the Doorkeepers will remove people if they need to.

Liz Kendall: We are doing this to give greater protections to children and greater clarity to parents and carers, and to set a new social norm for future generations. My intention is to lay before the House regulations on a ban, and to have a vote on them by the end of this year, with the ban coming into effect in early 2027. We plan to use the same model as Australia, covering user-to-user platforms that allow users to post material alongside algorithms. Our ban will include platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, Facebook and X. Because we want to make sure that we do not include educational services, e-commerce or music streaming platforms, there will be a narrowly defined list of exemptions, which we will keep under review.

I have listened to parents, civil society and many MPs in this House, including my hon. Friends the Members for Putney (Fleur Anderson), for Lowestoft (Jess Asato), for Congleton (Sarah Russell), and for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah), about the need to go further, and I can today announce our first steps to restrict a wider range of features and functions that create risks for young people. Because it can open the door to vile child abuse, we will ban livestreaming for under-16s across all platforms. We will ban communication with strangers, including in gaming, to stop paedophiles meeting and grooming children.

We are not stopping there. Artificial intelligence chatbots were a top concern of parents who responded to our consultation, particularly chatbots that mimic intimate relationships and exploit vulnerabilities. The Children's Commissioner and my hon. Friends the Members for Aylesbury (Laura Kyrke-Smith) and for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington) have also raised this issue. Today, Britain becomes the first country in the world to ban chatbots that offer sexualised content to under-18s, and we will restrict this functionality on general-purpose chatbots too. We know that there are really serious concerns about other AI chatbots, such as in therapy apps, but I recognise that some of those may have benefits, so I am working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care and others to assess the evidence, and I will come back to the House to give a further statement next month on this issue, and on wider measures on AI chatbots.

We want to address concerns that there will be a cliff edge when a child turns 16—an age when young people should be especially focused on their future and exams. I can announce that livestreaming and stranger communication, including in gaming, will be switched off by default for 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds. I am also strongly minded to bring in default overnight curfews

[Liz Kendall]

and breaks in infinite scrolling for 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds. I will set out further details in my next statement in July, once our pilot schemes are finished.

I know that not everyone supports a ban, and I have listened carefully to the concerns and want to take each in turn. First, we have seen in Australia that many children will try to get around a ban, and succeed. That is inevitable when social media has been such an integral part of their life. We will introduce more highly effective age-assurance measures better to support compliance, and I have asked Ofcom to share proposals on that within months. However, I want to be clear to parents, and to Members of the House, that our ban is as much about helping future generations, and resetting social norms in future, as it is about young people today.

Secondly, people worry that a ban would push children on to riskier, less regulated sites, and that is something that I take extremely seriously. I have had a long conversation with Ofcom and its new chair, and have written to them to stress once again that enforcement of the Online Safety Act 2023 and our new ban must be a top priority. Ofcom must focus rigorously on that, including in relation to riskier sites, and I have asked for an urgent review of whether it has the right capabilities in place. I have also asked Ofcom to publish a clear enforcement strategy, and an annual report to Parliament on how the strategy is progressing.

Thirdly, we must prepare children for the online world, which will inevitably be part of their life. Many schools are already doing that, but from September this year, every pupil across England will learn about social media in the classroom, including AI and how to spot deepfakes. My Department has produced new advice for parents on how to talk to children about the online world. It is called, “You won’t know if you don’t ask”. This is schools and parents together preparing children for the future.

Lastly but by no means least, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and my hon. Friends the Members for Kettering (Rosie Wrighting), for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean), and for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) have rightly raised the importance of ensuring that all young people can access information, trusted support and exciting activities, especially if they are no longer spending so much time online. We are delivering on that, too. The Secretaries of State for Education and for Culture, Media and Sport are expanding what is on offer in every school and beyond the classroom, including after-school clubs in the holidays and at weekends. There is support for a wide range of enrichment activities, such as art, music, sport, cooking, camping and museum visits—things that were once available only to those who could afford them, but are now available to every pupil in England. In stark contrast to Conservative Members, who cut youth services by 75%, we are investing £500 million in our “Youth Matters” national youth strategy, so that children from all walks of life, wherever they live, can access youth services, sport and the arts.

My driving force, and the reason I came into politics, has always been and will always be to give every child, from every background, the best possible start in life, because that is how they and our country succeed. Today, we take a decisive step towards creating a safer,

healthier life for our children and future generations. We are giving children their childhood back. I am clear-eyed about all the challenges that social media brings, for adults as well as children, and technology constantly changes. Today’s announcement is not “one and done”, or the end of the story. There is still much more to do, but this is a landmark day—a day when we stand with parents, charities, bereaved families, and all those who have campaigned for change. This is your moment. It is a day when we take power away from the tech giants, who have had countless opportunities to keep children safe, and put it in back in parents’ hands. It is a day when we give our children the freedom to be children again, so that they have the best possible start in life. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

4.59 pm

Julia Lopez (Hornchurch and Upminster) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. As someone infamous for her impatience, waiting for the Prime Minister to opine on something that she genuinely cares about must have been as frustrating for her as it has been for us.

Today the Prime Minister announced, as his shot at a legacy, something that six months ago he said he was personally opposed to—a ban on social media for under-16s. We can be grateful that he got there in the end, but the victory is not his. Thanks must go to some of the gutsier Labour Back Benchers whom we have heard cited today, the Leader of the Opposition, the shadow Education Secretary and, in particular, my noble Friend Lord Nash for his dogged determination in pursuing his amendments. Above all, we must thank those parents who took the senseless tragedies that befell their families and turned their pain into a legacy that will benefit so many children. They have conducted themselves with dignity and grace, and many are in the Gallery today to see the results of their courage.

The Prime Minister’s about-turn tells many stories. If he were a man with views, his position could have been laid out at the start of the year, with the consultation used as a chance to polish the policy. As it is, officials’ heads have been left spinning trying to retrofit details to this damascene conversion. The Prime Minister likes to make a virtue of process, but he has used process in this case as a tool to avoid doing what so many hon. Members said was not only inevitable, but right and entirely necessary. We have had votes: the Prime Minister instructed his troops three times to vote against the ban. We have had debates: the Prime Minister would not give a view. But lo, a career-critical by-election comes along and, upon realising that protecting kids is not just popular but vital, the Prime Minister has finally found his voice. With Makerfield going to the polls on Thursday, perhaps we should use the next couple of days to maximum effect by trying to extract his opinions on funding defence, cutting welfare and getting cheap energy, because this country has been waiting for leadership for too long.

As Conservatives, we believe in the ultimate responsibility of parents over their children, but they face huge challenges in keeping their children safe online. It is not simply a matter of denying them a phone or a computer.

There are many good uses of tech that children and young people should be free to explore, but the onus is on us, as adults, to create a positive place for their exploration. Instead, activity that would never be tolerated in the real world has been normalised, monetised and algorithmically amplified, to the detriment of kids.

The Online Safety Act 2023 was a step forward, but we better understand now that it is not just what children see, but how social media works. The success of the policy will depend heavily on its implementation, and the announcement still begs many questions. What additional resource is the Secretary of State giving to Ofcom? She is asking the regulator to take on a substantial amount of extra work. Does she expect tech companies to contribute more towards the regulator's budget or will the funding come from her own budget?

When can we expect precise definitions of what brings a platform into scope? A list of banned platforms has been briefed today, but it is not clear why some do not make the cut. Can the Secretary of State guarantee that this work will not distract from implementing the final stages of the OSA? What lessons has she learned from the circumvention of the Australia ban that will make the UK experience and our ban more effective?

The Secretary of State talks about more effective age assurances, and I agree with her about the need to reset social norms, but will she be ruling out mandatory digital ID as a requirement for accessing social media? What privacy protections will be in place if children's images are taken as part of face scanning for age verification? Is she considering age verification at app store level as a means not only of more reliable protection of children, but as a chance to reduce friction for adults wishing to access social media?

The Government have said that they are considering overnight curfews and breaks in infinite scrolling for under-18s. How do Ministers square granting 16-year-olds the solemn duty to vote, but not the power to have a cheeky night-time scroll on Instagram? The same applies to romantic chat bots. How is this going to work? Will the restrictions apply to 16-year-olds or 18-year-olds, given that both meet the age of sexual consent? On efforts to prevent children from taking or sharing nude imagery, will the Secretary of State set out the scope of the law she is considering and categorically rule out client-side scanning tools being applied to adults' phones?

We are told that the first set of regulations to enable the social media ban could be in effect by spring 2027. How confident is the Secretary of State that she will achieve her timeline? She will understand that this policy is not easily implemented—she has made reference to that—and she has detractors who share the aim but not the means, fearing that a ban pushes children out of supervised accounts and towards riskier services. What does she say to those, like Ian Russell, who believe that this policy is not only wrong but cynically timed? She suggests that it comes down to enforcement of the OSA, which makes my earlier questions more relevant.

Finally, I wish to ask the Secretary of State about her tweet last week on updating the Online Safety Act to remove illegal content with greater speed during “times of crisis”. The scenes in Belfast rightly appalled every decent citizen in our nation. The vicious barbarism of Hadi Alodid, just like the despicable murder of Henry Nowak, has ignited anger and sparked protests that have led to indiscriminate violence against innocent people.

Violence and protest can often mix, but they are none the less two very different things. Laws exist that prohibit incitement, criminalise threats to kill and stop platforms from hosting illegal content, and they must rightly be enforced with strength.

On the other hand, peaceful protest is a legitimate response to failure—in this case, the perceived failure of the political class to adequately deal with concerns that the public have raised time and again via the ballot box. In such circumstances, I appreciate that the Government have a job on their hands to ensure that work to stop the spread of illegal content is not perceived to be or does not become an attempt to obscure legitimate political comment. What powers are being taken? How will “times of crisis” be defined? What assurances can the Secretary of State offer the House that she understands that if the Government do not get their approach right, any actions she proposes risk stoking the very unrest that her policy is designed to subdue?

For too long, we have implicitly decided that childhood and parenting must simply adapt to the darker manifestations of the internet as a reality of modern life. Giving parents the support that they need is not the same as the state stripping them of their ultimate responsibilities, but when harm from social media to our children is real and growing, the time comes for action, even when the answers are not perfect. I look forward to working with the Secretary of State on ensuring that the implementation of her policy is as close to perfect as it can be.

Liz Kendall: I am glad that the hon. Lady said at the end of her question that she will work with us to ensure that we implement this policy effectively. That is extremely important. I absolutely agree that the policy is a win for all the parents who have campaigned for it, especially the bereaved families, who have had to relive the horror of what has happened time and time again.

The hon. Lady made some comments about the Prime Minister. Let me be really clear: we are moving so swiftly on this matter precisely because the bereaved families have said to us, “The longer you leave change, the worse it can be for children.” I have really taken that to heart and moved as quickly as possible. It was right to have the consultation, and not just because there are different views, but because what we have heard is so overwhelming. That builds supports for the ban and I hope it means that when we implement the ban, it will last.

The Online Safety Act took eight years from the initial idea to its implementation. The fact that this Government have taken powers in the Children Act 1989 means that we can implement this policy much more quickly. As I said, I want a vote on it by the end of the year, and I want it to come into force as early as possible, in the first couple of months of 2027.

The hon. Lady asked about Ofcom's enforcement, resources and capabilities. I have asked it to conduct an urgent review. It should first look at its own resources before coming to Parliament to ask for more, but I will look at what it says.

The hon. Lady also asked about the model that we are following. We plan to follow the model of Australia, and that covers not just the companies I named in my statement, but others. That is publicly available information.

[Liz Kendall]

The hon. Lady rightly asked about highly effective age-assurance measures. She will know that they are already covered for adults in the Online Safety Act. Not all of them are appropriate for children, so we have asked Ofcom to look at this issue as quickly as possible and to come up with something that will work. That is really important, but, as she will know, having read the Online Safety Act, privacy is absolutely at the heart of those measures. There are really strict requirements about any data collected, what it is used for and how it should be deleted. The measure regarding AI chatbots is for those aged 18 and under, because we think there are parallels there with issues such as pornography.

The hon. Lady asked about comments I put out on X last week on essentially incitement to violence online. If somebody incites violence online, it is the same as inciting violence offline, and that is not acceptable. This week in Parliament we are laying Ofcom's updated code of practice about what to do in crisis moments, which is essentially to take down illegal material. I think most people in this country would agree that if somebody breaks the law and incites violence, they should face the full consequences, whether it is online or offline, and I support that.

I know that in this House there is normally a lot of theatre around the politics—I understand that, as that is what this place is like—but the vast majority of Members support a ban. I hope we can all work together, because parents, no matter their politics, want the same thing. Let us crack on with the job.

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

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): As so many parents know, and as my Committee's ongoing inquiry into digital childhood has highlighted, British children have been the subjects of a malign mass experiment designed purely to optimise corporate profits, resulting in horrifying—though largely unmeasured—harms at an individual and population level. Successive Governments have been too ignorant, too ideological, or too in hock to big tech to act, so the Secretary of State is to be congratulated on taking action.

However, my right hon. Friend knows that a ban is riddled with problems, including workarounds such as virtual private networks and services such as generative AI and WhatsApp not being included, with new ones popping up regularly. It does nothing to address the organised acceleration of misinformation, which harms our children and whose consequences we saw on the streets of Belfast. As such, can I urge the Secretary of State to revisit my Committee's 2025 report and to go after the advertising-driven business model that incentivises these harms and is largely unregulated, and also to impose transparency requirements so that we understand the challenge we face?

Liz Kendall: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. As I think I have said in this House before, I will look again at the recommendations of that report. My right hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), who is a Minister in both my Department and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, is chairing a joint taskforce on advertising to look at what

more we can do in the online world. The Online Safety Act sets out very clear legal duties on providers to remove what is illegal for everyone and what is harmful for children, but I am looking at what more can be done, particularly during times of crisis. That includes boosting trusted sources and making it easier for people to reset their algorithms, and as I have said, we will lay updates before Parliament this week to bring into effect Ofcom's strengthened code of practice for what happens in times of crisis. However, I am sure that, as always, my hon. Friend will push us to go further.

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

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): On behalf of children and parents across the country, we welcome the Government finally taking action to keep children safe online. I know how important this issue has been to the Secretary of State. For almost 18 months, the Liberal Democrats—as the first party to force a vote on the issue—have been pushing for action to raise the digital age of consent and implement doomscrolling caps, health warnings and a film-style age rating to ban harmful social media for under-16s. Today, we welcome the fact that the Government have finally caught up with those calls to act and listened to the parents and tireless campaigners who have worked relentlessly, and often in difficult circumstances.

It is just a shame that it does not seem that it was those cries for help from parents and young people, or the mounting evidence, that finally made the Prime Minister act. After months of dither and delay, what has been announced today seems more like a panicked policy cobbled together ahead of a by-election and a Back-Bench rebellion. It is a real disappointment that, in their last-minute rush, the Government have not learned from Australia and other countries about how we can do better and deal with the root causes of online harm. Our Liberal Democrat harms-based approach would deal with addictive algorithms and features, such as from chatbots—not just the romantic companions or therapy bots that the Government have highlighted, although we of course look forward to hearing more about that next month.

Our approach is supported by more than 40 charities and experts who stand up for children and a safer online world. It would create a clear framework for new platforms and future harms that have already arrived, whereas Australia is playing a game of whack-a-mole. We can learn to do better, so why have the Government not learned from the experiences of other countries as the Secretary of State said she would? How will the Government protect children from emerging threats and addictive features elsewhere, and not just prevent young people from signing up? How are the Government deciding what platforms will be included? What framework differentiates YouTube from YouTube Kids, for example, and will children still be able to access YouTube without an account, as they can now? What addictive features will be tackled, beyond infinite scroll, and what assurances are there beyond the Government being “strongly minded” to act?

We do not mind the Prime Minister borrowing our ideas; we just wish he had borrowed all of them, and sooner. Of course, we continue to offer our services to

work together. Our approach would ban harmful social media for under-16s by default and set a new safety standard to make the internet truly a safer place, just like the standards for films and toys that we have had in the offline world for decades. Children are growing up in the attention economy, where their focus is being sold. They deserve a Government who treat this as a seatbelt moment, not a press release for Makerfield. Will the Secretary of State use this opportunity to truly hold the tech giants to account and back a harms-based framework that puts children's safety at the heart of this quickly changing technological world?

Liz Kendall: I have to admit that I am not sure whether the hon. Lady is for or against the ban. [*Interruption.*] She is a Lib Dem, say Members on the Conservative Benches. She asked about the model. In my statement, I said that it is the Australian model. We have learned the lessons, which is why we are focusing on more highly effective age-assurance measures. To be clear, there has to be rigorous enforcement, including of more risky sites. That is what I have talked about wanting Ofcom to do. We have taken powers in the Children Act 1989 to implement the results of this consultation, which includes restrictions on features and functions. One important issue is that if we restrict some features and functions, the companies will come up with others, but the powers in that Act allow us to move more quickly. One thing that has struck me is that we cannot take eight years over this, because technology is changing so fast. I am always happy to talk to Members.

Let me finish with the point about the Prime Minister. He believed in having this consultation, because there are different views. It has been a good thing to do, because the result is clear. There is not a rush; this is a deeply thought-through policy programme. I hope that the hon. Lady will rise above party politics and work with us to get it right, but I might be holding my breath.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham Yardley) (Lab): As somebody who was in some of the rooms where this policy was being discussed, I pay tribute to the Secretary of State. She has fought incredibly hard, and by no means has any of it been rushed for an announcement; she has worked incredibly hard on it. Last week, the Government announced that we would be age-verifying on the basis of the device. Why can we not use that same age verification at the device level for accessing social media?

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend is a huge champion, and has pushed hard, for many of these measures and many more besides. The ban links to the device-level interventions we have talked about, but this ban will be for under-16s. It is important that we set that clear limit. On the device proposals, I am very clear that we expect the companies to act, and we will legislate.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I welcome this morning's announcement. The platforms are not now off the hook: the Online Safety Act 2023 operates until the age of 18, which is the age to which the Children Act 1989 requires protection to be in place. On the announcement, what is the net effect of exempting messaging services but blocking communication from strangers, if a messaging service allows anybody who knows a person's phone number to add them to a large messaging group?

Liz Kendall: The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that we are not including things like WhatsApp in this policy. Parents have been clear that they want to be able to contact their children, but we want to block strangers being able to communicate with children. We will be setting out all the details in our regulations, and he knows that I will be more than happy to talk him through the details. The messaging services are not covered by the ban, but if they have features and functions—as they do—that allow strangers to communicate with children, we want to deal with that. We will be coming forward with further detail.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): The Secretary of State and I do not necessarily agree on the effectiveness of a ban, but we absolutely agree on companion chatbots. The entire business model of companion chatbots is to keep us and our children online for as long as possible, using grooming language, grooming behaviour and sometimes sexual circumstances to data-mine us and, more importantly, our children. Can the Secretary of State make it clear at the Dispatch Box that we will not tolerate these types of business models exploiting us and our children?

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend is a passionate advocate. We are absolutely clear about the fact that these so-called romantic, or companion, sexualised chatbots are wrong for children, and we will ban them, but we will ban that function in general chatbots as well; we have seen it on X, for instance. There is further to go in respect of AI chatbots, and, as I have said, I will make a further statement to the House in July on the other measures. I am more than happy to talk to my hon. Friend about that. The reason for today's big announcement about the ban was that the sooner we made the announcement the sooner we could lay the regulations, have the vote and bring it into effect. As I have said, however, there is much more to do, and I shall be very happy to talk to my hon. Friend about this further.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): The statement is not before time, but it is extremely welcome, and I congratulate the Secretary of State on extracting it through what must have been very complicated Government machinery.

I want to ask a couple of quick questions, if I may. First, just for clarity—because my school WhatsApp groups have lit up, as I am sure many others have today—can the Secretary of State confirm that all the enforcement will be against the platforms and the companies, and not against parents? As she knows, screens are a major source of conflict in the home at present, and we do not want to start thermonuclear war in homes up and down the land. Secondly, how will the Secretary of State stop the development of similar attributes in gaming environments, which are often on servers overseas and develop sophisticated ways in which to overcome the barriers that she may put in their way? Thirdly—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Ahem.

Kit Malthouse: Very quickly, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will the Secretary of State be looking at the design of content that remains on mainstream entertainment for children, which has moved much more towards the

[Kit Malthouse]

“flickering lights” mode of engaging their attention and may well now blossom and bloom in the absence of social media?

Liz Kendall: It was quite cheeky to ask three questions—but, absolutely, the enforcement will be against the companies and not the parents or the children. As the right hon. Gentleman will know, under the Online Safety Act we already have the potential to fine companies that repeatedly break the law up to 10% of their qualifying worldwide revenue and also to block service availability. We are finalising our proposals in that regard, but that is where the responsibility lies. What we have is an overall ban on social media platforms with a plan to use the Australian model, but we also have the ability to deal with specific features and functions in other services if we think that they are risky to children. I am sorry, but I have forgotten the right hon. Gentleman’s third question. I will write to him when my officials tell me about it.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and warmly welcome the decisive action that she has set out. She has agreed with the evidence-based conclusions of the Education Committee: that social media harms currently outweigh the benefits for children, that technology companies cannot be trusted to regulate themselves, and that we need to reset completely the relationship that children have with the online world. Our evidence demonstrated that a ban is not enough, and that when young people start using social media—hopefully post-16—it should be free from the most harmful, addictive features.

The tech sector is constantly innovating and evolving. Can the Secretary of State say whether and how the list of banned applications will be reviewed so that it keeps pace with the innovation in the tech sector and does not become out of date?

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend is right. We are doing what I call “Australia plus plus”: there is the ban on the providers—the platforms providing their services for children—and there is also the ability to deal with additional features and functions. We now have the legislative power to do that, and I hope it will allow us to keep up. However, I read the Committee’s report carefully, and was very struck not only by the support for an outright statutory ban but by the conclusion that this was a

“foundation for action, rather than a complete solution.”

I strongly agree with that.

I do not think that this is the whole story, and we will continue to engage with my hon. Friend and other Members of her Committee, because we must keep pace with change.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. It is highly unlikely that everyone will be able to ask questions. Far too many Members are bobbing, and we have a large amount of business to get through. However, if both questions and answers took 30 seconds, we could get most Members in.

Martin Wrigley (Newton Abbot) (LD): It sounds like the Secretary of State is hearing a fairly unanimous view from members of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, which is good. Today’s ban is a welcome start, but it is only a start and is not sufficient. Does the Secretary of State agree with me and the Committee that, in addition to parents and children taking action, the responsibility must be on the companies, as well as enforcement, because they are providing the product? Recommendation engines make them publishers of dangerous and addictive content; they are not passive platforms, as they would put forward, and they are doing it for financial gain.

Liz Kendall: Yes, I agree that the responsibility is on the platforms. They have to continue meeting their obligations under the Online Safety Act, as well as this ban. They have had chances to make their platforms safe, but they have not done so. That is why we are saying, “You can’t provide them to children anymore.”

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and welcome the decisive action she has taken. As a parent, I have seen at first hand how harmful predators stalk gaming sites, so I am glad that these have been included. As students in North West Leicestershire complete their GCSEs this week, can the Secretary of State provide more information about how we will ensure that free education resources continue and how this will be implemented in the light of the ban?

Liz Kendall: It is really important that two things happen. First, there needs to be more support for parents and schools to do what many are already doing: preparing children for a life online. We have had a big national curriculum review, and new measures are coming into place from this September, but there will be more when the full curriculum review comes into place. We are doing a huge amount to support schools to provide wider support for sport, art, culture, school plays—[*Interruption.*] I hear a cough from Madam Deputy Speaker, so I will write to my hon. Friend.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): This is a really important topic and a really important announcement about children’s health, safety and wellbeing, and I wish the Government well as they navigate some very thorny topics in bringing it into effect. Can the Secretary of State give any indication as to what accountability will look like for the platforms that will be tasked with enforcing this?

Liz Kendall: It is more complicated than it seems, but in the end, to govern is to choose. There are already strong requirements on companies under the Online Safety Act, as I said, and the fines and potential service blocks are already in the Act. We are developing further measures, but that is how we will hold companies’ feet to the fire.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows that I have concerns about the enforceability of a platform-based ban, but I welcome the news about tackling infinite scrolling, which affects people of all ages. I am concerned about young LGBT people growing up in often unsupportive environments, who can find support online from others

in similar circumstances—I know from personal experience how valuable that can be. Does the Secretary of State agree that such support is important, and if so, how will she ensure that it can continue?

Liz Kendall: That is one of the issues that I thought extremely carefully about—it is one of the things that made me unsure as we were going through this. Young people are still able to go online. I think that new resources and new support will be available in different ways that do not meet the model that Australia uses, but I am more than happy to speak to my hon. Friend and members of the LGBTQ community. It is really important that people who live or love in a different way are still able to connect, especially if they do not feel able to do so in their own community.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I know from my mailbox that today's statement will be widely welcomed by parents in Edinburgh West who are concerned about the safety of their children and the impact of social media on them, but does the Secretary of State agree that there are societal dangers as well? A lot of children are directed away from neutral sites and towards antisemitic influencers, Holocaust deniers and violent scenes, and there are wider implications. We should be looking at not just the obvious problem, but the less obvious ones.

Liz Kendall: The hon. Member is absolutely right. In England, we are looking deeply at the curriculum. Under the new relationships, sex and health education guidance, children will be taught about social media, AI and deepfakes, but the wider curriculum review will look at critical thinking about how we can trust things we see online, where they come from and what the implications are—whether that is misogyny or antisemitism. We need to prepare children for the future. We are certainly doing so in England, but I am more than happy to share with the hon. Member the evidence of that.

Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's actions to protect children from online harm, especially the harms-based approach she is taking. I have heard evidence from educational digital content creators, whose resources are a lifeline for young people. Will she commit to look at exemptions to ensure that teens over 13 do not lose access to long-form educational resources?

Liz Kendall: Yes, our list of exemptions is precisely so that we do not capture those educational resources. I have seen in my own constituency how those brilliant things can help young people learn and get on, and narrow the disadvantage gap between rich and poor kids, so I really want to make sure they are exempt.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): There is a great deal to welcome in what the Secretary of State has said, but she will know that detail really matters, so can I ask her two points of detail arising from her letter to Ofcom that was published today? First, she talks about launching

“a rapid assessment of what highly effective age assurance looks like for determining whether someone is over 16.”

Why is that work being commissioned after the announcement has been made, not before it, and given the integral importance of age assurance to her policy, is it not important for the Government to know that it can be delivered effectively?

Secondly, on the child safety duties under the Online Safety Act, will the Secretary of State confirm that what is likely to happen is that a children's access assessment will demonstrate that those platforms with highly effective age assurance in place will not need to go on and carry out a children's risk assessment for anyone under the age of 16?

Liz Kendall *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I understand how important this debate is, but, fundamentally, Members may ask one question that lasts under 30 seconds.

Liz Kendall: We have asked for the rapid review of highly effective age-assurance measures, so that they come in well before the regulations are laid and voted on in the House, and Members can look at and question them and absolutely make sure they are going to work. I will write to the right hon. and learned Member about his other question, because I do not want to get into any more trouble.

Ms Abena Oppong-Asare (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and her team for their work on this matter, but I want to understand better how the Government will look at social media companies to make sure that there is transparency in the algorithms they are using and that they are not continuing to target children.

Liz Kendall: That has been a really important question; researchers have raised being able to assess the impact and know what the social media companies know themselves, so that they can better scrutinise and assess the evidence. I hope we will be doing more on that soon.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): The SNP welcomes today's statement addressing what is a clear and growing threat to our children's wellbeing. The devil will of course be in the detail, but we will work constructively and positively to make sure the measures are meaningful and effective. Platforms such as Roblox, on which games are user-generated with a chat functionality, pose the risk of children being exposed to inappropriate content, online predators and scammers. How will the Government tackle such gaming platforms which are in reality just another form of social media?

Liz Kendall: As I said earlier, we have the ability under the Children Act to restrict certain features and functions. That is why we are able to say that we will ban live streaming and stranger communication for those under 16, and that we will have that turned off by default for 16 and 17-year-olds. We do not want all gaming to come under a blanket ban, but if we think particular functions are a risk to children, as we know stranger communication is with gaming, we will act.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): A decade ago, I marched with other young people to Parliament Square calling for votes at 16 to be introduced after the Brexit referendum, and I am proud that this Labour Government are doing that. However, how will we ensure that young people are well informed when they cast their first ballot, given that they are digital natives and get a lot of their information online?

Liz Kendall: First, young people can still go online. I think that this announcement will actually support news organisations—the BBC, Sky and all sorts of others—to do even more to provide news information, perhaps created by children for children, in an appropriate and effective manner. My right hon. Friend the Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts, who is also a Minister in my Department, is specifically looking at that issue. It is not only five-second TikTok reels that can teach children about news; there are other ways of doing that, and we want to support them.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I really welcome this restriction on social media for children. As a mother, I am grateful for it, and I am grateful to everyone across the House who has pushed for it. As others have alluded to, there will clearly be practical issues and difficulties with implementation, and we all need to work together to address that, but one thing I would like to understand from the Secretary of State is what consideration has been given to enforcement through the device, as opposed to age verification by social media providers.

Liz Kendall: As the hon. Lady knows, the Prime Minister said that we want to act on devices to stop children taking, viewing or sharing nude images. What we are talking about today is highly effective age-verification measures on social media platforms. Sometimes when we debate this issue in the House it is a question of either/or, but we need to take action on all those fronts. We need to keep the implementation of the Online Safety Act 2023, we need to tackle devices to stop kids taking, sharing and seeing nude pictures, and we need to put restrictions on AI chatbots and social media platforms, because that is how we will keep kids safe.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement today and for the leadership she has shown on this issue. A mother stopped me as I boarded the train today. She was beaming and she just said, “Thank you so much. This is going to make such a difference to my 13-year-old boy’s life.” I think there are many parents who will sleep a lot easier tonight knowing that help is coming. Does she agree with me that this is not the end of children’s life online? That will still exist, but this is a huge shift of power away from tech companies back towards children and their families, to make sure that their lives can be productive and constructive, and can include being outside with their friends as well?

Liz Kendall: I agree with every single word my hon. Friend says. This is about liberating children from what can sometimes be a terribly oppressive life online. It is about helping parents to do what they want. They have faced a tidal wave of stuff that they have been trying to fight off. We are just saying, “We want to back you to do what is right for kids.” I personally thank my hon. Friend for her support.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I wonder whether the Secretary of State could provide clarification. She has modelled her social media ban on Australia. Its definition of a ban includes companies taking “reasonable steps” to prevent under-16s having accounts with age-restricted social media platforms. She will be aware that for platforms such as YouTube and Reddit, people do

not need an account to access very harmful material. Will she clarify whether she is banning children from accessing accounts or from those websites altogether?

Liz Kendall: We will bring in highly effective age-verification measures, because we want to ensure that we learn the lessons from what has happened in Australia. The Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Kanishka Narayan), who has responsibility for online safety, went to learn all those lessons. There is much more that we will be saying as we draft the regulations and take this forward, but in my view that is one of the big lessons. However, I want to be honest about this: kids will get around this. Kids have always got around smoking and drinking—we have all done it. Maybe not! [Laughter.] That is what kids do.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I have had the absolute privilege of consulting the young people in my constituency in every secondary school in Bedlington, Ashington and Blyth. There was not one who believed an outright was the appropriate action to take. They all had negative issues with social media, but they all said that the social media and tech companies should take more responsibility and be more accountable for what is being seen on their platforms. Will my right hon. Friend say what avenues there have been for young people to feed into the consultation? Can she give me a guarantee, so I can tell those young people who I have discussed this with, that their voices—they are the ones being impacted—are being listened to?

Liz Kendall: We had a specific survey and consultation with children, 14,000 of whom replied, and I personally met young people in many constituencies. I understand why people say that responsibility should be put on to the companies—that they have got to keep their products safe, and that if they do not, they should not be able to provide them to children and young people. Well, they have not kept them safe, so they are no longer going to be able to provide them to children and young people. In response to the consultation, many of the children did not want an outright ban, but two thirds wanted a whole load of different restrictions. In the end, it is for adults and the Government to decide what is best. Children’s views have been heard, but we think that it is too risky, and we want to have a reset for them and future generations.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): This has definitely been the Secretary of State’s finest hour. I am only slightly disappointed that, for reasons of his own, the Prime Minister chose to upstage it in Downing Street. Can she tell the House what the main reasons are in Australia for reports—admittedly according to AI—that as many as 61% of young people are getting around the restrictions? Will she be working jointly with the Australians to try to get that down to a more acceptable level?

Liz Kendall: First, kids are savvy; social media has been an integral part of their lives, and they want to get around restrictions. I will be careful what I say this time, but just because children try to get around things does not mean that we do not have rules and boundaries. Secondly, we are trying to learn the lessons from Australia. It does not have the highly effective age-verification measures that we have. We want to put those measures

in place here, but I am not going to claim that even those measures will mean that no kids are on social media platforms. We have got to take a decision and draw a line in the sand. This is as much about resetting the expectations of eight, nine and 10-year-olds, by saying, “You won’t be going on this until you’re 16.”

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the announcement from the Secretary of State. It is right that we highlight the dangers that our children are exposed to. It is not about saying that social media is unsafe—I defy any parent or carer in the Chamber not to know the lyrics to “CoComelon” on YouTube. Social media has its place and works for some people. Equally, I raise the dangers of collecting children’s personal data and exposing them to the threat of leaks and hacks. My email, and my staffer’s email, were hacked recently. All of that personal information in the wrong hands could cause a lot of problems, so is that something that the Government will look at as they roll out the plan?

Liz Kendall: As I said, I will make a further statement to the House in July, which will include issues such as raising the digital age of consent, so that we have greater protections around the use of children’s data. That is an important issue. Privacy must be at the heart of this measure, because many parents and young people are worried. We have got further things to say in July, and I am more than happy to discuss that issue with my hon. Friend.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): Parents in Winchester are certainly going to welcome the Government taking action on this issue and the Minister clarifying that it will be tech companies that are responsible for enforcing it, rather than the onus being put on parents. To push the Minister on AI chatbots specifically, it is excellent that we are removing access to chatbots that allow sexual relations and content, but there is so much other misinformation and bad health information being given by chatbots. That includes people with eating disorders being advised to get weight-loss drugs and misogynistic attitudes not being challenged. Could the Minister comment more on that?

Liz Kendall: I am going to come back to the House in July and say more about that. Chatbots telling kids not to eat, and all that dreadful stuff, is wrong, but if there are mechanisms for supporting therapy that could get my child and adolescent mental health services waiting list down in Leicester, I would be interested. Properly regulated therapy sites could be good, but I will come back and say more about that. I want to get rid of the bad ones and protect the good ones, but that is more complicated, so we need to take a bit more time.

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): The message from more than 1,200 North Somerset children, families and parents—like myself—could not be clearer: they wholeheartedly welcome the direction of travel today. However, spring 2027 feels too long to wait; every day that passes is another day on which children are exposed to harmful algorithms, addictive features, inappropriate advertising and contact from strangers online. So I ask my right hon. Friend: what are the barriers to implementing the policy sooner?

Liz Kendall: There is a process that we normally go through when regulations are laid, and there is a certain amount of time for parliamentary scrutiny. I am trying to balance giving Members a say on the regulations—looking at them, and ensuring that we have got them right and that they are going to work—with cracking on as soon as possible. I would still say that early 2027 is much quicker than the time it normally takes for a whole Bill to go through Parliament, but I do hear my hon. Friend’s determination to push this policy forward, and I will do what I can do get it over the line as quickly as possible.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): I very much agree with the Secretary of State about the gravity of the risks and the need for urgent action to protect young people’s wellbeing online. It is often the most vulnerable young people who are most likely to be exploited online, but it is also often the most vulnerable young people who use online channels to seek support for their vulnerabilities. Will she assure the House that action will be taken to support the most vulnerable young people, and does she agree that addressing the hollowing out of social services is a crucial part of that?

Liz Kendall: Alongside the matter of supporting young people who might like things or live or love in a different way, another thing that I am really concerned about is the question of how they actually connect with people—that trusted support is really important. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is working hard to boost things like mentoring and support services, and has just announced £10 million for a new youth opportunity programme with the King’s Trust and Sir Gareth Southgate. There is more that we can do there. I am more than happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman about his ideas, because we have to ensure that people can get trusted advice easily. On balance, though, I feel that the risks of social media exploiting vulnerabilities outweigh the potential benefits. Let us try to find a way through.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Stepney) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s announcement; she has worked tirelessly on this issue. I want to draw her attention to vulnerable over-16s who are being targeted by organised criminals and predatory behaviour, including from sexual predators, as well as extremist far-right individuals and religious extremists who are radicalising them online. Alongside the very important announcement she has made today, will she set out how she will work with other Departments to protect vulnerable young adults?

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend is right to say that what I have announced today is not a silver bullet for all these challenges; I am setting out what we can do specifically on the online world, but the truth is that we have to provide that wider support. As always, I am very happy to talk to her about what more we can do across Government to protect those vulnerable children and young people in order to deal with the issues she raises.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): I welcome the ban, and I know that thousands of other parents of the frontier generation—the children who were born after the advent of Facebook in 2004—will be welcoming it too. However, as the Secretary of State has said, children get around bans, and there are also children

[Monica Harding]

over the age of 16 who will be vulnerable. What will the Government do to introduce legally enforceable safety by design duties on tech companies to ensure that all kids—even those who slip through the net—are safe?

Liz Kendall: It is not an either/or—either enforce the Online Safety Act or introduce a ban. There are clear requirements on tech companies to remove illegal content for everybody and harmful content for children, and we will continue to enforce them. Just because we know children will try to get around these measures does not mean we should not put them in place. There is more that we can do on enforcement. It is for the tech companies to keep children safe—they have had ample opportunity to do so, and now we are saying that they can no longer provide their services to children.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Parents across North Warwickshire and Bedworth responding to my survey told me overwhelmingly that they feel powerless to protect their children from the harms of social media, where they are told that they are not pretty enough, thin enough, cool enough or good enough at their favourite sport—or, worse still, where pictures are shared without their consent or suicide is pushed. Now is the moment that we say enough is enough in order to put children's health and happiness first. But we know that a ban alone will not be enough. Does the Minister agree that we must ensure that a cliff edge at 16 is avoided and that kids who do get around the rules are protected by compelling big tech to take action to protect everyone, rather than allowing them to profit from doomscrolling, division, hatred and despair?

Liz Kendall: I absolutely agree that this is not a one-and-done; we have got to do more. The tech companies need to abide by our law in our land: the Online Safety Act. My hon. Friend is a powerful champion for her constituents. I want to avoid that cliff edge, and I want to take further action on restricting features and functions. As I said, there is more to come in July.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and the efforts she is making to protect children and young people from the harms of social media. I welcome her sentiment that social media platforms have more to do and a greater responsibility to keep our children safe. With that in mind, will there be greater consequences for platforms that, for whatever reason, still allow and provide services to children online?

Liz Kendall: Yes. As I said, under the Online Safety Act we already have powers to fine companies up to 10% of their qualifying worldwide revenue and, should companies repeatedly refuse to obey the law, Ofcom can apply to the courts to block their services. We have not finalised the fines and consequences, but what I have said shows the direction of travel.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Hundreds of parents and young people in Redditch have contacted me regarding the Government's consultation. Many of them will welcome today's announcement as a critical step to protect our children and end the unfettered social media experiment on our children. The Secretary of State knows that this will not be a silver bullet to keep our

children safe online, so can I implore her—although I know that she will do this anyway—to keep up the pressure on the negligent tech giants who have acted with such impunity throughout the process?

Liz Kendall: For the good people of Redditch and the rest of the country, yes, I will.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): I greatly welcome the ban and the fact that it will apply across the United Kingdom. Is the Secretary of State satisfied that there are no cross-border loopholes such as virtual private networks with the Irish Republic that could be exploited to allow children in Northern Ireland still to sign in?

Liz Kendall: We will come back to VPNs in July; I have commissioned further research about their usage. There are really important issues to balance here. Many people want to use VPNs for privacy—that is important—but we know that some children use them to get around restrictions. I will come back to that in July in our response to the consultation.

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I welcome the statement regarding the safety of our children online. I am grateful to the young people of Bolton South and Walkden who have shared their views with me. Children should obviously not be an afterthought at the implementation stage, so will the Secretary of State confirm that their voices have genuinely shaped the decision? Will she also assure the House that when these measures are implemented, children will remain at front and centre as the architects of their own online world?

Liz Kendall: I understand that this announcement will be extremely difficult for many children who are on social media today—I know that it will cause a lot of worry and disquiet. I want to ensure that their views and voices continue to be heard.

In the results of our survey, I was quite struck by just how many children want risky features restricted: two thirds said they did. More than half want restrictions on infinite scroll, as do almost two thirds on explicit image sharing and location sharing, and almost half on live streaming. I think children do want to see change. It will be hard for them to manage the transition, but that is what we need to do to build a better future.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State's realism in accepting that the bans announced today will not be 100% perfect. Can she tell me what proportion of under-16s the Government expect will be prevented from accessing social media?

Liz Kendall: We have not set any targets or goals. I do think that more highly effective age verification measures will make a difference. As I said—I want to be honest—this is about today's children, but it is even more about resetting the expectations and cultural norms of children growing up now so that kids will know they will not be on social media until they are 16.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State; thousands of parents in Blackpool and local organisations such as Alliance 4 Children, led by the inspirational Paul Wright, who has been in the

Gallery today with bereaved parents, will welcome this news. Will she outline what lessons the Government have learned from countries such as Australia regarding the effectiveness of this approach? How will the Government ensure that any measures—whether restrictions, regulations or education—effectively reduce exposure to harm? Will she consider banning VPNs for under-16s as well?

Liz Kendall: I am glad that my hon. Friend believes his constituents will support this action. The Minister for Online Safety spent a week in Australia learning the lessons, including about how kids are getting around the ban. That is why we have already said that we want more highly effective age-assurance measures. I will come back to VPNs and young people in July; it is really important that we continue this discussion.

We want this action to be as effective as possible, but we need to help parents with younger children to begin to shift the social norms. What happens is this: the kids really want it—all their friends are on it—so even if parents set their boundaries and rules, they are under constant pressure. We are just saying, “We’re on your side. We’re going to help you do the right thing for your kids.”

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): A massive thank you to the Secretary of State on behalf of parents in Dewsbury and Batley. We have argued in this place that the root problem lies in the illegal content, harmful content and deliberately addictive design of these platforms, which impact children and adults alike. What will the Government do to introduce and enforce regulation so that the platforms, and the services and features they provide, are safe for all?

Liz Kendall: This is a wake-up call for the companies: “You had your chance. You didn’t fulfil your existing obligations under the law. Enough.” That is really important for us to say. They will remain responsible for fulfilling their obligations under British laws to remove illegal content and to remove harmful content for children. That is hugely important. We stood up to Grok, X and Elon Mus, saying, “Enough is enough.” We are now drawing a line in the sand now, too.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and the Government for the decisive action they are taking in introducing a ban on social media for under-16s; I know that many teachers, parents and carers in Battersea welcome it. I chaired a recent roundtable with young people, and one young person shared that he was on his phone for 14 hours in one single day. That highlights how serious the problem is. Will the Secretary of State commit to working across Government to look at some of the eye health impacts of excessive screen time on our young people and, where necessary, commit to carrying out research on this important issue?

Liz Kendall: I am really glad that my hon. Friend has raised this issue. There was an important point in the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges’ response precisely about the physical health implications, as well as mental health implications, for young people. She will know that we have already published guidance on screen time use for under-fives, and we are currently reviewing it for five to 16 year-olds. I listened carefully to that medical

evidence, and that is one of the reasons that we are taking this action—although, of course, I know that there will be more to do.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement—it was brilliant. May I raise concerns about historical data held by social media companies? Has she thought about what powers she, and parents and carers, might hold to invoke something like the right to be forgotten, in order to ensure that children’s records and data footprints are destroyed, if that is what is wanted, and the social media companies’ memories are wiped, with a real penalty enforced if they do not comply?

Liz Kendall: That is not part of the announcement that I have made today. I am always willing to look at people’s arguments on different issues. On a separate issue, we have now taken action to try to preserve some of the data, through data preservation notices, for parents who have lost their children, and who want to see what they were looking at online, so I think we have to tread carefully on this.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): Five hundred and twenty-seven of my constituents told me that they wanted a ban—I am delighted that the Government have listened to them—and only seven were against. Parents also said in the consultation that they wanted action on recommender algorithms, which are radicalising increasing numbers of adults, who are seeing increasing amounts of extremist content. Will my right hon. Friend come back to us in July with measures to ensure transparency and user control over recommender algorithms?

Liz Kendall: I thank my right hon. Friend for her question; she has campaigned tirelessly on this. The model in Australia that we plan to use captures user-to-user platforms that have enabling social interaction as their sole purpose, or a significant purpose, and that allow users to post material, alongside algorithms and recommender actions. The model that we plan to follow is precisely about saying that children cannot access social media platforms that can be defined in that way. I think that is a big step forward. I know that she would like us to look at this further, and I am always open to discussion, because as I have said, I am very aware of all the other issues, and we want to take action where we can.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): The UK is home to world-leading and award-winning game studios, and some games rely on multi-player communication; it is a core part of their design. The Secretary of State was talking about banning particular features and functions. Can she elaborate on whether the Government have conducted an assessment of the impact that this might have on UK game studios?

Liz Kendall: We have a brilliant, fantastic, world-leading gaming industry in this country. That is why we are not including games under the blanket ban. However, I have been really concerned by issues raised not just by hon. Members, but by the police and others, who have shown that a real, substantial risk is posed by strangers who are not playing with but directly communicating with

[Liz Kendall]

and messaging children, and then taking them on to WhatsApp and grooming them. We are narrowly focusing on that issue.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): Last Friday, I joined pupils at St Bede's Roman Catholic primary school for their internet safety assembly. Thanks to their headteacher's regular internet safety assemblies, St Bede's children are now well versed in the subject. Does the Secretary of State agree that today's announcement will support the work of many schools and teachers, and send a clear message to big tech that it must now match that commitment?

Liz Kendall: Absolutely. I have been very clear throughout this statement that the responsibility is on the social media platforms, not on parents or children, and that it is up to them to take the action they need to take.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Parents are doing all they can to keep their children safe online, and are taking the initiative to achieve this. In Epsom and Ewell, I attended a phone-free childhood event at St Martin's school in Ewell. Over 150,000 people all over the country have signed the pact not to give their children a phone before the age of 14. I welcome today's announcement as a step forward, but we need to ensure that the ban is enforced. When it is in place, what real enforcement ability will Ofcom have to ensure that social media giants are held to account, in order to safeguard our children?

Liz Kendall: The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of enforcement. That is why I have specifically asked the new incoming chair of Ofcom to hold an urgent review of its capabilities, to ensure that it focuses rigorously on enforcement—including on riskier sites, in case children go off the main platforms and go further underground—and to publish a clear strategy and a proper report to Parliament on how that enforcement is going. In the end, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I would like to thank the young people in my constituency from Ark Blake Academy, Oasis Academy Arena and Oasis Academy Shirley Park for meeting me to share their views on how to keep them safe online. They were clear that they wanted action against the harmful aspects of social media, but wanted to protect the good bits. Can the Secretary of State outline the work being done across Government to ensure that young people continue to have access to safe opportunities to connect, both online and in their communities? Does she agree that it is time to give proper statutory protection to youth services, so that we ensure that all young people have somewhere safe to go, and something meaningful to do IRL?

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have made great strides, with the £500 million in our Youth Matters national youth strategy, on rejuvenating our youth services and giving more access to sport and the arts. The Department for Education has a new enrichment framework that will help schools and colleges. It will be backed by a £22 million enrichment programme—there will be details soon—to help 400 schools in England

create an excellent offer on enrichment. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport is also investing an additional £130 million in activities such as arts and culture, sport and physical activities, adventure and life skills, and much more besides.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Many families and parents will be relieved by the announcement today of the ban for those under the age of 16, but there will also be parents who will be frightened, to a degree, because of the repercussions from children who have addictions. The Secretary of State has stated that children will be given support. Will parents be given some support as well?

Liz Kendall: Yes, absolutely. The Department has already published new help and guidance for parents on how to talk to children about their life online. That will need to be done differently at different ages, and it is sometimes difficult to talk to children about this. The ban will support parents in doing the right thing, but I recognise that this will be a big change for many children and young people, and of course we want to do everything we can to support them through it.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): In the large group of 16 to 18-year-olds from schools in my constituency that I discussed a potential ban with, there was no consensus about whether there should be a ban, but there was strong consensus that they needed good-quality information and education to prevent harm. Will the measures that the Minister mentioned use the best behaviour science knowledge that we have? Will the advice and—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call the Secretary of State.

Liz Kendall: We want to provide the very best advice and support, based on the evidence, to parents, and also through schools.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement, particularly the bit about communication with strangers and chatbots, and I am sure that the parents of South Devon will join me in doing so. However, we know from Australia that an outright ban does not give the big tech companies the incentive to redesign their platforms to make them less addictive, misogynistic or full of toxic, divisive misinformation, so how will the Government continue to pressurise and incentivise the tech companies to make these changes? As she says, there will always be children who circumvent the ban, and there will also be vulnerable adults and older adults who are victims of such misinformation.

Liz Kendall: The Online Safety Act 2023 requirements remain. This is not an either/or; the companies have to make sure that they remove illegal content for everybody and remove harmful content for children. I have personally introduced a whole series of priority offences under the Act, including those to do with self-harm and suicide. The companies have to not just take this stuff down but actively look for it, and those requirements will remain.

Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Huge thanks must go to the Secretary of State and all involved. This is the right decision, consulted on in the right way. Tech companies have had more than enough time, but have chosen to engineer for addiction and profit. Will she work across Government to ensure that parents and schools have the support that they need during the transition, alongside investment in the arts, music, drama, creative subjects and youth services, so that children can be children?

Liz Kendall: Yes. I have had detailed conversations with the Culture Secretary and the Education Secretary about all these issues. There is much more to do, but we are determined to give children the very best start in life, and the freedom to be children again.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): As the father of two teenagers, and on behalf of other parents, can I thank and congratulate the Secretary of State on bringing forward this legislation? She has already said a number of times that children will find a workaround, but big tech will also always be looking for a workaround to the legislation and the rules that have been brought forward. Can she give us reassurance that the Government will remain agile, and will fund organisations that will ensure that this dangerous online activity does not flare up?

Liz Kendall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments. There is obviously overwhelming support among parents, teachers, the police and others for an outright ban; then there are those who say that we just need to restrict certain features and functions. The truth is if that if we dealt only with the features and functions, the tech companies would come up with another feature and another function, and then another one—and another one, and another one. We are saying, “No, this is the line in the sand. No one under 16 on these.” If there are specific features and functions that go beyond social media, such as in gaming or on other sites, we want to restrict those, too. I hope that the new powers in the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 will allow us to be more agile, but if they do not, I will always look again, because we have to keep up with how technology is changing.

Rosie Wrihting (Kettering) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for online safety, the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Kanishka Narayan), for their engagement and conversations on this issue. I had social media before I was 16. I deeply understand the concerns, and have experienced the bad, but I also know the value, particularly for working-class kids, of seeing a world outside one’s own—the value for the boy who is growing up without a father and learns to shave from YouTube, for the young person who teaches themselves to code and shapes their career, or for the LGBT community. How is the Department working directly with DFE and DCMS to ensure that we identify these areas of need?

Liz Kendall: As I said in response to an earlier question, this was the issue that I wanted to grapple with the most. People want to find people who love in the same way, or who like the same things, and they may be worried about doing so where they live with their friends. This is hugely important. There is potential for a life online that still enables those things to happen, but just

not on the social media platforms. I want to continue working with my hon. Friend, for whom I have the greatest respect, and the Department for Education to ensure that the chances that social media offered to some are still in place for people who want to experience and believe in different things. We want to give everybody the freedom to express who they are.

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): In February 2023, Leo Johnson from Stourbridge died by suicide at the age of 19. His mother Jane remembers him as excited and energetic to start his life, and his passion for scuba diving fuelled his decision to study oceanography at the University of Plymouth. He became increasingly absorbed in his phone and social media, and told his friends that it was affecting his mental health—not because of dangerous content, but through the drip, drip, drip of comparison culture, which left him feeling inadequate, anxious and numb. Does the Secretary of State agree that a ban is the right thing to do, so that fewer young people like Leo are harmed?

Liz Kendall: I am so sorry to hear about what happened to Leo. I heard what my hon. Friend describes so many times during the course of the consultation, and many of the representations we had—from the Royal College of Psychiatrists, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, Royal College of General Practitioners and others—raised precisely the issues that she talks about. One of the reasons why the ban is so important is that we must protect children from those serious harms. Two thirds of GPs and two thirds of hospital clinicians say that every single week they see something that they think is a direct consequence of social media. That is a wake-up call to us all.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the ban on social media for under-16s. I wish we were not here, but the ban represents the failure of the social media platforms to get their house in order. It was inevitable that we would get here in the end. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need to make social media safe for everyone, including through measures on foreign influence and accountability for the owners, so that when children turn 17 or become adults at 18, they are safe, along with the rest of us?

Liz Kendall: There are already requirements under the Online Safety Act for companies to remove illegal content, and those deal with the issue of foreign interference, particularly during elections. As I said, I am looking again at some of what the Science and Technology Committee recommended on this issue, because of exactly the concerns that my hon. Friend raises.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): The Education Committee heard evidence from Snapchat, which pushed back on the hard evidence and the facts—and on any idea that the platform caused harm to young people at all. It was perhaps no surprise that the e-safety commissioner in Australia opened an investigation into Snapchat for non-compliance with the Australian ban. Against that backdrop, can the Secretary of State confirm that, should the social media companies try to subvert the new rules that we introduce, they will be held accountable, and that parents will not be held accountable for enforcing them?

Liz Kendall: Absolutely. This is about the social media companies putting their house in order. Lots of people have said, “Won’t you bow to pressure? You’ll cave under it.” I hope that today, we are showing our intention: we want a better life for children; we want to put power into parents’ hands; and we want to reset social norms. That is what this Government are absolutely determined to do.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I tried to go as fast as I could, but we could not get everybody in.

Russian Shadow Fleet

6.15 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Dan Jarvis): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will update the House on UK operational activity against the Russian shadow fleet.

Before I begin, I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), who led the Department through a period of growing instability with clarity of purpose and sure judgment. I thank him sincerely for all that he did as Secretary of State. He leaves office safe in the knowledge that our armed forces are better prepared and better supported than when he assumed it.

This is my first appearance in the House since my appointment as Secretary of State for Defence. It is a privilege and a responsibility beyond all measure, not least because this is a moment of challenge for our nation, and it is my job to make sure that we rise to meet that moment. It has been some time since I left the armed forces, and the tactics, technology and threats have changed beyond recognition. What have remained constant, however, are the professionalism, courage and extraordinary skill of our servicemen and women.

Those virtues were exemplified in full yesterday in the English channel. In the early hours of the morning, 25 miles south of the Isle of Wight, Royal Marine commandos fast-roped under the cover of darkness on to the deck of the *Smyrtos*, a 244-metre oil tanker, which at the time of interception was travelling at 10 knots. Within a matter of minutes, our Marines had seized control of the vessel without resistance. They worked closely in this operation with specialist officers from the National Crime Agency and were supported by aircraft from the maritime air group, including Chinooks, Merlin Mk4 and Wildcat helicopters, an RAF P-8, Type 23 frigate HMS *Sutherland* and minehunter HMS *Ledbury*. I take this opportunity to recognise the vital contribution of the Home Office’s border security command maritime teams.

This was a highly complex operation that was executed with remarkable precision. Lasting six hours, this Royal Navy-led interdiction was the first of its kind for UK forces, and was the result of careful and meticulous planning across multiple Government Departments and agencies. All military and law enforcement personnel are safely accounted for. I know that the whole House will join me in expressing the deepest respect and sincere thanks to the hundreds of people who were involved.

The vessel is now secured outside of port limits at Weymouth anchorage. A 38-year-old Indian national has been arrested on suspicion of sanctions offences. All other 24 crew members remain on board and are assisting the NCA. This is a live criminal investigation, and further updates will be provided at the appropriate moment.

In the days leading up to this interdiction, UK armed forces, supported by our allies, including France, to whom I am very grateful, closely tracked and monitored the vessel on the grounds that it was suspected of using a false flag. This was a vessel that was sanctioned by the UK, sailing without nationality and transporting sanctioned Russian oil. I can confirm to the House that this operation was conducted in accordance with international law, including the United Nations convention on the law of the sea, and the relevant domestic legislation.

Yesterday's operation follows the support that the UK has provided the US and France in the interdiction of several shadow fleet ships this year. In March, my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister made clear our intention to interdict shadow fleet vessels at a time and place of our choosing. This had a clear deterrent effect, with many vessels taking longer and more costly routes to evade action taken by the UK and our allies.

Let me expand on why this operation matters. We know who benefits from the shadow fleet: over 700 vessels are used to move around 40% of Russian oil. And we know who suffers from the shadow fleet: sanctioned oil is bankrolling Putin's brutal war in Ukraine. Every barrel sold helps fund the missiles and drones used to kill Ukrainians in their homes, destroy their infrastructure and break their will. This operation deals another blow to Putin. We are clear with Russia about our intentions and our basis to act. We do not seek escalation, but we will always take the necessary steps to enforce UK sanctions.

The UK has sanctioned over 550 Russian shadow fleet vessels. That has had a material impact. Nearly 200 have been forced to anchor because of the action of the UK and our partners. Yesterday's operation sends a clear signal to Russia that the UK and its allies can, and will, act against the Russian war machine. We will use every measure available to prevent the trade in sanctioned goods that funds Putin's illegal war.

Yesterday's operation demonstrates that the UK's commitment to securing a just and lasting peace for Ukraine is absolute. I know that President Zelensky thanked the UK following the interdiction, yet we should remember that it is us who owe the Ukrainian people. They have now resisted Putin's full-scale invasion for more than four years and suffered under the pain of occupation for more than 12 years, and still they fight—for their security and for ours; for their values and for ours.

Yesterday I spoke to the Ukrainian Defence Minister to assure him that although there has been a change in leadership in UK defence, there has been no change in our position: the UK will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. On Thursday I will be at the NATO headquarters to co-chair the next meeting of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group and secure the arms and ammunition that Ukraine's forces need to fight Putin's war machine.

Let me end by saying something that I have always believed: the defence of our nation is a shared endeavour. It falls to those of us who step forward to protect the country in and out of uniform. We owe a debt of gratitude to all those people who exposed themselves to risk yesterday and to those who will do so tonight, tomorrow and in the future. I have a responsibility now to them to ensure that they get what they need, and I am determined to fulfil those duties. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

6.23 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I thank the Defence Secretary for advance sight of his statement and welcome him to his new post. He had a distinguished military career and, as Security Minister, will have had a foretaste of the operational demands of his new job.

I will be turning to the circumstances that brought him to that position shortly, but we wish him well in his position. I also welcome the new Minister for Veterans, the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey), to his post and welcome his predecessor, the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Sandher-Jones), to her new role as Armed Forces Minister.

I also pay personal tribute to the previous Secretary of State. On the day he resigned, I said that he was an honourable man who had done an honourable thing, and I meant it. Whatever our political differences, I respect the dignity with which he left Government—on a point of principle, in the national interest.

On the seizure of the Russian shadow fleet vessel, the Opposition welcome this action and the way it was conducted. Throughout his time in office, the previous Secretary of State and I maintained a rock-solid consensus in support of Ukraine, standing shoulder to shoulder against the Russian threat. Whenever he announced action against Russian naval activity in our territorial waters, such as against Yantar, I welcomed it, because we must stand strong against the serious threat posed by Putin. That is why it is important that this vessel was seized, but I do have one particular concern.

Back in March, the Prime Minister announced that British armed forces are now able to board sanctioned vessels that are passing through our waters, but the BBC reports that since then in at least 94 instances shadow fleet vessels have crossed into UK territorial waters without a single one being interdicted by our armed forces. Until this weekend, almost three months after the policy was announced, no boarding of these vessels had taken place. What changed?

On the specific action that took place, I pay tribute to all our brave armed forces and law enforcement personnel involved, who conducted their mission to the highest professional standards, because one thing is certain about those who serve in our military: give them the kit and they will do the job.

But here is where the problem lies. This operation was necessary as part of our overall policy to deter Russia. However, that attempt at deterrence has been completely undermined by the total debacle of the defence investment plan. Last week we witnessed an unprecedented moment in UK defence, the likes of which has never been seen before, with the Secretary of State, his deputy and two Parliamentary Private Secretaries all resigning in total and unprecedented chaos. The Defence Secretary resigned from Government because the money the Prime Minister was offering for the defence investment plan was so meagre that it would

“make the country less safe”

and would

“reduce the readiness of our Forces and increase the risk to personnel on operations”.

That is a shattering verdict on this Government's plans for defence, and it was one shared by the former Armed Forces Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns). For some reason, he did not get a mention in the Secretary of State's statement, or in the response from his junior Minister earlier. But as we are talking about the actions of our Royal Marines, let me put on the record my huge respect for the former Minister and the way in which he, too, resigned on a matter of principle. We share a passion for delivering

[James Cartledge]

the drone revolution, and given his distinguished military record, it was damning for him to say that the defence investment plan was

“not built for the threat we face. It is neither transformative enough nor sufficiently funded.”

In particular, in his resignation letter, the previous Armed Forces Minister stated that the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill is “unfit for purpose”. We agree 100%. Just as the professionalism of our personnel was at the heart of this weekend’s interdiction operation, standing by our veterans and serving personnel must be at the heart of defence policy. As a veteran of Operation Banner himself, does the Secretary of State agree that the last thing the Government should be doing is hounding former soldiers through the courts? If he agrees, will he therefore urge the Prime Minister to scrap the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill?

On the core issue of funding, it will be deeply worrying for our NATO allies to see the chaos now surrounding the defence investment plan. It was meant to transform our armed forces, yet the very Secretary of State responsible for delivering the DIP until five days ago said that it will make us “less safe”. That is because the money on offer was nothing like enough. Is it true that the Prime Minister is refusing to give the Secretary of State any more cash for the defence investment plan? If so, in principle, does he welcome the offer from the Leader of the Opposition to work with the Government to find the welfare savings to fund defence?

To conclude, as this is our first exchange at the Dispatch Box since his appointment, I assure the Secretary of State that we are willing to work with him in the national interest to find the money for defence. Will he work with us?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the shadow Secretary of State for his welcome. I was pleased to have the opportunity to speak to him on Friday evening. I do want to work constructively with him and colleagues on both sides of the House. I said in my opening remarks that I believe very strongly that the defence of our nation should be a shared endeavour. That is always the approach I have taken in this House, and I very much hope that it is the approach that we can continue with. I am also grateful to him for his support for yesterday’s action, as well as the cross-party consensus that I am, as I am sure he is, genuinely proud of with regard to Putin’s illegal war in Ukraine.

I understand why the hon. Member asked about the timing of the operation, but I can say to him—and he will know this from his own time as a Minister in the Department—that the activity that was brilliantly and bravely executed yesterday was the result of weeks of military and operational planning. I know that he will understand very well that the UK has played a critical role in the interdiction of a number of shadow fleet ships in recent months, including through close co-operation with our US and French counterparts. The Prime Minister, as he mentioned, made clear back in March our intention to interdict shadow fleet vessels at a time and place of our choosing, and that is what we chose to do.

The shadow Defence Secretary mentioned the former Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns). I was

saving him up, not least because he is someone that I hold in the very highest of regard. He is an honourable and gallant Member, and it is very widely recognised that he has provided outstanding service to our country in the most difficult circumstances that anyone could ever imagine. I am beyond proud that he sits on this side of the House, and I look forward to listening to him and working closely with him in the future.

Entirely reasonably, the shadow Secretary of State asked about the defence investment plan. I hope, in what I intend to be the spirit of constructive consensus, that he recognises that this Government have spent over £11 billion more this year on defence than the Conservatives spent in their last year of government. I hope he will also understand that colleagues across Government have been working on the defence investment plan for many, many months. It is a hugely important piece of work. It is the first line-by-line defence budget in 20 years.

I fully appreciate the desire of the shadow Defence Secretary to see the contents of the plan published as soon as possible, and I absolutely share that desire. Since being appointed Defence Secretary just a couple of days ago, I have worked very closely with my Department and colleagues across Government to ensure that we progress this work as an absolute priority. The Prime Minister has said that we will publish it before the NATO summit next month, and we will.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): May I welcome the Secretary of State to his place? We are looking forward to welcoming him to Aldershot and Farnborough for the national Armed Forces Day celebrations. On behalf of my constituents, I thank the British personnel involved in the operation in the channel for their immense bravery and professionalism. This was a major blow to Putin’s regime, and it underscores the growing Russian threat to European security. Everyone knows about NATO article 5, but the lesser-known NATO article 3 is our commitment to preparedness. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need a total-Government approach to delivering NATO article 3, with every Minister clear on how they can help us to be prepared?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, not least because she has been a doughty champion of the garrison town that is Aldershot. She speaks with great passion and knowledge about these matters. She is right to raise concerns about the threat that we face from Russia; it is a threat that I have spent the last two years dealing with. She is also right about the need for a whole-of-Government approach. I championed that approach in my previous role across the Home Office and Cabinet Office. Now, within the Ministry of Defence, I look forward to working with my colleagues across Government to ensure we have the appropriate defences to guard against the threats that we undoubtedly face from Russia.

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

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, and I join others in welcoming him to his new role.

May I start by associating myself with colleagues’ remarks in thanking our Royal Marines? Through their bravery and skill, they have denied Vladimir Putin the

fossil fuel profits that he depends on—profits which, without their intervention, would have gone straight to Russia's frontline against Ukraine. Their courageous action has already had a chilling effect on other shadow fleet vessels, with reports suggesting that at least six ships altered course following the interdiction of the *Smyrtos*.

Now that we have taken this step—albeit several months after the Prime Minister initially promised—will the Secretary of State commit to stopping more shadow fleet vessels and ensure that this is not just a one-off? The Liberal Democrats believe that we should not just be stopping these vessels but ensuring that the seizure of their cargo can be used to fund Ukraine's defence. We have already called for the £30 billion of frozen Russian assets across Britain to be used to support Kyiv's war effort. We need to do the same with shadow fleet fuel. Will the Secretary of State commit to seizing and selling the sanctioned oil transported by the *Smyrtos* and selling the resulting funds to Ukraine, and will he do the same for any future interdictions?

The next critical step must be to close legitimate routes to market for all Russian fossil fuels. Spearheaded by our leader in the other place, Lord Purvis, the Liberal Democrats won an important concession last week on this issue, securing a commitment from the Government to an end-date for their waiver on sanctions for the import of diesel and fuel products refined by Russian crude. This gaping loophole should never have come into force in the first place.

The Government must now go further. Will the Secretary of State work with colleagues across Government to ban all UK maritime services for the export of Russian oil, gas and coal? We must end once and for all the scandal of UK plc helping to fund Putin's war machine.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the very constructive tone of his comments, and I am keen to work with him and his Liberal Democrat colleagues on these matters. He is absolutely right to raise the deterrent effect. The Prime Minister's announcement back in March has been extremely helpful in that regard. I understand and agree with the sentiment of the hon. Gentleman's points. He will understand that because there is an ongoing, live criminal investigation, I am not able to say anything more about the specifics regarding this vessel and the oil contained within it.

The hon. Gentleman made important points about sanctions and the need to ensure that we are working across Government. I can give him the assurances that he seeks. That absolutely will be our approach. It is very important that we as a Department work very closely with our colleagues in the Treasury, and I am very pleased to be joined on the Front Bench today by the Chancellor. I also discussed these matters with the Foreign Secretary earlier on today.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. I pay tribute to our armed forces and the NCA for successfully intercepting the Russian oil tanker off the coast of Weymouth and Portland yesterday. As has been mentioned, this was the first British-led operation of its kind, and it delivers a blow to Putin's illegal war in Ukraine, which threatens our collective security in Europe.

Regarding next steps, can the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that any potential environmental and public safety risks have been fully considered and that the right specialist teams are on hand to assist if needed? While I fully appreciate the complexity of such an operation, may I politely urge the Secretary of State to maintain this posture and exploit further opportunities to degrade Putin's war machine and scuttle Russia's shadow fleet?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who has an important and close constituency interest in these matters, for his comments. I give him the assurances that he seeks. He raised a number of important points. Given his close interest in these matters, I suggest that he has a briefing from the Minister for the Armed Forces, who has just made that offer to him. We look forward to working closely with him on this.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I wish the new Secretary of State the best of luck in his new post and express the hope that the appearance of the Chancellor of the Exchequer alongside him on his first outing is not too symbolic of what has perhaps been going on in backrooms behind the Treasury?

On the question of the seizure of the ships, does the Secretary of State agree that there is a possibility that Russia may in response start to think about escorting such ships by means of warships? This would, of course, expose Russia's hand very much more clearly, but it does bring a whole element of possible escalation into play, including the possibility of Ukrainian strikes against those ships. We all know how successful Ukraine has been in the Black sea, and it might end up doing something similar in the Baltic sea and beyond.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, as I always am, for his sage counsel on these matters; he has been talking about them for very many years. He referenced the presence of the Chancellor on the Front Bench. The Chancellor is someone who cares very deeply about our national security; that is why she is here—to lend that support.

The right hon. Gentleman understandably raised a very important point about the risk and threat of retaliatory action from Russia. He will know, because he and I have discussed it on many occasions, that I have spent the last two years thinking very carefully about that particular point. Of course, we take every measure and use all the tools at our disposal to guard against that, but I think he will agree that, ultimately, the activity we saw in the English channel yesterday was the right one. We have to stand together against Russia in support of Ukraine, and that is what this Government will do.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I will start by praising 42 Commando for the planning and execution of what could have been a difficult operation. Today the Ukrainian Speaker, Ruslan Stefanchuk, visited us in Parliament, and the all-party group on Ukraine hosted him. He said that he hoped to see further action on the shadow fleet, including the *Arc7*, Arctic ready, liquefied natural gas tankers, which are still unsanctioned by the United Kingdom. I also wrote to Minister Doughty, who responded to me—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Gentleman has been here long enough to know that we do not refer to Ministers by their name. Could he perhaps make sure that his question finishes briefly?

Alex Sobel: I wrote to the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty), about the remaining licences for Russian fossil fuels—*[Interruption.]* And here he is. He said that those licences would be ending in January 2027. Now that the strait of Hormuz is open, could that be finished earlier, because another six months of Russian profiteering from the UK is not acceptable?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his reference to 42 Commando. He has been a long-standing supporter of Ukraine, and I hope he heard in my earlier remarks that my first international call as Secretary of State was with my counterpart in Ukraine, who I will meet on Thursday. His point about the FCDO licences was well made, and the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office has arrived right on cue.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I congratulate the Secretary of State for Defence on his appointment. Given his experience as Security Minister, few Members of the House understand the threats better than he does. It was welcome to learn last Friday that the Government have committed to banning imports of diesel and jet fuel made from Russian oil by 1 January, and it was impressive to see a shadow fleet vessel interdicted in the English channel this weekend. Given that that is one of 550 sanctioned shadow fleet vessels, does the Secretary of State think that the Government would do well to revoke the licence to import diesel and jet fuel made from Russian oil before the end of this year?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, not least as a fellow veteran and someone who has served on the Intelligence and Security Committee, and he speaks with authority about these matters. He has made an important point, and I have been given assurances by the Minister for Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), that we keep these things under close review.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I commend our brave forces for their skilful action and welcome my right hon. Friend to his place. He spoke passionately about defending British values, but at the same time as our own brave forces were planning their decisive action against the Russian shadow fleet, Stephen Yaxley-Lennon was praising Russia, sat alongside Errol Musk in Moscow. Will the Secretary of State seek to work with colleagues across Government to join action against Russia's shadow fleet with action to defend our country against Russia's shadow influencing operations?

Dan Jarvis: My right hon. Friend makes an important point, and there is widespread agreement for it. She will know that I spent much of the past two years doing exactly what she describes, and I look forward to working closely with my predecessor to ensure that we prosecute Russia's proxies, and counter its illegal activity wherever it raises its ugly head.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I warmly congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment, and wish him the best of luck—he will certainly need it. I congratulate all involved in the successful operation in the channel. The reputation of our troops is peerless, and that operation followed similar operations by our allies France, Germany and the US. May I press the Secretary of State on the point raised by my hon. Friend the shadow Defence Secretary about the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill, which he did not address? That surprised me slightly because, as an Op Banner veteran, he must have a view on that. Will he now ensure, in his new office, that that dreadful measure is cancelled, and bring comfort to those who are threatened by it?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, not least for the experience that he brings to these matters. He knows the huge regard that I have for his constituents, not least because of their long-standing support for the armed forces. He is right to praise them and to reference the importance of their reputation. The reputation of our armed forces is something we can all be proud of, and it goes right around the world. I hope, however, that he will understand that the purpose of my appearance today is to give an operational update on the activity that took place in the English channel yesterday, and that a couple of days into the job I am not in a position to provide a further update on the matter he raises. He knows how seriously I take those matters, and I will work on them closely with colleagues in other Departments, including the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. No doubt we will both have more to say about it soon.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his update and welcome him to his place. I join him in paying tribute to the exceptional bravery and skill of those who carried out the recent operation on the shadow fleet. Does he agree that it is vital that we continue to squeeze the Russian economy in every way we can, including many more operations of that kind against the shadow fleet, so that we can ultimately support Ukraine in a successful outcome in resisting Putin's illegal war?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is exactly right to raise those points in the way he does. I am joined on the Front Bench by the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who takes such matters incredibly seriously, and there is huge activity right across Government. It is also important to highlight the continued support for Ukraine, not least the UK's largest ever drone package for Ukraine, which delivered 120,000 drones this year. So, yes, we must squeeze the Russian economy, and support our Ukrainian partners to ensure that they can stay in the fight and win it.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): On Saturday night, I heard the unmistakeable sound of Chinook helicopters passing over my home in Dorset, en route to intercept the Russian tanker. Whether it is a shadow fleet funding the war against Ukraine, spy ships scanning our seabed, or political interference in our democracy—including the former Reform leader in Wales

taking bribes—it is clear that Russia is upping its game. Last week I asked about energy, food and information security, so what assurance can the new Secretary of State give the House about how this situation is being addressed to keep us all safe at home?

Dan Jarvis: The sound that the hon. Member described at the beginning of her remarks is one that I am very familiar with—it is one that still, to this day, makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I know she has a long-standing interest in these matters, and she raised an important point. I give her the assurance that we will work collaboratively across Government to maximise the deterrent effect on Russia and its illegal activities. Wherever we can seek to do more to prosecute those activities, we will absolutely do so.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place. Operations such as this demonstrate an incredible level of planning, co-ordination and professionalism across our armed forces, police, Border Force, and wider Government, so I pay tribute to and thank all those involved. For a city like Portsmouth, which has supported generations of those who serve, this is a reminder of the importance of expertise. Will the Secretary of State confirm that all Departments work closely together and will continue to do so, in a safe, legal and effective operation? Will he also confirm that the operation was conducted in a way that ensured the safety of UK citizens and our military personnel?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the meticulous planning that these complex military operations involve. There are lots of moving parts. Risk is carried by those brave enough to undertake such operations, and we owe them a huge debt of gratitude. The other huge debt of gratitude that we owe is to the family members of those who step forward, of whom I know my hon. Friend is proudly one.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): May I offer my congratulations to the right hon. and gallant Gentleman? He is a good fit for the role, and I hope that he will listen to those across the House and try to work constructively. In that spirit, this incredible operation was reliant on the Royal Navy and Royal Marines. Earlier today, I asked the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry about whether the plans in place for the Type 26s, Type 31s and Type 83s would remain as outlined. I am really looking for a yes or no answer, given that there are shipyards wondering whether they can keep their current workforce because they are relying on the DIP but it is not there. I ask the Secretary of State directly: are the plans in place for ships for the Royal Navy going to remain?

Dan Jarvis: I am genuinely grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his comments, because he has spoken with real authority on these matters for many years. I hope that he understands that at this particular moment—as we seek to ensure that the DIP does precisely what I think all of us want it to do—I am not going to delve into the specifics of precisely what might be contained in it, but that this Government are very clear that we will always back British shipbuilding.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment—he is very well suited to the job at hand. I am sure he will understand, though, if I also express my disappointment that his predecessor and my constituency neighbour, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), felt he had to resign because of the inadequacies, as he saw them, in the defence investment plan.

I congratulate everyone involved on the seizing of the tanker. It is an important lesson for Putin that we are going to disrupt his war machine, but it is also a first; will the Secretary of State indicate if we are looking to undertake such operations more regularly in order to ensure that the many such tankers that sail in these waters are not free to do so in future without the fear that our Government may act against them?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments, and I share the sentiment he expressed at the beginning of his question. I anticipated that he might seek to draw reference to the hugely important industrial activity that takes place in and around his constituency in South Yorkshire. This Department and this Government believe strongly that defence is an engine for growth, and I am acutely aware of the economic opportunities that exist in his part of the world. He is right to reference the fact that this is the first type of activity of its kind. It will sow the seeds of doubt in our adversary's mind. He will understand that I am not going to speculate about what we might do in future, but the simple act of the Prime Minister's commitment back in March has had a significant deterrent effect, as will the activities of yesterday morning.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I welcome the Secretary of State to his place, and pay tribute and give thanks to our incredible armed forces in the successful seizure of the shadow tanker. It was nice to see the Chancellor alongside the Secretary of State for the first half of this statement. Shall we take from her departure that she is only half committed to funding the defence investment plan?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman, I have to say, is a constant source of disappointment to me, not least because I believe he has the potential to be the statesperson of his party.

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): It's a very low threshold!

Dan Jarvis: It would be very mean of me to say that it is a low bar, so I will not say that. The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) is unfair to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. I think it is important that she took the opportunity to be here; that was a demonstration of her commitment to this important piece of work, and I for one am very grateful for that.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): While our brave servicemen and women were defending our national interests over the weekend, today it has been reported by the BBC that Russian state operatives were linked with arson attacks on our Prime Minister. Just last week, Stephen Yaxley-Lennon was meeting Errol Musk in Russia, and the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth

[Sarah Smith]

(Rupert Lowe) has said that he would not block that same individual from joining his party. Does the Secretary of State agree that there is no greater threat to our national security, nor anything more unpatriotic, than this dangerous rise in far-right politics across our country?

Dan Jarvis: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, who makes an important point. She referenced the abhorrent attacks that we have seen in recent times. She will not expect me to get into the detail of all that but what I can say is that, as I saw very clearly in my previous role, our counter-terrorism police and our operational partners in the security services are extraordinarily dedicated in their work. All of that is done in the shadows, and we should be very grateful for their efforts. I give her and the House an assurance that we take the threat that she describes incredibly seriously and will always guard against it.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment and welcome the action in the channel. He will be aware that last night saw one of the biggest attacks yet on civilian buildings and people in Kyiv, and included damage to the historic cathedral there. He will also be aware that dual-use technology is still arriving in Russia via third countries. We heard today from the Ukrainian Speaker about washing machine microcircuits that were supposedly going to Kazakhstan being found in Russian missiles falling on Kyiv. Will the Secretary of State look again, with his colleagues, at what further action we can take to stop this technology being used to kill more people in Ukraine?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the horror of the continued attacks on civilians in Ukraine. It is beyond abhorrent, and we must continue to remind ourselves of the totally reckless nature of Putin's illegal war. As a Government, we have an absolute responsibility to use all means at our disposal to make it as practically difficult for Russia as we possibly can. I am extremely grateful for the efforts of the Ministers from the FCDO and the Department for Business and Trade, who are sat alongside me on the Front Bench, and their work to combat this particular threat; they all take the work incredibly seriously and I look forward to working closely with them in that endeavour.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State to his place. I know that he is man of integrity and decency; I have known him for over 15 years and I wish him the best of luck in his new role. I also join him in paying tribute to the men and women who organised and conducted this operation. They are the best of the best, the bravest of the brave, and we all thank them, across this House and beyond. International co-operational is hugely important in tackling the Russian shadow fleet, so can the Secretary of State confirm that we are working closely with our allies to take every opportunity to degrade Russia's war effort?

Dan Jarvis: I have known my hon. Friend for a very long time; he proudly represents a constituency with a long track record of sending young men and women off

to serve in our armed forces, and he is a great champion of them and all those who serve. He is completely right to raise the important point about international co-operation. I have spent much of the weekend talking to allies, and on Wednesday I will be heading to Brussels to co-chair the Ukraine Defence Contact Group with my German counterpart. The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth, who has joined me on the Front Bench, also works tirelessly on these matters to make sure that we collaborate closely with our international partners in order to tighten the screw on Russia.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his appointment. I, too, pay credit to the Royal Marines on a job well done, and welcome anything that helps our allies in Ukraine fighting for their freedom. Of course, decisive action against the Russian shadow fleet could and should have been taken much earlier. I do not think that I am being overly cynical in suggesting that there may be a link between the Prime Minister finally sanctioning this operation and the disintegration that we witnessed at the MOD last week. Given that disintegration was entirely due to the failure of the Treasury to adequately fund our conventional forces, does the Secretary of State share my fear that the seizing of unarmed merchant shipping could soon become the limit of the Royal Navy's surface capability?

Dan Jarvis: I join the hon. Gentleman in paying warm tribute to the Royal Marines. I should probably confess that I have not spent all my adult life paying tribute to the Royal Marines, but I am proud to be able to do so now. On his second point, let me just say to him: there is no link.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I join all hon. Members and the Secretary of State in paying tribute to the Royal Marines, as we are proud to host the Royal Marine reserves in my constituency. I welcome the Secretary of State to his place, and his assurance that we have not missed a beat in our support for Ukraine. I have been to Ukraine with many hon. Members present, and we know how much last night's bombing of Kyiv will have frightening the people of Ukraine. We remain steadfast in our support, although our deeds are more important than any words we can say. I urge the Secretary of State and his Cabinet colleagues to maintain this posture, to keep up the action and to exploit future opportunities to continue to degrade Putin's war machine, so that the illegal war in Ukraine will come to an end?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising the Royal Marine reserves, as it is very important that we pay tribute to all those who serve in the reserves. I am constantly inspired by those who are able to balance civilian life, family life and service life; we owe them a huge debt of gratitude. On her substantive point, I absolutely give her the assurances she seeks. I spent much of the weekend talking to allies, and I will be in Brussels on Thursday to co-chair the next meeting of the Ukraine Defence Contact Group, working with our partners in order to ensure that Ukraine's forces get the support they need to fight Putin's war machine.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): I welcome the right hon. and gallant Member to his place, and I thank the Royal Marines, the Navy and the National Crime Agency for their work over this weekend. It is very important that we see more initiatives on this basis. Will the Secretary of State give the House the very specific cost of maintaining and ultimately decommissioning this ship? He was not willing to tell us whether the seized oil will pay for that. The cost will run into the millions, so he will know the exact cost. That would let the House work out where the funding will come from.

Dan Jarvis: I am genuinely sorry that the hon. Lady will not be shadowing me any more, but I know that she will continue to make constructive contributions. The figure she seeks does not sit in my Department; I think it sits in the Department for Transport, but I will correct the record if I have got that wrong. I hope she understands that there has been very close collaboration across Government. A huge amount of planning went into launching this operation. There was a truly joined-up approach across Government, with important contributions made by the Department for Transport and the Department for Business and Trade.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. and gallant Friend on his new role. In and out of uniform, he has dedicated his life to this country, and we are grateful to be sitting behind him. May I pay tribute to the brave men and women who executed the operation over the weekend with the utmost skill? It is clear that it required multiple stakeholders and international co-operation to deliver an excellent result. Is this the start of a more aggressive attitude in British waters to the shadow fleet, which is conducting an illegal trade to fund an illegal war?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the importance of international co-operation. The words I would use are “robust action”. When it comes to the war in Ukraine, the stakes are so high that we absolutely owe it to the people of not just that country but this country to take the robust action that we saw yesterday. He is right to make the point about the amount of preparation and planning that goes into these activities. It was an absolute privilege to be very closely sighted on the deployment of our troops this weekend. They performed a very difficult and complex task in an exemplary way, and I know that my hon. Friend, like all of us, is very proud of them.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Standing up to Russia, standing shoulder to shoulder with Ukraine and supporting our military depends on our military infrastructure and our defence manufacturing. However, today a roundtable of advanced manufacturers across the whole supply chain has raised very loud alarm bells about the impact of steel tariffs, especially on category 14 and category 17. The deadline of 1 July is looming. Will the Secretary of State speak with his colleagues, especially those in the Department for Business and Trade, to ensure that those tariffs do not have an inadvertent impact on our defence capabilities at this important time?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. I have already engaged with colleagues in industry, and the Minister for Trade has said that he is very happy to meet her.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): My constituency, and particularly Ramsgate, is a maritime community, so awareness of the importance of safety and security at sea resonates with people across it. This ship appears to have been operating under the flag of Cameroon—a flag of convenience that the shadow fleet used to avoid being properly policed. What efforts are the UK Government making—independently, with their allies or through international channels—to deter flagging states from offering stateless ships the cover of apparent respectability and lawfulness?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the point about the importance of the safety and security of those at sea. She also made an important point about flags of convenience. She will understand that because of the ongoing investigation, I cannot get into the specifics of this case, but the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), has just given me an assurance that we are working very closely with our allies on the point she that she raises.

Ben Obese-Jefty (Huntingdon) (Con): I congratulate the new Defence Secretary on his battlefield promotion. He will remember from his time in command that the best way to prove himself to his new team is to take them out tomorrow morning and thrash and phys, so I look forward to that.

On the DIP, it was widely reported last week that the funding settlement is £10 billion of cash, plus £3.5 billion from, I assume, the in-year cuts announced back in April. What confidence does the Defence Secretary have that in the next two weeks—the length of the stay of execution that he has been given—he will be able to make that plan work better than the previous Defence Secretary, who ended up resigning over it, could in nine months? What will happen if the defence chiefs dig their heels in? Will the Defence Secretary end up publishing the DIP as it was before he took over? Can he guarantee that he will manage to change it sufficiently so that it satisfies all the parties involved?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. That seemed a little bit different from some of the reported comments I heard over the weekend. I will leave that to one side for now, not least because I think he has extended me an invitation to go out for a run in the morning. *[Interruption.]* He seems to be backtracking on that invitation. I understand why he raises his point in the way that he does, and I hope that he will understand my determination to make progress. He will understand that I have had a limited amount of time to get into the detail of all this, but doing so is my absolute priority, and I will return to the Department to do that very shortly. I hope that he will give us a little bit of time; in the end, it will be for him to take a view on where we get to with this work.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I genuinely welcome the Secretary of State to his place, and I commend the Royal Marines, the National Crime Agency, the personnel from the RAF and all the others for conducting their work this weekend. Clearly, this is not the last we will see of the Russian shadow fleet. There are reports that two more ships are sailing our way;

[Mark Sowards]

they are sanctioned by the US, the EU and Canada, but not by the UK. I am aware that the Secretary of State cannot comment on future sanctions, but will he tell us that he will work extremely closely with our allies on sanctions alignment to close any loopholes that Putin might seek to take advantage of?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my Yorkshire neighbour for his welcome, and for the tribute he has paid to the Royal Marines. Let me emphasise the support that he offered for the National Crime Agency. I was privileged to work very closely with it over the past two years; it does extraordinary work in the shadows, and we should be hugely grateful to it.

I can give my hon. Friend the assurances that he seeks about close co-operation with our international allies. I am joined on the Front Bench by the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), who works incredibly hard to ensure that we are joined up in the best way, and working most closely with our allies. We take that very seriously, and understand the benefits of doing so.

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): I welcome the Secretary of State to his position and thank him for his statement. I also thank our brave Royal Marines for undertaking this action. It has been reported in the press that our entire hunter-killer fleet is out of the water, being repaired and maintained. Is that true? When will these submarines be back on duty and defending our seas?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for the point he has raised, and for the way in which he raised it. He will understand that I am not able to talk about the availability of submarines and the activity that they undertake—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Why?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman on the Opposition Front Bench questions why. I am quite certain that he would not have done that when he was in government, and I am not going to do it, either. What I will do is pay tribute to those who serve on submarines for their outstanding service.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome my right hon. and gallant Friend to his new role. He is a very humble man, but may I say what a pleasure it is to work with him and with hon. and gallant Members from across the House? I pay tribute to all the armed services personnel who took part in yesterday's really important operation. Sanctions are really important, and sanctions against the Russian war machine are incredibly important in defending our allies in Ukraine. However, sanctions work only if we look to enforce them. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give me that this Government will continue to support that enforcement?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. He has slightly thrown me, because he is not in his usual place, but it is good to see him on the other side of the Government Benches.

My hon. Friend is right, both about the importance of sanctions and about the importance of sanctions enforcement. It is an issue that my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, takes very seriously—he keeps sanctions under very close review, as do other colleagues across Government, including in the Department for Business and Trade. However, I am very happy to speak to my hon. Friend further about this issue.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): It is good to see the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) moving to the right. I pay tribute to members of the armed forces community, who played a big part in this operation; they truly are the best of us. Could the Secretary of State advise us on any actions that are being taken regarding the Russian frigate Admiral Grigorovich, which has been patrolling in English waters for two months without intervention from the Royal Navy?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. He will understand that it would be unwise of me to give a commentary on specific activities, but I hope that yesterday's actions demonstrate our absolute resolve to take robust action against Russia, and we will look for every opportunity to do so.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I welcome my right hon. and gallant Friend to his place and his new position. Given that nearly three times as many Conservative Members were in the Chamber for the urgent question on the defence investment plan as are here for this statement, does he agree that while we are all tempted on occasion to politicise issues, we in this House are better when we speak with one voice, particularly on matters of national security?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend raises an important point. I completely understand why Members on the Conservative Benches and elsewhere want to score political points, but I think the public expect us to behave in a grown-up fashion, particularly when it comes to the defence of our nation. That will always be my approach, and it is the approach I recommend to others.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I welcome the Defence Secretary to his position and thank him for his statement. Sanctions are ineffective unless they are fully enforced, and I join the Lib Dem spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (James MacCleary), in pointing out that we cannot allow loopholes to undermine our sanctions regime against Putin's war machine. Numerous shell companies, as well as flags, are used as shields to disguise operational control of Russia's shadow fleet, but Russia is also making extensive use of non-military, dual-use manufacturing and the global commercial supply chain to support its war. What action is the Secretary of State taking to prevent Russia using dual-use manufacturing; to boost the UK's manufacturing expertise, so that it can identify potential dual use, and prevent Russia using commercial supply infrastructure to support its war; and to ensure sanctions are fully enforced?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Lady is right to highlight the importance of defence manufacturing. She has also raised a number of other important points, not least about unpacking transparency and shell companies.

My ministerial colleagues on either side of me—the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Trade—were listening intently to the points she raised, and were providing me with assurances that a lot of activity is taking place in their Departments on standing against the kind of activity that she highlighted. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Lady is indicating that she wants somebody to write to her. We will work out which one of us will do so.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement.

Point of Order

7.13 pm

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. During the urgent question on the defence investment plan, the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry said that the Government are committed to all 62 recommendations laid out in the strategic defence review. In a later response to a right hon. Member, he described those recommendations as being “supported” by the Government. As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, the word “committed” carries a specific financial meaning in our civil service, so can the Minister use this opportunity to clarify the Government’s position? If not, can you advise me on how to get an appropriate answer?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for notice of his point of order, and I understand that he also notified the Minister that he intended to raise it. As he will know, it is not a matter for the Chair, but I am sure that Government Front Benchers have heard him, and if the Minister wishes to respond, he can of course do so through a further point of order.

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am grateful to my Devon neighbour, the hon. Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed), for allowing me to say again that the Government back all 62 recommendations of the strategic defence review, and we are implementing all 62 of those recommendations. It is an important, first-of-its-kind review, and it is one that this Government fully back.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day’s sitting,

(i) notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Order No. 20 (Time for taking private business), the private business set down by the Chairman of Ways and Means may be entered upon at any hour (whether before, at or after 10.00pm), and may then be proceeded with, though opposed, for three hours, after which the Speaker shall interrupt the business; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply; and

(ii) the business determined by the Backbench Business Committee may be proceeded with for two hours or until 10.00pm, whichever is the later, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of; those proceedings may be entered upon and may continue, though opposed, after the moment of interruption; and Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply.—(*Jade Botterill.*)

Royal Albert Hall Bill [Lords]: Revival

Motion made, and Question proposed,

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.*)

7.15 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): I am pleased to support the revival motion before the House today. It is about 11 months since I moved Second Reading of the Bill last year. At that stage, it had already completed its passage through the House of Lords, and it was given a Second Reading without opposition. It then went into the Committee on unopposed private Bills, and the panel met in March this year under the chairmanship of the Chairman of Ways and Means. The Committee approved the Bill subject to an undertaking given by the Royal Albert Hall, which I will come back to. I do not want to repeat all of the speech I made on Second Reading, but I do want to set out again why the Bill is so necessary and beneficial, and not just to the Royal Albert Hall but to the many people who enjoy performances there.

The Royal Albert Hall is one of our most important cultural institutions. There can be few people in this Chamber, or indeed the country, who have not enjoyed performances at the hall—either live or broadcast—including the last night of the Proms, the Festival of Remembrance, Cirque du Soleil and, tonight, Elvis Costello. I should declare that I served as a trustee of the Royal Albert Hall, appointed by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, from 2018 to 2020. I was one of five independent trustees, and I also sat on the conflicts committee, which is an extremely important part of the management of the hall, and to which I will return. As a result, I gained a good understanding of the way in which the hall operates, and I saw how the council works to fulfil the charitable purposes of the hall.

The hall has operated successfully for 150 years, and to explain why this Bill is necessary, it is important to appreciate its history and the model on which it is based. The hall was the idea of Prince Albert. Sadly, he died before he could see it completed, but the corporation was set up in 1867 in his memory, and the hall was built and opened by Queen Victoria less than four years later. The initial funding for the building of the hall came from the commissioners of the Great Exhibition, but it was insufficient, so the remainder—the gap that needed to be filled—was met by payment in return for seats in the hall. It is perhaps a unique model of public-private partnership. The hall has around 5,500 seats, of which around 1,250—just under a quarter—are privately owned. Those seat holders are members of the corporation, and in some cases those seats have been passed down through families across generations. Others have been bought by charities, companies and individuals when they have come up for sale.

Ownership of a seat brings with it the right to attend certain performances—but not all—and the members elect from their ranks 18 out of the 23 trustees who run the hall. They also make a significant financial contribution each year through what is called the seat rate, which is currently around £2,250. That is an ongoing commitment

of the seat holders to the continuation and the costs of the hall. On top of that, it has always been the case that seat holders agree to forgo their tickets for events held in the hall on just over 100 days each year. By giving up that right, the hall therefore has the tickets available either to offer to the promoter or to use for its own purposes. By doing so, it can attract higher artists, so it is of considerable financial benefit to the hall that the seat holders behave in that way.

The practice of agreeing to forgo the right of using a seat is not covered expressly by the constitution of the hall; it is voted on and agreed by the members that they should do that. However, there has been a suggestion of legal challenge from a very small number who do not like the fact that a majority of the seat holders have voted accordingly to give up the right, so there is now legal uncertainty and a risk as to whether the Hall can continue to offer as many tickets as it does to what are called exclusives, where all the tickets are available for use by the hall.

That legal uncertainty has resulted in several options for the hall, none of which is particularly palatable. It could continue to operate on the present basis, but it risks defeat in the courts, should that legal challenge be sustained. Indeed, failure to pass this Bill may encourage those seeking to challenge the current situation. The alternative is that the hall could revert to having exclusive performances only to the number permitted under the existing constitution. That probably means losing around 40 exclusive lettings in a year out of perhaps 150. The Bill is necessary to allow the existing practice to continue, to the benefit of the hall. If the Bill does not pass, the chief executive has calculated that it is likely to cost the Royal Albert Hall around £1.8 million.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): I defer to my right hon. Friend's superior knowledge in this area. I recognise the value of the asset. Can he reassure me on the concerns about conflicts of interests? Those people holding the seats are also trustees, so they are taking decisions for financial gain. Is he reassured that the process he is suggesting we follow will counter that issue?

Sir John Whittingdale: I will make a couple of points to my hon. Friend. As I have said, I not only served as a trustee, but sat on what is called the conflicts committee. The conflicts committee has a majority of independent members—not of seat holders—and it is there to ensure that any decisions taken are done properly. While it may be the case that conflicts exist, that in itself is not a problem, so long as there are proper mechanisms in place to ensure that the current situation is not abused. Certainly no evidence has ever been suggested, as far as I am aware, of seat holders seeking to take decisions for their own benefit, rather than for the good of the hall. If they did do that, the Charity Commission would come down on them rapidly, so there is an existing control around that issue.

My hon. Friend is right that concerns have been voiced about how the hall operates. When the Bill went through the House of Lords recently, an amendment was passed relating to the resale of tickets, which is the other issue that some Members have raised. It was suggested that seat holders, if they wished to sell their seats, should be required to do so through the hall's own

ticket resale mechanism. Many do choose to do that, but the problem with that is twofold. The first is how the resale mechanism works. It pools the takings and redistributes them among all seat holders. If not all seats are sold, that could end up costing seat holders money. The second problem, which is more fundamental, is that these are property rights. It is the legal right of the seat holder to decide whether to use the seat himself or herself, to pass it to somebody else, or to sell it. It is a fundamental property right.

To meet the concerns that were expressed, and the amendment that was made in the House of Lords, the hall offered an alternative undertaking, which is that each year those trustees who are seat holders and had sold tickets during the course of the year would have the amount of money that they obtained as a result made public. Through that, there would be greater transparency, with anyone able to see that those seat holders who become trustees are not exploiting their position in that way. That undertaking was accepted by the panel of the Committee on unopposed Bills, and hence that undertaking is now being given by the hall in place of the amendment.

This Bill is about one question alone: the ability of the hall to go on with the present practice, whereby seat holders go above and beyond the number of events or days where they agree to give up their rights and put more into the pot to the benefit of the hall and the public. If the Bill does not pass, there is a real risk that the entire model on which the hall operates will be undermined.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I was interested in what the right hon. Gentleman said about the pooling of money following resale through the hall's box office. Would it not be palatable for the members of the hall to have an agreed price by which those tickets are resold? Instead of the money being pooled, they could receive their portion of the contribution that they make.

Sir John Whittingdale: We are talking about very few events where tickets are sold at a much greater price than their face value. There will be some. The problem with what the hon. Gentleman suggests is that, at the end of the day, we are talking about somebody's right as a legal owner of a property to decide what to do with it.

The seat holders have been extremely generous in the level to which they agree to support the hall. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) and I agree with each other on many other occasions—we sit next to each other on the Foreign Affairs Committee—but on this we are on opposing sides. She has suggested, for instance, that the hall has benefited unfairly from the Government and the taxpayer because it received a loan of around £20 million during the covid pandemic.

I was a Minister in the Department of Culture, Media and Sport during covid. The cultural recovery fund amounted to £1.5 billion. If that had not been put in place, the entire cultural landscape of this country would have collapsed. In the vast majority of cases, the funding was grants. Cultural institutions—theatres, museums, galleries and music venues—were given grants by the Government, ranging from the Royal Opera House through to the Hot Box in Chelmsford, which I occasionally attend to see up-and-coming bands. All of them were

beneficiaries, but the difference was that in the case of the Royal Albert Hall, it was not a grant, but a loan, and it is repaying that loan.

The great thing about the Royal Albert Hall is that for 150 years it has provided one of our greatest cultural assets, and at almost no cost to the public purse. Apart from that covid loan, there has been no cost to the public purse at all, and it remains the case that, unlike so many others, it does not receive a grant. If this Bill does not pass, a model that has been so successful for 150 years is at risk of being undermined. If the consequence is that the hall has to withdraw from a lot of its charitable activities—reaching out to put on events for young people and for communities—and becomes solely focused on having to raise money, the communities will lose out. There must be a real risk that ultimately, if that model is no longer sustainable, it will be the taxpayer who is asked to step in in place of it.

Let me say this to Members on both sides of the House. When we come to consider the Bill, it will have undergone scrutiny, and can continue to undergo scrutiny. I am aware of the concerns that the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) is about to express. Let us have a continuing dialogue with the hall about those concerns, but the Bill is only about sustaining the present mechanism, which is clearly of benefit to the hall, to everyone who goes there, and to the country. I hope very much that it will be allowed to be revived and to pass into law.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Before I call the next speaker, it may be helpful if I point out that all we are really arguing about this evening is the revival of the Bill, not whether it is a good Bill. Obviously, however, Members will want to set some context.

7.30 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): If anyone had asked me three years ago, “How does the Albert Hall work?” I would have said that it was publicly owned, and that it put on events and collected the ticket money, and the money was spent on enabling people to continue to use the Albert Hall. However, it is not a bit like that. The Albert Hall is a charity, but it is also a business. It is both things at once. It is a charity to the extent that it was bailed out by the Government during covid, but it is a business in that a fifth of the seats were bought by people who, I am sure, were assisting in getting the Albert Hall built at a time when there was not sufficient funding for the construction to be completed. So some people bought seats, and they bought them at £100 each. A box of ten would cost £1,000, and a box of five would be £500. In 2017, someone who went to Harrods Estates would be able to buy a box for £2.5 million. In 2023, Kay & Co were selling a box for £3 million. A row of four stalls seats was advertised recently at £600,000. I laugh when the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) says that we should be grateful for the assistance of the people who now own these boxes and these seats for giving us a couple of thousand pounds a year to help with the ongoing costs of the Royal Albert Hall, because I think he is getting things out of proportion.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I am sure that the right hon. Lady paid as close attention to the remarks of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon as I did, but she has just repeated that during covid the Government, to quote her phrase, bailed out the Royal Albert Hall. My right hon. Friend has explained to the House that the Government made a loan that is being repaid by the Royal Albert Hall. I do not recall anyone in the House saying that providing the cultural support that the Government gave cultural institutions during covid was the wrong thing to do. In fact, we were all probably clamouring for more to ensure that our theatres and other institutions were kept afloat in a post-covid scenario. If the right hon. Lady has got that basic fact wrong, why should we believe anything else that she is about to say?

Emily Thornberry: I have heard the hon. Gentleman make some good points in the past, but he has not made one tonight. If you lend some money to a business that is about to go under, you are bailing it out. Yes, it may pay you back later, but, really, we are talking about what colour angel is dancing on top of a pin.

Sir John Whittingdale: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Emily Thornberry: I will give way once more, but then I must make some progress.

Sir John Whittingdale: I should add that while the Government gave the hall £20 million as a loan, as it gave loans to so many institutions across the country, the seat holders—the members of the Royal Albert Hall—put in £2 million above and beyond what they had to provide under the arrangements normally, as support. The seat holders have been extraordinarily generous, and it is not the case that they have somehow exploited the Government. They put in their own money to the tune of £2 million to get the hall past covid.

Emily Thornberry: The right hon. Gentleman has told us how many seats are owned privately. Let us suppose that £2 million were to be divided up among them, bearing in mind that it is possible to buy a box for £2.5 million or £3 million, or to buy six seats for £600,000. As I have said, we need to get this into proportion. Not only do these people own the seats; the reason they own them and they are worth so much money is that they can sell them, and they can sell them on the black market, and they can sell them for whatever price they want. I hear the right hon. Gentleman saying that sometimes those seats do not go for a lot of money, but tell that to Ed Sheeran. The seats for his performances were being sold at £6,000 a night, and he complained, as did a large number of other artists who have appeared at the Royal Albert Hall.

It is bad enough for there to be a black market for ticket touts, but tickets being sold by the people who own the seats in the Royal Albert Hall takes that to a new level—and it goes further. Not only do those people own the seats and trade them among themselves, and sell them for large amounts of money; according to the constitution of the Royal Albert Hall, they are the people who need to run the Royal Albert Hall. So there we are: it is a charity when it comes to getting public money as a bail-out, but when it comes to anything else, it is somehow a business. I do not understand how it

cannot be an obvious and manifest conflict of interest for people who benefit from the Royal Albert Hall to be running the Royal Albert Hall, and for it still to remain a charity, and I am not alone. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman knows the views of Victoria Prentis, who was Attorney General in 2024. She is now in the other place, and is a very sound woman. She has said:

“It is widely acknowledged that the constitution of the Corporation of the Hall of Arts and Sciences”—

that is, the Royal Albert Hall—

“gives rise to a potential conflict between the private interests of seat-holding trustees and the Corporation’s charitable objects. This potential conflict is of significant concern to the Charity Commission and many well-informed observers.”

So that is what the problem is.

When I was shadow Attorney General, representatives of the Royal Albert Hall came to see me. I hope that I am not disclosing any confidences, but I made it perfectly clear to them that if they were going to bring any legislation before this place and ask us to spend our time looking at legislation relating to the Royal Albert Hall, we needed to sort this out. We could put this into legislation. The Royal Albert Hall cannot change unless we put it into legislation, because that is the way in which the Royal Albert Hall was originally put together. We must sort out the governance, and we must sort out the fact that these people are selling their seats on the black market. They are selling them to ticket touts. Those seats should only be sold through the ticket office, as they are at the Royal Opera House and at theatres. Why should these people have the benefit of being able to sell their seats on the black market? It is undermining everything. If members of the public thought that such a beloved institution as the Royal Albert Hall had such a racket going on, they would be outraged, as I was when I first heard about it. I told the representatives of the Royal Albert Hall, when they came to see me three years ago, that unless they brought in those changes in legislation, I would object, and I am just keeping to my word.

Let us look back at the history. Originally, the legislation was going to be about the fact that extra seats were put into the boxes, contrary to the rules. The owners thought, “We are going to get into trouble here”. They wanted to bring in legislation to allow boxes of 12 instead of boxes of 10, because boxes of 10 were within the rules and they were putting 12 seats in them, and making that much more profit as a result. They then thought, “Oh, we cannot do that”, so they wanted to introduce legislation. They then pulled that bit of the legislation, but not before it was advertised online that there were going to be 12-seat boxes. Someone was going to make a lot of money out of this. They then ditched that bit but have kept this other bit, which makes a technical point: seat owners are restricted from selling seats for every and any event. For example, people will be glad to hear that no one is making a profit from the Remembrance Sunday commemoration at the Royal Albert Hall. Those seats are sold properly through the box office, and none of this nonsense is allowed on that night. There was a limited number, which the owners then agreed that they would increase, and a small number of people challenged that in court. I appreciate that that may be uncomfortable for some people, but I do not see why Members of this House should spend their time promoting legislation that simply looks after the interests of a small number

of people who already make a great deal of money out of owning seats in the Royal Albert Hall. It seems to me that we should be demanding that the Royal Albert Hall change its governance processes, stop the way in which it sells tickets, and get on and deal with itself in a way that is 21st century and not anything else.

Why it is appropriate that whereas the rest of the tickets for a charity event are sold for the sake of the charity, such as the Teenage Cancer Trust, trustees on the board of the Royal Albert Hall—a so-called charity—can sell the tickets to line their own pockets? We have a charity event run by a charity, yet those running that so-called charity are allowed to make a profit out of it. It is scandalous, and it should be stopped. I know that Conservative Members will say that it is the trustees' right and that they should be allowed to do what they like with private property. Well, they can go ahead and sell their seats to make a bunch of profit for themselves, if that is what they want to do, but I do not see why Parliament's time should be used to help facilitate that. If the trustees of a charity are supposed to be running it, why are they thinking about how they can generate the most money and the most profit for themselves? It is quite obvious that there is a conflict of interest at the centre of all this, and it is not an appropriate use of this House.

At this stage, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for all the work that she has done in this area over the years. She has exposed some really shocking examples of ticket abuse, including by one of the hall's vice-presidents, who offered tickets for the publicly funded BBC Proms for up to 10 times what the hall thought they were worth. It is the most outrageous profiteering that has led to this Bill being amended in the House of Lords. Peers did not ask for that much in the House of Lords—it was pretty tame, frankly—but the amendment said that trustees should use the ticket return scheme that the hall runs, not sell their tickets in backroom deals while the hall gets a pittance and has to beg the public for bailouts. To have that amendment struck out and replaced by a commitment that the trustees will be transparent about their profiteering, rather than cease it, is disappointing and inappropriate, to say the least. I also note that although family members are included in that commitment, other individuals are not, making it still perfectly above board for a trustee to give their tickets to friends and associates, who can in turn go ahead and sell them instead.

I know the corporation is desperate to get this Bill through so that it can protect itself against legal challenge, but I want us to stop and think about who it really benefits. Who benefits from striking out the amendments? Not the public—that is for sure. Publishing some information on some of the profits of some of the sales on a website once a year just does not cut it. The truth is, what the trustees have here is a magic money tree, and they do not want to give it up. The corporation said that the amendment passed in the Lords was

“unnecessarily restrictive and financially punitive”,

but one might say that charging £6,000 to see Ed Sheeran is also pretty restrictive and is not something that he appreciates, as he has made clear. I urge my colleagues to reject this Bill as it currently stands and to instead secure some much-needed reform to the board of trustees, which seems to have forgotten who it is meant to serve.

7.43 pm

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): The Royal Albert Hall is undoubtedly one of our premier cultural institutions, and it does a great deal of public good. It hosts a great many events that simply could not be hosted elsewhere, particularly large-scale choral and classical music. It is worth noting that the hall was an early adopter of the ticket levy scheme and has put over £300,000 back into grassroots music venues around the country, which have historically been underfunded.

Undoubtedly, the hall's governance arrangements and business model are peculiar. If this was normal across the arts, I think we would rightly take issue with it, but it is not normal. I note that among OECD countries, the UK is 22nd out of 25 on how it funds the arts; in fact, we have seen a one-third cut in the amount that we spend on the arts since 2010. However, the central question before us tonight is: do we block this legislation, or do we seek to improve it through parliamentary process? I choose the latter. There may be ways in which we can improve the Bill, and we can certainly improve its transparency and ensure that those with a decision-making or governance role in the running of the hall do not use it as an opportunity to make huge and excess profits.

Emily Thornberry: Is my hon. Friend aware that the House of Lords has struggled with this? Part of the problem is that the long title of the Bill is so restrictive that very little can be added to ensure that the governance of the Royal Albert Hall is sorted out.

Jonathan Davies: We undoubtedly have more work to do on this Bill, but we must continue to do it through the parliamentary process that we have.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): My hon. Friend may or may not be aware that the proposers of the Bill can withdraw it at a time of their choosing. If amendments were to be made to the Bill, I fear that the proposers would simply choose to withdraw it from consideration.

Jonathan Davies: That is a risk that they take on behalf of a venue whose future they seek to secure. I encourage the proposers of the Bill to work with this House and the other place to make sure that we get it over the line, because I want to see the Albert Hall thrive.

Sir John Whittingdale: I think the hall's representatives would be only too happy to talk to the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry); indeed, they have asked to speak to her several times, without success. As has been pointed out, this is a very narrow Bill—it has a very restrictive title—and it is essential if the hall is to continue. We should continue to talk to the hall, but we should not stand in the way of this Bill, which is absolutely vital if the hall is to continue.

Jonathan Davies: I am not standing in the way of this Bill. I want to see it proceed tonight.

Emily Thornberry: I do not know whether the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) is aware that I have given the Albert Hall's representatives several dates to meet me, but they have not been in touch.

Jonathan Davies: I am not my right hon. Friend's diary secretary, but perhaps the hall can get something moving soon.

We should probably bring this debate to a close, but it opens a great many questions about how we fund the arts in this country. This model would not be acceptable for the Barbican, the Bridgewater Hall or other venues. We make an exception for the Royal Albert Hall, but we should not let it be the norm. We should look more carefully at the kinds of audiences that we create for the future through the National Centre for Arts and Music Education, so that places such as the Royal Albert Hall have an audience and do not become dependent on people having to pay huge amounts of money to see huge names. People come to events like the Proms because they want to hear classical music, for which we do not currently have an adequate audience at the moment, but we need the venue to be there for them to come.

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

7.47 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): If we do divide today, I shall be supporting this Bill, primarily for the reason that mentioned in its introduction: today we are debating whether to reintroduce the Bill. If we choose to do so, there will be plenty of opportunity to debate it at a later stage, and it appears that several Members want to do just that.

Given that the debate has swayed into the substance of the Bill, I should say that I am one of the former Ministers who oversaw the implementation and execution of the culture recovery fund, alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale), when we were in government—something that I am very proud of.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I have a number of constituents who go to events at the Royal Albert Hall two or three times a year. Members on both sides of the House have referred to the process of legislating, and we must consider our constituents and those who buy tickets in order to travel from Northern Ireland two or three times a year. Some of my constituents do that, and many others from Northern Ireland do the same.

Nigel Huddleston: Absolutely.

The Royal Albert Hall is a vital part of our tourism ecosystem, our cultural history and our cultural offering. Therefore, my final comment is an offer to the Minister. I am one of the biggest supporters of the arts, culture and heritage, and am very proud to be so, but I sometimes wonder when we have such debates whether it is truly appropriate in this day and age for us to discuss in this Chamber, when there are other demands on our time, the minutiae of the internal dynamics, operations and rule changes in certain institutions. When they were set up and established in other centuries, Parliament was the right vehicle to have such discussions, but I wonder whether it is the right vehicle now.

If the Minister—or indeed the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) or others—wishes to discuss, once this has been resolved, whether there is a broader debate to be had about some of the ecclesiastical, heritage and academic institutions

where Parliament still needs to arbitrate on what, at the end of the day, are internal operational decisions, I would be happy to discuss with the Minister whether that is an appropriate debate to have in this place.

7.50 pm

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): Madam Deputy Speaker, I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this debate, which clearly is about whether we revive this Bill, not the internals of the Bill itself. I thank the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) for sponsoring the Bill and for his speech. I also acknowledge the work of the Bill Committee in scrutinising the Bill in the last Session, and ensuring it is proportionate and meets the aims of the hall, which has included making sure that the hall's new ticket income declaration policy is sufficiently robust.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Droitwich and Evesham (Nigel Huddleston), raised a whole host of interesting questions about whether we should still take primary legislation through this House for institutions set up over 160 years ago. I would be more than happy to discuss that with him. I would have thought he was more interested in reviving the Conservative party than in reviving this Bill, but we could discuss his point about such institutions.

I acknowledge the contribution of my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). She is not alone; the Charity Commission itself and several commentators, many of whom she mentioned, have long expressed the view that there is a strong conflict of interest in the majority of the hall's trustees being seat holders, because they are sometimes acting in their own financial interests instead of the charity's best interests, which is against the rules and regulations of the Charity Commission.¹

The Bill drew strong opposition in the other place for not tackling this conflict of interest, and it is disappointing that it has not tackled it—for all the reasons that have been raised this evening. The Charity Commission maintains its concerns that the Bill does not fully address the hall's long-standing conflict of interest, especially the make-up of the board of trustees, despite the new declaration policy. The hall's position is that it is willing to discuss concerns about other matters with interested parties, but that these should not obstruct the passage of the Bill. Perhaps what the shadow Minister has said about primary legislation should be part of this discussion.

I understand that the Bill will come back to this place on Report and Third Reading, and I encourage Members, if they have concerns, to table amendments on Report. I am not alone in raising this criticism. Baroness Twycross, who spoke on behalf of the Government in the other place, has expressed the same disappointment, as did my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant).

There are few institutions that hold as distinctive a place in British public life as the Royal Albert Hall, and it is fitting to be discussing the Bill in Parliament now, given that the Proms start next month; I am sure many hon. Members, myself included, are looking forward to this time-honoured event in the British cultural calendar. However, this motion is only about reviving the Bill, and the provisions of the Royal Albert Hall Bill are not

1.[*Official Report*, 18 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 6WC.] (Correction)

considered contrary to public policy. I would point my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury to our draft ticket tout ban Bill, which was announced in the King's Speech, which will deal with some practices of selling tickets at an extortionate price.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): This is a process point, but will the Minister confirm to the House whether, if the revival motion fails, the promoters can bring in another Bill at a time that suits them, ideally with some of these issues resolved?

Ian Murray: That is indeed the case. The promoters can bring back a Bill and, in the same way, the promoters can withdraw this Bill at any point.

This is a private Bill, and the Government always take a neutral position on such Bills, notwithstanding amendments from Members in this House or from those in the other place. We will therefore not be supporting or opposing the Bill's revival; that is a matter for the House.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 24, Noes 37.

Division No. 23]

[7.54 pm]

AYES

Bhatti, Saqib (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)	Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Blackman, Bob	Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)
Brandreth, Aphra	Rankin, Jack
Cane, Charlotte	Smith, Greg
Cartlidge, James	Snowden, Mr Andrew
Davies, Jonathan	Spencer, Patrick (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood</i>)
Davies, Mims	Stafford, Gregory
Harris, Rebecca	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Huddleston, Nigel	Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Jenkin, Sir Bernard	Wood, Mike
Johnson, Dr Caroline	
Lam, Katie	Tellers for the Ayes:
Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Simon Hoare and
Morrissey, Joy	Sir Alec Shelbrooke

NOES

Amos, Gideon	Maguire, Helen
Berry, Siân	Mathew, Brian
Bloore, Chris	Maynard, Charlie
Cadbury, Ruth	Minns, Ms Julie
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Mohamed, Iqbal
Carling, Sam	Moon, Perran
Chambers, Dr Danny	Prinsley, Peter
Charters, Mr Luke	Qureshi, Yasmin
Denyer, Carla (<i>Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry</i>)	Ramsay, Adrian
Foord, Richard	Shannon, Jim
Foy, Mary Kelly	Slade, Vikki
Gardiner, Barry	Slaughter, Andy
Gardner, Dr Allison	Slinger, John
George, Andrew	Spencer, Hannah
Gibson, Sarah	Taylor, Rachel
Glendon, Mary	Vaz, rh Valerie
Hume, Alison	Western, Matt
Jogee, Adam	
Jones, Ruth	Tellers for the Noes:
MacCleary, James	Peter Swallow and
	Ms Polly Billington

Question accordingly negated.

Backbench Business

NHS Dentistry

8.7 pm

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House is concerned about NHS dentistry; notes that over a quarter of a million people have signed a petition calling for urgent action to save NHS dentistry and make it fit for the 21st century; regrets that nearly 14 million people were unable to access NHS dentistry in England in 2025; welcomes the Government's commitment to both tackle and rebuild dentistry for the long term; and calls on the Government to set out a clear timetable for the fundamental reform of the NHS dental contract, and to improve retention of NHS dentists and access for patients across the country.

Around 14 million people, or one in four people, were unable to access NHS dental care in early 2025. Some 56% of children in Somerset did not see an NHS dentist in 2025. We are all seeing scenes that we would expect to read about in a Charles Dickens novel, not read about in the news, hear about from friends, or, if you are an MP, hear about almost every day from constituents. I have heard from 15 parents directly who have recently taken their children to hospital with dental issues. One local told me that her 86-year-old father was in so much pain that he pulled out his own teeth because he could not get dental treatment. I have heard from a military family and a pregnant woman who could not find NHS dental treatment. To highlight the scale of the problem, a local dental practice told me that every day, it takes in at the very least 10 to 15 unplanned emergencies, compared to two or three a few years ago.

The situation has got so bad that some locals are telling me that it is cheaper, sometimes by hundreds of pounds, to fly to Spain to get dental treatment—and a tan, of course. One couple who lived in Thailand for a while even told me that when they came back to the UK, they worked out that it was easier and cheaper to stay registered in Thailand, and to go back there to get dental treatment. I mean, that is just insane! Over 93% of respondents to a survey of locals that I carried out recently were dissatisfied with the availability of NHS dentistry, and 69% of parents I surveyed said that getting an NHS dental appointment was either very difficult or impossible. It would be easier to pull teeth.

Like many Members of this House, since being elected, I have been doing all I can to fix the issue. Luckily, we have had some real successes. After finding underspend in dentistry budgets in Somerset, I worked with our local NHS to open new dentists in Crewkerne and Chard. As a result, and with the new practice in Wellington, NHS dentistry has been brought to 20,000 extra people in Somerset, which is good news. However, the underused dentistry budget has fallen by 91% across the country. That means that there is not enough money to open new NHS dentist practices through underspend, which is a real problem, as we need NHS dentists in Yeovil, Ilminster and the rest of my constituency. It is not as if the workforce was not there. While the number of dentists registering to provide care in the UK has gone up to around 47,000, we are seeing the number of NHS dentists fall. Only around 25,000 dentists are doing some work for the NHS.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): I was interested to hear about the hon. Member's local survey. Ahead of the general election, around 65% of respondents to my survey in Filton and Bradley Stoke reported that the reason why they do not have an NHS dentist is that theirs went private. Does he agree that it would be helpful if the Minister could provide an update on the incentives for keeping more dentists in the NHS?

Adam Dance: I agree with the hon. Member, and I will come on to that issue later. During covid, people missed appointments, and then got completely taken off the dental list.

One local working in dentistry summed it up perfectly when they told me that,

"NHS dentistry is in terminal decline."

Patients have had to either go private or go without a dentist. Just before the general election, I had a £1,600 bill for a root-canal filling that needed to be redone. I was fortunate, in that I could afford that, but many people would have had to have the tooth ripped out. In a cost of living crisis, this is more than a problem. In my public survey, 87% of respondents rated private dentistry as unaffordable.

To be fair, the Government have made a good start by providing 100,000 urgent dental appointments. That is great, but the target is 700,000. I find it worrying that the Government seem to have quietly dropped their promise to deliver 700,000 more dental appointments by broadening the definition of "urgent" dental appointments for clinical reasons.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing forward this debate, in which all of us across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland have an interest. The Government committed themselves to increasing dental training places by 40%, but the fact is that after three years of training, those who have trained seem to go elsewhere for better money. Does he agree that training more dentists without addressing the reasons why dentists are leaving the NHS is like trying to fix a leaky bucket? It is time for the Government and the Minister to take on and sort out this issue.

Adam Dance: I totally agree with the hon. Member, and I will come on to that point later. I hope the Minister can clarify my point about broadening the definition of "urgent" dental appointments for clinical reasons, and I am happy to give way if he wants to do so now.

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock) *indicated dissent.*

Adam Dance: I will move on, but if the Minister could remember to address that question later, it would be most helpful. On urgent care, we Liberal Democrats would go further by introducing a £750 million dental rescue plan and flexible commissioning, which would guarantee an NHS dentist for everyone needing urgent and emergency care.

I welcome the Government's work on prevention, and particularly the support for supervised toothbrushing. I have raised this with the Minister before, but schools in my area rightly pointed out that when all the tasks that teaching staff have to do are factored in, sometimes

getting the toothbrushing scheme in place is not possible. Schools in my area have had their own ways of promoting good oral health, but I also understand the drive to support and manage this nationally, so will the Minister meet me to hear from schools in my area, and talk about what we can do to support them without adding more burdens?

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, my near neighbour, for bringing forward this motion. He will agree that this is an issue that seems to fall hardest—disproportionately so—on rural areas. Does he also agree that Governments of both hues have tried a number of gimmicks and initiatives, but the core of the issue is to try to make NHS dentistry more attractive, and the best way to do that—please forgive the pun—is a root-and-branch reform of the contract to ensure that it pays? It is not rocket science; it is quite easy to do.

Adam Dance: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman, my constituency neighbour. I will come on to contracting later, but he is completely right on that point. Dentists in my area are asking why there is no funding for them to do school visits, as they would be happy to come in and support. We also need to look more broadly at the way we inform families.

What makes people in Yeovil really angry, however, is that we have all known for years what is wrong. We have an underfunded system with an NHS dental contract from 2006 that just does not work—100% of respondents I surveyed from dental practices in Yeovil said that the contract is not fit for purpose. Just about everyone agrees with that, as we have heard today. The biggest issue is units of activity, which are like tokens that the NHS gives to local dentists to use each year. The system basically sets quotas on the number of patients a dentist can see on the NHS. If they go over that quota, dentists are not paid and will have to cover the cost of material, lab work and other overheads.

One of the biggest problems with the system is that it underpays for treating patients with complex and high needs. The Government's recent changes are a welcome first step, with new care packages for patients with very high needs, and higher rates. NHS Somerset is doing all it can and has increased units of activity by 10,000 from 2025-26.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): I have met with my local dentists. Does the hon. Member agree that part of the problem is the massive differential in the price per unit that each dental practice is paid? It means that for some dental practices it is no longer viable to continue to do NHS dentistry, whereas for others, based on the legacy price per unit they get, it remains competitive.

Adam Dance: I completely agree with the hon. Member on that point. We have seen that in my constituency and others in Somerset: one place will be on a higher rate, and another place will be on less. Ultimately, we need to get rid of that system if we want more NHS dentists, and look at alternatives, such as the weighted model suggested by the Health and Social Care Committee.

But that is not all. One of the frustrating things that I found when we were setting up a new NHS dentist in my area is that dentists cannot prioritise locals. The dental contract means that people do not register with a

dentist as they do a GP; they can attend any dental practice that is taking NHS patients, even if the practice is based miles away. That is because, technically, people are only with a dentist for as long as a course of treatment, which means that if someone lives in Yeovil, Crewkerne or Chard—or in the rest of my constituency—they do not have the right to be permanently registered with their local NHS dental practice.

When we got the new practices open, there was no guarantee that locals who needed a dentist most would get one. That is madness. We had people travelling 200 or 300 miles to come to one of our new dental practices, and someone a mile down the road could not sign up. What is the point of opening a new dental practice in our area if it does not benefit all—or even half—of the people there? That part of the contract also means that to stay with their NHS dentist, someone needs to have six to 12-monthly appointments to keep their spot. That meant that a lot of people lost spots during covid. Local providers, the NHS and I are doing our best locally, but there is only so much we can do within those rules. I urge the Minister to make reintroducing permanent patient registration rights a priority in contract reforms.

Even then, without proper funding such changes will not work. Since 2010, the amount of the NHS budget spent on dentistry has more than halved. Integrated care boards, which oversee local NHS services, have also been making serious budget cuts, with 50% of their staff having to be made redundant. That has left us in a situation where we invest less of our health budget in dentistry than any of our European neighbours, according to data from the OECD. At the same time, dental practices in Yeovil tell me that the cost of materials, energy and labour have gone through the roof, while missed appointments or last-minute cancellations are costing practices a fortune. We need the Minister to set out how the Government plan to fund NHS dentistry properly. Will he also set out what steps he is taking to support dentists with day-to-day costs, particularly in relation to resourcing and cancellations?

There is one other big issue that we have to address: getting dentists to work and stay in rural areas such as Somerset. Mark, who is about to retire after 39 years as a dentist in Yeovil—thank you for your hard work, Mark—has been saying to policymakers and the press since the mid-1990s that we would end up in exactly this situation if we did not attract dentists to places like south Somerset, which lose out because NHS dentistry tends to be concentrated around dental training schools and urban centres. It is therefore a good start that the Government will require younger dentists to work in the NHS after graduation for around three years, but that is only a short-term fix, just like the golden hello bonus—another one-off fix. We need to write proper workforce planning for health and social care into law, including projections for dentists and dental staff.

Similarly, the Government's recent announcement of 50 new dental school places from 2027 is great, but that is a rise of only 6%—a drop of water in the dental Sahara desert that is the south-west. I think it is fair to say that dentists trained in Portsmouth will probably stay around there and instead of coming to fill demand in Somerset, which is a real tragedy because as a community we have so much to offer. I invite the Minister to come to Somerset to talk with us about how we can get that across to dentists.

Ultimately, we need fundamental changes to the NHS contract, how we fund it and how we recruit. Of the local dentists I surveyed, 100% said that they were not satisfied with the Government's progress on improving the NHS dental contract, while 82% of the public I surveyed rated the Government's performance on NHS dentistry as poor or very poor. Two years into this Government, we are still waiting for proper changes to the NHS dental contract; if we factor in early discussions, consultations and then actually drafting and proposing the thing—we all know how long those things take—I am sure the Minister is aware that if this is kicked down the road any further, the Government will not be able to deliver on their promise to roll out a new NHS dental system by the next election.

I urge the Minister to provide a clear commitment to getting the consultation on fundamental reforms done this summer, no matter how distracting a new Secretary of State, a by-election and a change of Prime Minister may be—let us get on with it. I hope the Minister will also use this debate as an opportunity to go further and provide a clear timetable for when formal negotiations will start, as well as a firm deadline for rolling out the new system in this Parliament. I know that the Minister is committed to getting this right, and that he is working with a difficult brief, but there seems to be a disappointing trend emerging with this Government, whether in social care, defence, investment or dentistry: if it is hard, kick it down the road.

We were promised change, so please work with us to deliver that. I do not want to have to be back here in a year or two, reporting that things have got even worse in Yeovil.

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I broadly agree with the hon. Gentleman's list of demands. I wonder whether he could offer advice, based on the Liberal Democrats' five years in government, on lessons learned about the NHS contract and its reform.

Adam Dance: There is always a dig like that from the Labour Benches. Look, that was back in 2010. I was 18 at the time—I turned 34 on Saturday. Things have changed. The hon. Gentleman's Government is in power now, and they are making a bit of a mess of a few things at the moment. This is something they could be really proud of; they could deliver change for the people of this country who voted for them. Get out there, make change and get their teeth sorted.

8.23 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I am proud to speak in this debate. I declare that I co-chair the all-parliamentary group on dentistry and oral health.

I have been working on this issue for the best part of a decade, raising it with Ministers in the previous Government, and I have to say that the scale of the challenge that this Government inherited is nothing short of a national scandal. I welcome the steps that the Government have taken: the 700,000 additional urgent appointments; the broadening of that definition in February; and the 1.8 million extra treatments delivered in just seven months. These are real achievements, and I pay tribute to the Minister, whom I have always found to be accessible. He and I have had a number of discussions,

[Yasmin Qureshi]

and I know that he is not just sympathetic to the issue, but very keen to resolve it. However, as he knows, although these steps are welcome, they are just a sticking plaster on a wound that runs very deep.

Almost 14 million people in this country could not access NHS dental care in early 2025—that is more than one in four adults in England, and more than three times as many as before the pandemic. These are not statistics; they are people in pain, people who cannot eat properly and people who are even embarrassed to smile. The British Dental Association's research tells us that 41% of adults now have tooth decay—levels that have not been seen since the 1990s, undoing decades of hard-won progress in oral health. Polling from Ipsos makes for truly shocking reading: people across this country who cannot get an NHS appointment have been forced to pull their own teeth out. In one of the wealthiest nations in the world, that is just not acceptable.

How did we get here? Since 2010, the proportion of the NHS budget spent on dentistry has more than halved, from 3.3% to just 1.5%. That is the direct result of 14 years of the previous Government—£1 billion gone, and patient charges hiked by over two thirds. In 2023, the Health and Social Care Committee branded the dental contract “not fit for purpose”; both the Public Accounts Committee and the Nuffield Trust have said the same. Yet the previous Government for 14 years did nothing about it.

After the Tory Government recovery plan was found by the National Audit Office to be off track, this Government have tried to change things. The new patient premium cost £88 million, but produced no measurable improvement in access. Just last week, we learned that despite the offer of a £20,000 golden hello, just two dentists in Greater Manchester signed up to do NHS work. That tells us how broken our system is.

I want to raise a specific injustice that was brought to my attention by the Epilepsy Society. Around 630,000 people in this country have epilepsy. A third have uncontrolled seizures and fall without warning, often face-first, breaking their teeth again and again. Harriet, who is 29 years old, has six missing teeth, including her front teeth—top and bottom. After she broke her NHS dentures three times in a single year, her dentist has refused to issue another set. She can barely speak clearly, she struggles to eat, and every time a seizure strikes she faces a new bill for the damage she could not possibly prevent. A broken arm caused by a seizure is treated free in hospital; a broken tooth caused by that same seizure incurs significant expenditure. There is no medical exemption for epilepsy-related dental damage, but there should be. I urge the Minister to look specifically at that in the short term before going on to the full dental contract.

What is the cost of fixing it, and why do we need it? The British Dental Association estimated that it would take about £1.5 billion a year to restore NHS dentistry to a universal service. When the Chancellor announced £29 billion for the NHS in her statement on the spending review, I asked her whether any of that money could be set aside for dentistry. Sadly, it has not been, and no additional money has been set out for dentistry.

Catching decay early is far cheaper than an emergency treatment, prevention in children costs a fraction of what we spend fixing the damage in adults and a workforce who stay in the NHS are definitely cheaper than one who walk away. We need a new contract that breaks decisively with units of dental activity, prioritises prevention and makes NHS dentistry a place where talented professionals want to build their careers. The Government have announced a public consultation for this summer, which is great news, but we need a timetable and a firm deadline for a new system in this Parliament. We cannot kick this into the long grass again—13 years of that was quite enough.

As I said, I have been raising these issues for years. I sat in rooms with Ministers and heard warm words but found nothing changed. I do believe that this Government are different and that the Minister is serious—I have had many discussions with him, and he has met the all-party parliamentary group on dentistry and oral health a number of times—but that seriousness must be matched with urgency, and that urgency must be matched with investment. The people of Bolton South and Walkden and people across the country deserve to see a dentist without waiting years and without pulling their own teeth. They deserve a Government who will finally fix NHS dentistry. I urge the Minister to please urge the Chancellor and the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to give it the utmost priority. Let us resolve it once and for all.

8.31 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The Government were elected on a platform that included a dentistry rescue plan. They correctly assessed a crisis in NHS dentistry and promised to fix it. Nowhere is that crisis more felt than in the rural areas across the country.

Nearly two years on from the general election, I consulted residents across my constituency in a survey about the health care issues that mattered to them. Almost everyone who replied mentioned the state of NHS dentistry and the lack of provision across Somerset. If the Government want to show genuine support for rural communities, as they claim, they can no longer ignore those voices calling for action—but ignore them, the Minister does.

When I asked the Minister on the Floor of this House what steps he was taking to increase the number of dentists accessible to rural communities, he directed me to, “Watch my post box” to be furnished with the numbers of how many more appointments have been provided in my constituency. I did wait, and then I waited some more, and no response came. Eventually, having chased the special adviser outside the Chamber and threatened a point of order for the Minister's reply, I did get a response. It then became clear why his Department had been so reticent: the numbers revealed that 4% fewer NHS dental treatments had been delivered in the first seven months of this financial year compared with the same period before the general election.

The Government are too busy patting themselves on the back to notice the dire reality of NHS dental provision across Somerset and other rural counties. For meaningful change to be felt by my constituents and patients across the country, reform of the system needs to start being treated as a priority. Access to quality NHS dental care should be available to all, not just those in urban Labour constituencies.

Families in Somerset should not need to travel miles for basic care, paying fees they cannot afford or, worse still, going without treatment altogether. Polling for Ipsos last year revealed that when people cannot secure dental treatment, a quarter will resort to at-home DIY solutions. That is simply not acceptable in a modern health service.

Before those on the Government Benches leap to their feet with interventions beginning with “Fourteen years”, which we hear every sitting day, I have to acknowledge that this problem did not start in July 2024. Previous Governments, including previous Conservative Governments, did not do enough to fix the problem. The last Government did take steps, including an uprating of NHS dental unit pricing, but far more needs to be done to address the deeper structural issues in the system. Contract reform, fundamentally, is what we need to see.

I am encouraged that Ministers seem to agree, but on this issue, this Government’s intervention follows a familiar pattern. Instead of taking action, they are launching a consultation. This Government and this Minister have been in office for two years, and I would have thought that by now they would have worked out what they wanted to do to improve the system. If the Minister is going to consult, I very much hope that it is on the basis of a well-thought-through plan and that it is not being used as another delaying tactic. I hope, in particular, that he will consider how we can strengthen the dental workforce in rural areas.

Something I have raised previously with the Minister is how we can train more dentists locally. Clinicians who train in a community are more likely to stay and practise there. In Bridgwater, discussions took place with Bridgwater and Taunton college on the potential for partnerships, such as with the University of Bristol dental hospital, to deliver local training pathways. If student dentists could do some of their practice within rural communities, it might encourage them to work there afterwards. The Minister asked me to write to him about that, and I did, but I got a whole load of platitudes back and, regrettably, no action was taken.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that the national golden hello scheme to attract and retain NHS dentists is just not working? Only four of 19 posts in Devon have been filled, and the Fresh Dental practice in Dartmouth will end the provision of NHS dental services at the end of June. It will no longer provide NHS care and is the last dentist in the town. It says that it has tried to recruit for years but cannot fill the positions. It says:

“It has become increasingly difficult to maintain the NHS contract in a sustainable way.”

Sir Ashley Fox: I thank the hon. Lady for her point. I think golden hellos are a useful tool, but they are not sufficient. Reform of the contract is fundamentally what we need, and one would hope that after two years in his place, the Minister would have developed an idea of what to take forward. I believe that these local partnerships are exactly the sort of solution that could make a real difference to areas such as Bridgwater.

More broadly, the Government must ensure that NHS dentistry is a viable and attractive career. This means continuing to look at how procedures are valued, at whether payments properly reflect the work involved and at how we can encourage dentists not just to enter

the NHS but to remain in it. This House has already identified the problem and we have talked about reform, but now we need to deliver results to those in need. My residents across the Bridgwater constituency do not want another consultation that drags on for months without anything changing. They want an appointment with a dentist, and I urge the Minister to do all he can to deliver upon that as quickly as possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): With an immediate four-minute time limit, I call Alison Hume.

8.38 pm

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): Imagine being 81 years old, blind and waking up with a terrible toothache, and then imagine having no car and no local dentist to turn to. This was the reality for John, one of my constituents in Scarborough and Whitby. His story is unfolding at a time when we are seeing a much-needed and welcome shift in how our country tackles dental care. After years of the system being left to decay, we are finally seeing real funding, new incentives to recruit dentists and a genuine, sincere effort to rescue NHS dentistry. Last year, this Labour Government invested around £3.7 billion on primary care dentistry. We are starting to make a real difference to people’s lives. Take another of my constituents, Margaret. She was so grateful for the recent changes that she sat down and wrote a letter to the Minister for Care. After suffering from a debilitating toothache, which had threatened to leave her housebound, the Government’s new emergency appointments meant that she could get her tooth extracted at short notice.

The true test of our reforms is whether they reach everyone, and Margaret’s story shows that they have not. The reason that Margaret needed that emergency help was that her regular NHS dentist went private. Last week, I called 13 dental practices in my constituency. Only one, in Whitby, is taking on adults on the NHS, but only those with a Whitby postcode, and no dental practice in Scarborough is taking on adults under the NHS. Because John could not find an NHS dentist in Scarborough, he had to go private for an emergency extraction and was hit with a £280 bill. That is not just an exorbitant fee; it is a breaking point. If someone is blind and cannot drive, an emergency appointment in a nearby town is not much use.

We cannot judge success on national averages while people in coastal communities such as Scarborough and Whitby feel stranded. In Scarborough, we have seen practice after practice going 100% private and handing back their NHS contracts. Two constituents who moved to Scarborough were appalled to find that not a single dental practice was taking NHS patients.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): My hon. Friend and I know that our constituencies are somewhat similar. My Carlisle constituents currently have to travel 12 miles to find a dental practice that is taking patients. That is an improvement: last year they had to go to Yorkshire to find an NHS practice that was taking on new patients. Does she agree that the steps this Government are taking to rebuild NHS dentistry need to be focused on our rural and coastal communities, such as our two constituencies?

Alison Hume: My hon. Friend is right, and I hope that the Minister addresses the challenges faced by rural and coastal communities in his closing remarks.

The two constituents I mentioned were told that they could be put on a waiting list. Unfortunately, the waiting lists were 10 years long; aged 80 and 77, they did not think it was likely that they would even get to the top.

My Scarborough and Whitby constituency is a dental desert. I worry about any constituent not having access to an NHS dentist, but I worry particularly about those with disabilities, like John. Because people can attend any dental practice, and dental practices can choose who to deliver care to, integrated care boards cannot decide who dentists see under their core contract. That makes it difficult for ICBs to target access at particular patient groups.

The Minister has worked tirelessly to deliver on our manifesto commitments, and further improvements are coming. I applaud the progress made so far, but I ask my hon. Friend, on behalf of my constituents: what specific targeted action is being taken to address the complete lack of access to NHS dentistry in coastal towns such as Scarborough? What about people such as John and others who have disabilities but do not receive the benefits that passport them to free NHS care? We have made huge progress in getting children access to NHS dentistry. Is it not time to target access at patients with disabilities?

8.43 pm

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): Almost half of children in Cambridgeshire have not seen a dentist in the last 12 months. That will have many impacts that we can only imagine, but one of them is that one in every eight children in East Cambridgeshire have tooth decay by the time they are five. That should be utterly unacceptable to us all. In short, Ely and East Cambridgeshire is an NHS dental desert.

We have heard Labour Members make valiant attempts to blame almost anybody else for this situation, but it was a Labour Government who introduced the new dentist contract in 2006, despite lots of people warning that it would lead to dentists leaving the NHS. Indeed, that is exactly what we have seen: they have left in droves.

In Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, we have a vacancy rate for NHS general dentists of 24%—almost one in four. Even more frustratingly, I have heard from dentists locally who are willing and able to take on more NHS patients, and have contacted the ICB and asked for the funding to do so, but have been refused that funding. I have constituents who cannot get an NHS dentist appointment, and I have dentists who are willing to give them an NHS dentist appointment, but nobody seems willing to give them the money so that that can happen.

Sam Rushworth: The hon. Member is making an excellent point, and I suspect that the ICB in that situation is finding that its budget is overstretched. On that basis, and in the spirit of not being partisan, would she welcome the investment that this Government are putting into the NHS, which the Liberal Democrats oppose?

Charlotte Cane: I welcome investment in NHS dentistry, but it is all just playing around at the edges unless and until we change that contract, because it is the contract that is at fault. I understand the Minister said that he would consult on that in the summer. We are already

part way through June. Can we please have a date for the consultation, and a commitment to implement changes to the contract so that it is more attractive and we can get dentists back into the NHS? Can we also have a commitment to when we will have a workforce plan for dentistry, so that one in four NHS dentist roles in my area are no longer vacant?

8.46 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank the hon. Members for Yeovil (Adam Dance), for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) and for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford), and my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson), for giving us this opportunity to discuss dentistry.

This situation of access to dentistry is not new. From 2007 to 2014, I managed the Braunstone health and social care centre in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall). The centre was designed to bring NHS organisations together, with space for a dentist and an optician. However, we were unsuccessful at attracting NHS dentists and opticians to work in the centre, so those spaces were repurposed for other NHS services.

Flash forward to today: I have been working with Fiona Ellwood, a constituent and associate professor and director of dental education at the University of Lincoln, on how we tackle the NHS dentistry issue head-on. Fiona and I have been working together on a proposal to utilise the workforce we already have, which I shared with the Minister a few weeks ago; we would welcome a meeting with him to discuss this further.

As of last month, there were just shy of 70,000 dental nurses and around 47,000 dentists in the UK, which I am pleased to see represents a workforce expansion of over 5% under this Government. However, despite seven distinct professional groups making up the dental team, dentists remain overstretched because patients are funnelled to them for almost everything—even cases that trained dental nurses, dental hygienists or dental therapists could safely handle. NHS data confirms that dental therapists and hygienists deliver just 5% of total service activity. That baseline has stagnated for years, trapping dentists under a mountain of work when the entire workforce, if utilised, could make systematic improvements to dental care. Just imagine the appointments that could be released if we just used the current workforce in a different way.

The current situation is inefficient and expensive and is driving dentists out of the NHS, while 13 million people across the country are left with a completely unmet need for NHS dentistry. My constituency of North West Leicestershire already has the second lowest rate for units of dental activity in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland. There were 14 contract terminations between February 2021 and July 2024, and one practice was terminated in Ashby in my constituency. We do not have a lack of talent; we have a failure of deployment. Dental therapists can do over 70% of routine primary care. Why do we not use the service that we have? We could realise clear benefits if the whole dentistry workforce was utilised according to skills and experience, rather than according to what a dentist can or cannot do.

Dental nurses also have the greatest capacity to take on intervention and preventive work, and to work with flexibility and agility within community and neighbourhood

settings. Many are already oral health practitioners in their own right. I am greatly pleased that a training centre in Lincolnshire offering courses in dental hygiene and therapy will open in 2026, accepting around 30 students in its first year. It will teach a new BSC in dental hygiene and therapy alongside a foundational course designed to help dental nurses and other healthcare professionals retrain and reskill.

Members and the Minister will no doubt aware that the 2009 Steele review of NHS dentistry proposed a tiered model of care, matching patients to the right professionals at the right time, with prevention at its core. It was never fully realised, but maybe it is time to dust it off. A genuinely tiered NHS dental service would cut waiting lists, free up dentists to focus on complex care, and make better use of dental nurses and dental therapists, who are already trained and ready to do those jobs. Most importantly, it would shift the system towards prevention, not crisis management, which I note is a core priority of the Department.

8.50 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I thank my fellow sponsors of this debate: the hon. Members for Yeovil (Adam Dance) and for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay), and the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson), who is not in his place.

Oral health is fundamental to dignity, confidence, employability and overall health. The ability to see a dentist when needed should never be treated as a luxury within a universal healthcare system, yet that is precisely what has happened. The consequences of that are not abstract but real, painful and increasingly visible. Tooth decay remains the leading cause of hospital admissions for children aged five to nine—though clearly poor parenting holds a lot of blame. A growing number of people are turning to so-called DIY dentistry because they have no other option. That alone should give this House pause for thought.

We must be clear about what is driving this problem. It is often said that it is simply a workforce problem, but that is only part of the truth. As the Policy Exchange report “Pulling Teeth” sets out, there are over 37,000 dentists in England, yet only around 10,500 full-time equivalent NHS dentists. There is not a shortage of dentists but a shortage of dentists who are willing to work under the NHS contract.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the British Dental Association, which has supplied an excellent briefing to many right hon. and hon. Members for this debate, is in no doubt at all that it is precisely the 2006 contract that lies at the heart of the problem? The BDA states that it wants two things from this debate: one is a clear timetable from the Government as to when they will start to renegotiate that contract; and the other is a firm deadline for the roll-out of a new system in this Parliament. Those are the two things that we have been invited to press the Minister to deliver at the end of this debate.

Gregory Stafford: My right hon. Friend is precisely right. The BDA is absolutely right to call for those two things; they are what the Government should be working towards. As my right hon. Friend said, the contract started in 2006 under the last Labour Government and

was based on units of dental activity, and it is fundamentally misaligned with clinical reality. For example, it pays the same whether a dentist does one filling or six. Essentially, it rewards volume, not complexity, and it actively discourages preventive care.

We also had covid. We have to remember that around 4 million adults struggled to access dental care before covid, and that figure has now risen to nearly 14 million. Of course, covid alone did not create the crisis, but it did significantly accelerate and expose it, and we are still dealing with the aftermath.

This Government came into office promising action, yet nearly two years on, the gap between promise and reality is difficult to ignore. The roll-out of additional appointments was delayed, and even where appointments have been delivered, the British Dental Association has noted that they amount to only around two extra urgent slots per dentist per month. That is not transformation; it is marginal adjustment.

At the same time, the long-promised NHS workforce plan remains unpublished. The ambition to expand access depends entirely on having enough clinicians willing and able to deliver NHS care. Without a credible workforce strategy, the objectives of reform remain difficult to assess, let alone achieve. As has been mentioned, that pressure is not evenly distributed. In parts of rural England, there are as few as 10 NHS dental practices per 100,000 people. These so-called dental deserts are not random but the predictable outcome of a system that fails to align funding with need.

Mr Snowden: My hon. Friend mentions rural communities and dental deserts. My constituency, Fylde, is split between rural and coastal, and those coastal areas are experiencing the same dental deserts. I agree that the dental contract is the root cause, and we want a commitment from the Minister to review it.

Gregory Stafford: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head, and as in so many healthcare cases, rural constituencies, and rural and coastal constituencies, are often hit the hardest. In my view, that is where the Government should be spending their efforts and money, in order to ensure that we get the same level of service in those areas as in large urban population centres.

That brings me neatly to my constituency, where the consequences are very real. One family contacted me about their daughter, who lives with a long-term eating disorder and developed a serious dental infection. Despite seeking help, they faced delays, long waiting lists and limited access to specialist care, with treatment stretching close to a year. Another constituent raised the case of his wife, a head and neck cancer patient. Following chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery, she now faces severe and ongoing oral health complications, yet access to appropriate NHS dental follow-up has been extremely limited, forcing reliance on expensive private care. Those are not isolated cases; they are emblematic of a system that is failing those who need it most.

We must also recognise the financial and operational pressures facing dental practices. Rising national insurance contributions, increased wage costs and high levels of missed appointments all add further strain. In some practices, missed appointments alone cost tens of thousands of pounds a year. In Haslemere in my constituency,

[Gregory Stafford]

the local hospital has a fully equipped dental suite that is, unfortunately, entirely unused despite clear local demand. That is not inefficiency; it is systemic failure.

Incremental change will not fix this. We need a credible workforce plan, genuine contract reform that rewards prevention, and a strategy for dental deserts that goes beyond short-term fixes. We need a system that aligns capacity with need, rather than relying on historical allocations drawn up nearly two decades ago. More fundamental proposals are also on the table, including models that would extend coverage and give patients greater choice and control. Whether or not every element of that is agreed by the House, what is clear is that the status quo is failing too many people for us simply to continue as we are.

I have a lot of respect for the Minister—I am not entirely sure it is mutually given—and I have some questions for him. When will we see a fully funded and credible NHS dental workforce plan? How many additional dentists, hygienists and therapists are required to meet demand? What is the Government's plan to ensure that dental deserts do not become a permanent feature of our healthcare system? Unless we answer those questions honestly, the Government are not reforming NHS dentistry; they are supervising its managed decline.

8.57 pm

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and I declare an interest as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for dentistry and oral health. I pay tribute to the British Dental Association, our secretariat, for the work it continues to undertake to keep NHS dentistry in the spotlight. Due to my APPG role, I hear regularly from patients and dental professionals across the country, and the message I hear nationally is echoed by my constituents in Durham: NHS dentistry is becoming harder to access and the current system is not delivering the practical care that patients need. We need to measure access properly. Ministers should publish local data showing which practices are accepting new NHS patients, how many NHS clinical hours are being delivered, whether urgent care is being completed, how many children are being seen, and whether disease is being stabilised rather than left to worsen.

One issue raised with me is the NHS Business Services Authority reporting and payments. Recent system changes have led to incorrect payments, and have made it harder for practices to calculate associate dentists' pay. For practices already operating under serious financial pressure, that creates yet more uncertainty. Another issue is unit of dental activity caps. One local dentist described a practice with the chair, the associate dentist and the patient ready to go, but no additional UDAs were available. The associate dentist was left, in their words, twiddling their thumbs, while patients were turned away or offered private care.

I also heard from award-winning Claypath dental surgery, one of the last remaining NHS dentists in Durham city. The practice manager said the practice had "witnessed firsthand the steady destruction of NHS Dental Services over the last 20 years by successive Governments, that have used the demolition of NHS Dentistry as a way of saving money in the NHS".

As part of the cost cutting, the practice's contract was reduced by 2,000 exams in April. During an attempted appeal, the practice was told to accept the change or lose the whole contract. I ask the Minister: how does cutting contracts like that improve access for patients?

I welcome the Government's recent steps, including the urgent care changes and the beginning of wider reform discussions, but tweaks to the existing system cannot become a substitute for fundamental reform. We need a clear timetable for formal negotiations on a new dental contract, a deadline for replacing UDAs in this Parliament, and proper funding, so that practices do not lose money for providing NHS treatment.

The challenge before us is to build a system that allows dentists who want to provide NHS care to do so, and a system that ensures that patients can access that care. The measure of a healthcare system is not how well it serves those who can afford an alternative, but how it protects those who cannot. We must stop treating the collapse of NHS dentistry as inevitable. A generation is growing up with pain, fear and preventable disease. We know the problems. We know the solutions. What we need now is action.

9.1 pm

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): It is a pleasure to co-sponsor the debate. In my constituency, registering with an NHS dentist as a new patient has become extremely difficult, if not impossible. East of England has the lowest number of NHS full-time equivalent dentists per head of population. When Ministers say that the system is improving, I ask them to picture the reality for patients in rural communities: people travelling miles, sometimes for hours, for appointments, ringing dozens of practices without success, and waiting until pain becomes unbearable before seeking urgent care.

Leanne from Halesworth told me that it took three years to find an NHS dentist, while her children still cannot access NHS care. Another constituent, Michael from Dickleburgh, spent more than £2,000 on private treatment after being unable to access NHS treatment. Ministers have admitted that NHS dentistry has only enough budget for fewer than 40% of adults to be seen over a two-year period. The principle that an NHS service should be available to everyone is in tatters when it comes to dentistry.

The Government have emphasised urgent appointments, but without additional workforce and funding, there would be fewer routine appointments, undermining the Government's own prevention agenda. The British Dental Association estimates that the NHS dental budget has been cut by a third in real terms since 2010, reducing the allocation to 1.5% of the overall NHS budget. Further funding will clearly be needed to restore NHS dentistry as a universal service, yet when the Chancellor announced £29 billion of additional NHS funding in the spending review, the Minister indicated that none of that would likely be allocated to dental services.

Delayed routine care leads to greater pain, more complex treatment and higher costs for both the patient and the NHS. Nowhere is that clearer than in children's oral health. Tooth decay is the leading cause of hospital admission among five to nine-year-olds in England—a totally shocking fact

Dentists do not grow on trees. I am delighted that, following many conversations, the University of East Anglia will begin training students from 2027. However, the truth is that, at UEA and nationally, not enough funded places are being provided. The previous Government promised a 40% increase in dental training places, but no funding was attached either for training those additional clinicians or for commissioning the NHS dentistry workforce that they would eventually join. The current Government have announced further expansion of dental school places, which I welcome, but the funding remains inadequate.

Adam Dance: Like me, the hon. Member represents a rural constituency. Does he agree that this issue affects us a lot worse in rural areas? We do not have universities close by to train dentists.

Adrian Ramsay: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member, who made an excellent speech in introducing this debate. Rural communities lose out so often when it comes to health services, and the decline they have seen in dentistry is a strong and worrying example of that.

Unless NHS dentistry becomes a place where clinicians can build sustainable careers, new graduates will continue to drift away from NHS practice. If NHS work is too costly for dental practices to deliver, we should not be surprised when surgeries replace NHS service with private care. The Government must pursue contract reform and ensure that dentists are funded for the work they do, with a strong emphasis on prevention. The crisis in NHS dentistry will continue to deepen if immediate action is not taken. If the Government are serious about targeting dental deserts, East Anglia should be one of the first in line.

I ask the Minister to do four things. Will he commit the funding needed to restore dental services? Will he support innovative therapist training models, such as Suffolk's model? Will he review and reform NHS dental contracts, as promised? Will he commit to boosting the dental places in our region, and providing the places that we have lacked for decades?

9.5 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) and others for securing this important debate.

Cornwall is a dental desert. Healthwatch Cornwall's 2024 report found that every single NHS practice was closed to new adult patients. In Cornwall, under 30% of adults have seen a dentist in the last two years; across England, that figure is 40.7%. That is a stark reflection of the regional inequality, and the lack of access to basic healthcare. At the same time, the number of dentists in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly has fallen dramatically, from 285 in the year 2019-20 to just 221 in 2024-25. Since 2010, the proportion of the NHS budget spent on dentistry has more than halved. At best, NHS dentistry only ever covered about half the population.

Cornwall is rural and coastal, and like many such areas in the south-west, we face real challenges in attracting and keeping dental professionals. Two years ago, more dental nurses left the workforce than joined it in every NHS region. In the south-west, for every nurse who joined, two left. Every dental practice in Cornwall reports recruitment difficulties for all staff, and morale among NHS dentists is at a low, with more than six in 10 in

England saying that they are thinking of leaving NHS dentistry. We need to make the NHS a place in which dental staff choose to build a career, and the golden hello scheme is a start. Cornwall and Isles of Scilly ICB has invested £188,000 in 11 posts across the area.

It is also crucial that we train more dentists. I recently visited the Peninsula dental school at Treliske in Truro, which is part of the University of Plymouth. Fourth-year dental students train in Truro and offer free dental care. They provide essential treatment and community outreach to more than 30 local groups. That is exactly the type of model that we need. The school wants to expand its intake from 58 students to 72 students per year to meet demand and bring the region in line with the national average. If we train more dentists in Cornwall, we stand a better chance of keeping them there. The Government are expanding dental school places, with 50 extra dentists, which is brilliant, but I ask them to include Peninsula in the next wave.

There is a recognition that the current contract is flawed. It is based on UDAs, which effectively cap how many patients a dentist can see. If dentists exceed the cap, they are not paid for it; if they under-deliver, money is clawed back. In Cornwall, only around two thirds of UDAs are delivered, which sometimes leads to millions of pounds being clawed back. That money could be used to treat patients. The money has historically been paid monthly in advance to practices, but unused money has not been repaid in some cases until the end of the year, which has made it hard to divert it to other uses.

Cornwall's ICB has introduced an incentive scheme to encourage practices to hit a certain percentage of their target, so that less money needs to be returned. The Government have introduced reforms to the contract from April '26. There will be a level of urgent care that is at an improved rate, and there will be a new care pathway for higher-needs patients and more clinically complex cases.

Let me talk about some of the schemes already in place to tackle the acute dental need in Cornwall. Since July last year, there has been a dental van, run with Smile Together, which delivers care for our veterans, the fishing community and patients who have been waiting for urgent treatment. The Government's scheme for brushing in schools has already reached up to three quarters of the schools in Cornwall, and up to six new dental practices are due to open in Cornwall soon, through the clawed-back funding. This will not fix everything overnight, but there is positive reform. I will ensure that these changes are felt in Cornwall, because everyone deserves access to dentistry where it is needed.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): With an immediate three-minute time limit, I call Richard Foord.

9.9 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I pay credit to my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) for working with the Backbench Business Committee to secure this debate. He knows that the south-west is the worst-affected region for NHS dentistry—according to NHS data from March 2025, fewer than one in three adults in the south-west had seen a dentist in the previous two years. That is the lowest rate of any region, and a full 14 percentage points below the north-east or the north-west of England.

[Richard Foord]

When people cannot access a dentist, they end up in an acute hospital. In 2023-24, one in every 460 people in the south-west went to accident and emergency for a dental problem; that is almost twice as common as in London, where the figure was one in every 860 people. The south-west has the highest vacancy rate for NHS dentists in the country, at 22%, and it also has one of the lowest ratios of full-time dentists to head of population.

Despite the Government's pledges and dental plans, little has changed on the ground. In 2025, just 38% of adults in Devon had been seen by a dentist in the previous two years. That is down from 54% a decade ago. Only 47% of children in the county had seen a dentist in the previous 12 months—down from 61% a decade ago. Those who cannot afford private dental treatment are often left with no choice but to let their children go without care for years. We must move towards a preventive model of dentistry. Affordable, routine check-ups can catch problems early, saving the NHS the greater cost of emergency care later.

I want to give the example of Ken from Northleigh. Ken is a pensioner. He has dentures that no longer fit, and with no NHS dentists accepting patients in our area, he went to a local private dentist. That dentist told him that it would cost £800 to prepare his mouth and a further £3,000 for the new dentures. Ken is lucky—he has savings; he can afford to pay—but how could anybody on the state pension ever afford such a price?

The last Conservative Government proposed targeted recruitment incentives, or golden hellos. However, the local democracy reporter Bradley Gerrard discovered that only one had been taken up in Devon in November 2024. Let us properly fund the training and retention of dental professionals. No one should end up in A&E because they cannot get seen by a dentist. The Government say that they are serious about fixing the system; let us see it on the ground in our constituencies.

9.12 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): The question before us this evening is quite simple: are we prepared to rebuild NHS dentistry as a genuine public service? My constituents, and people across the country, demand and deserve NHS dental services that are accessible and available. I commend the campaign Toothless in Suffolk, which has been a tireless advocate, and many of my parliamentary colleagues who are in the Chamber this evening, who have spoken about their very own dental deserts.

Families should not have to choose between going private and going without. The Americans talk about English teeth—wonky and yellow. That myth was dispelled, but sadly it is returning; children being admitted to hospitals with dental abscess and decay was once rare, but it is now familiar. Before the election, I spoke of the decay of the nation's teeth as a metaphor for the decay of the nation—what an outrage!

NHS dentistry disappeared in plain sight when the contracts were changed. The dentists simply switched their practice to private and informed their patients—it was not really a choice. This happened to me and, I expect, to many other Members. I was an ear, nose and throat surgeon in the NHS. I was paid to work at the hospital, not per case, but as part of a team tasked with providing

a service to the population. The incentive was to work hard to benefit the greatest number of patients; nobody ever said to me that I could switch all my patients to strictly private operations in the hospital and charge a fee per case, yet that is what happened to NHS dentists. Surprise, surprise—private practice became very popular.

There are plenty of dentists, although it is true that we could do with more. I welcome the new dental school at the UEA and commend the vice chancellor and his team for their work on it. I welcome the plans to increase the number of overseas dentists by increasing places for the General Dental Council qualifying exam, as there are many dentists who would like to work here. I also welcome the emergency dental appointments now widely available using the underspend in the NHS dental contract to provide sessional dental appointments. I definitely welcome the emphasis on prevention and the toothbrush campaigns.

Adrian Ramsay: I thank my fellow hon. Member from Suffolk for giving way. He will be aware that the University of Suffolk is running training for dental therapists and hygienists, who are an important part of the jigsaw. The funding model is broken, because training a therapist receives support of only £5,000 a year, compared with £36,000 a year for dental students. Does he agree that that disparity needs to be addressed?

Peter Prinsley: I thank my neighbour for his intervention. I agree that there is much that dental hygienists and dental nurses can do, especially in check-up work.

There are many positive steps, and I commend our excellent Minister on everything he has done, but we urgently need the new contract and incentives and rewards for NHS dentistry. This debate is to ask the Government when that will happen, and what barriers are preventing that. The teeth of the nation depend on it.

9.16 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance), my constituency neighbour, on securing this important debate and on all his campaigning. I began my campaign in my part of Somerset's dentistry desert in 2021, when I was not an MP. My survey found that just under half had access to an NHS dentist. When I surveyed 2,000 people last year, things had got worse and only 35% of children in Taunton and Wellington could access an NHS dentist. The House of Commons Library has pointed out that from 2015, the last Government cut funding for NHS dental services by a sixth in real terms.

I start by welcoming some good news. Thanks to the campaigning by my hon. Friend and me, and many others, we can confirm the news from NHS Somerset, published today, that 10,000 more units of dental activity were delivered last year in the county than in 2024-25. Let us hope for more improvement as this financial year progresses. In addition, I had the privilege of cutting the ribbon at Wellington's new NHS dental practice in October. I thank the Minister for the work he does. His commitment to this issue is genuine. I thank the Dentistry For You team and all those in the NHS locally, because they are achieving these things against a background of limited resources and a broken funding system.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) for securing this debate. I welcome

the fact that the Government have decided to tie in newly qualified dentists so that they work in the NHS for three years, but does my hon. Friend agree that since that only starts next year, and the crisis is now, we should be starting that measure in September 2026, not waiting until September 2027?

Gideon Amos: My hon. Friend and near neighbour is, as so often, exactly right. I completely agree that urgency is needed in the training of new dentists and in the contract changes, which I will come to.

One sentence in NHS Somerset's recent announcement stands out:

"There is currently insufficient funding to provide NHS dental care for the entire population and...available resources can only support around half of the county's residents."

That means that 64,000 children in the county did not see a dentist at all last year, putting Somerset in the worst-hit 5%. In Taunton and Wellington, it is even worse than the average. Hard-pressed parents responded to my survey to record that they are paying £100 a year per child because they cannot access NHS dentists. That grosses up to £4 million spent by parents in my constituency in the last five years. In a cost of living crisis, that is clearly unacceptable. Increasingly, I and they believe that we should be prioritising children for NHS appointments, and I urge the Government to consider that in their reforms. It is the contract that is at fault, as Eddie Crouch and all the brilliant work he does with the British Dental Association have shown.

In the longer term, the key to resolving this issue is prevention. In April I became an ambassador for The Magic Dentist, a charity that brings together local primary schools and local dental practices. The charity is trying to roll out that model across the country, and I want to pay credit to its hard work, including that of its founder Nicki Rowland and the trustee Councillor George Western. I congratulate them on enabling yet another primary school—alongside Holy Trinity Church of England primary school in Taunton—to find a partner in a local dental practice, Today's Dental, led by Rob Paxman. I also thank Charlie MacEwan and the WPA Benevolent Foundation. Beginning with prevention where it works—with children—is exactly what we need to do.

The Liberal Democrats are clear about what is needed: the scrapping of UDAs, reform of the dental contract, a fair share of the £29 billion for NHS dentistry, and a proper workforce plan. Until then, charities will continue to have to pick up the pieces.

9.20 pm

Sam Rushworth (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): It is now 9.20 pm, and I have waited all day to be able to say what I am going to say—in three minutes. I cannot give the speech that I wanted to give, but I had to come to speak up on behalf of my constituents, particularly the patients at the West Auckland dental practice who have just been told that they can no longer have NHS dentistry.

Let me take the House back to three years ago, when two dental practices closed in our area, one in Shildon and one in Bishop Auckland. A year later, a month before the general election, another practice sent letters to parents saying that because of

"the way in which the NHS contract is funded and managed...and a national shortage... We have...come to the realisation that we are unable to offer...NHS patients the level of care they deserve, and...will no longer be able to provide NHS dental services to child patients from 1st October 2024."

That was the situation that this Government inherited: an underfunded service, a broken contract—the reasons in 2006 for introducing it were sound at the time, but it was broken and needed reform—and the off-rolling of patients.

Some things have gone well, and the Government have made progress. It was right to focus on using the underspend for emergency appointments, because people were pulling their own teeth out in the most extreme cases. However, appointments have not always been easy to come by, and often require people to travel across the county. Toothbrushing in schools is massively welcomed by dentists, but less so by teachers. I would be grateful if the Minister could tell us what can be done to increase the take-up of that programme. The increase in the number of places in dental training schools is welcome, as is progress on the new contract, but many dentists are telling me that the care pathways pay less by the hour, and they are not sure whether they will see the value in them. We must be honest: the number of people with access to NHS primary care, as opposed to emergency appointments, has barely increased in two years.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech on behalf of his constituents, and he has mentioned dentistry challenges in his area. Like other Members, he has talked about the contract, which currently rewards activity rather than prevention. Is that one of the changes that he would like to see?

Sam Rushworth: I would like to see that change, and I urge the Minister not to delay the consultation on new proposals on the contract. However, in addition to bringing about reform, we need to return funding levels to where they were in 2010. I recently met dentists from across Durham, including one of the chief negotiators for the British Dental Association. They had warm words to say about the Minister, who they felt was sincere and serious in tackling the problem, but they felt that the resources were simply not enough, and that—as has already been pointed out this evening—£1.5 billion a year is enough to fix NHS dentistry so that everyone in the country could have an NHS dentist. That is the equivalent of a 0.3% increase in national insurance, or £3 per month per taxpayer. It is not a large sum in the grand scheme of things, compared to what could be saved if there were not so many people facing dental emergencies.

I want to press for cross-party support on this issue. It is all very well everyone coming here and saying that we need to reform the contract—and we do—but we must face the fact that we need to fund NHS dentistry properly, and it is worth the investment to do so. It is intolerable to keep hearing from the Opposition Benches opposition to the investment that we are putting into the national health service. A moment ago we heard a call for some of that £29 billion to be spent on dentistry, so I say, "Support the £29 billion, and yes, let us fund NHS dentistry."

9.24 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) for leading today's debate. Across my Thornbury and Yate constituency, the lack of dental practices providing NHS services has been particularly acute. As I put it to

[Claire Young]

the Minister last week, less than a third of the adults, and just under half of the children, in my patch have been seen by an NHS dentist in the past two years—both figures are well below the national average. Constituents write to me regularly to express their frustration at the lack of local NHS provision.

I have been assured that the NHS does everything to ensure that patients who lose access through privatisation receive adequate treatment elsewhere, but that has not been the experience of many of my constituents. David waited nearly two years for an appointment, only for his practice to go private. His situation deteriorated to the point that he required emergency treatment, which the NHS did provide, but the underlying problem was never fully resolved and he has been advised by his practice to go for private treatment. That is a failure, and not only in the immediate sense. Short-term emergency care does not address the underlying cause. The longer-term cost, whether to the NHS through repeat emergency appointments or to my constituent through lost earnings and private fees, is significantly greater than the cost of timely treatment. This Government have now been in power for two years, but David has seen no improvement in his dental care. I think that speaks for itself. David's story is one of dozens that I have heard. Another constituent, Doris, was left with an infection for months, only to be told that there is no NHS provision for molar treatment in south Gloucestershire. She, too, had to go private.

Members across the House have highlighted the steps that the Government need to take, particularly on the contract, and I want to make two points. First, in response to a written question, the Minister told me that no data is held centrally by the NHS on NHS dental appointments that have been cancelled due to practices converting to private provision. How can we measure progress if we count only those coming in through the front door, not those leaving at the rear? Secondly, rural dental provision has higher operating costs and lower patient density. How can that challenge be reflected in the contract review?

Thornbury and Yate is exceptionally poorly served by NHS dentistry. I have written separately to the Minister to request a meeting to review our local situation, and I hope he will take me up on that.

9.27 pm

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Let me start by saying that I love dentists, and I will tell the House why. Twenty years ago, almost to the day, I completed my last GCSE history exam and decided to go and celebrate with my friends in Drighlington, in my constituency. We chose to cycle down New Lane, which is between Gildersome and Drighlington. New Lane is on a steep hill and, as I discovered, it has speed bumps. My friends and I decided to race down the hill and, in my desperation to win, I went faster than any of them. I do not remember my face meeting the concrete, but I do remember the sensation that one feels when going down on a rollercoaster. That is the good news. The bad news is that my face was badly damaged and my teeth were completely destroyed.

I am eternally grateful to the NHS doctors and nurses who put my face back together, but unfortunately it required years of treatment from dentists to fix my teeth,

and the treatment is still ongoing today. I am very grateful to have been served by NHS dentists over the past 20 years, and they have done extremely well in dealing with composite bonding. If any Member of this House has experienced composite bonding, they will know that it can have a transformative effect, but they will also know that it can break really easily. I grind my teeth at night, which means that in some cases I have had weekly appointments at NHS dentists, just to maintain their appearance. Unfortunately, some of my teeth could not be saved and I had to settle for some veneers, but I still go back for my composite bonding appointments.

Despite that story, I still count myself as one of the lucky ones, because if that accident were to happen to me today, I imagine that my experience would be very different. My constituents contact me all the time to tell me about the lack of access to NHS dentistry. In some cases, I have constituents who are told by NHS dentists that they will be seen within six to 12 months, but if they call back and ask for a private appointment, they can be seen that day. The only difference, of course, is that it will cost six times the amount to be seen.

Sam Rushworth: Does my hon. Friend agree that this is a massive cost of living pressure for people who cannot afford a dentist, and that it would probably be worth our putting in the investment to ensure everyone can have an NHS dentist?

Mark Sewards: I absolutely agree we should consider that. It must be done within the fiscal rules and we must find the money in a responsible way, but given we have heard some sources cite £1.5 billion to fix dentistry, I think that is a very reasonable figure to consider finding.

I do think there is a solution, which is fundamental reform of the NHS dental contract. It must start considering prevention much more seriously, incentivise dentists to treat complex problems, not just simple ones, and focus on the workforce demands. Those three things are difficult, but we are here to grasp the nettle. This Labour Government and most Labour MPs, just like me, were elected to do the difficult things in office. I know that this is difficult, we need to find extra resources and there are no easy choices when it comes to fixing any of our public services, including dentistry, but we have this time in office, and we should use it.

9.30 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): It is great to follow the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) as I recall my husband losing his two front teeth to a crash helmet in his face, and my nephew Arlo currently has plastic on his teeth having lost his two front teeth at the age of 10 to his little brother.

Jonathan, a senior NHS dentist in my constituency, whom I consider to be a true expert, as he has worked for almost 40 years in NHS dentistry, told me that, in 2024, we had a £9 million underspend in our dentistry budget—goodness knows where that has gone—and a freedom of information request has revealed that, this year, £6 million was removed from a supposedly ringfenced budget for dentistry. What is going on in Dorset?

The ICBs have arranged for urgent care to be done through NHS 101, but no one knows about it. That means one provider that provided 4,000 appointments

last year will deliver only 1,300 this year. Alongside my colleagues, I have been calling for a dental school in Dorset for years. It seems that we may be getting something in Bournemouth, but only for dental technicians, not for dentists, which is not much good to those of us who need complex care. In Poole, we have heard proposals for a centre for complex care for people with disabilities or neurodiversity, but we need £4 million of capital, and no one can tell us where capital for dentistry comes from. So it seems that in Dorset things are in a bit of a mess.

We have heard that dentists were told they could have an additional 10% in the number of dental units, but they were not given the information until six weeks before the end of the year, meaning they have no opportunity to spend them. Residents who do have a dentist tell me that their dentists are refusing extractions or anything complicated, instead referring them to the hospital, where they are added to the secondary care waiting list. Why? Because the dentists cannot make enough money from them, and the tax trap apparently means they are reducing their number of hours on the NHS, because the tax treatment of the fees in the private sector means that they are better off doing it that way round. Frankly, it is a complete mess.

I welcome the changes that mean dentists have to stay in the NHS for three years, but I do have to ask the question: why should our residents only have junior dentists dealing with their complex care? It is a disgrace that, over the five years to 2024, 100,000 children were admitted to hospital with rotting teeth. This issue is now urgent. We cannot waste any more time, and if it is not addressed, we will continue to lose NHS dentists as quickly as my constituents and our colleagues are losing their teeth.

9.33 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): In my constituency of Melksham and Devizes in Wiltshire, in two years only 29% of adults were seen by dentists. Only 56% of Wiltshire's children are seen by an NHS dentist each year, which is a figure of shame, given that the NHS recommends that children be seen regularly from their very first tooth.

Nationally, the picture is just as bleak. According to NHS England, over 12 million children across the country did not see an NHS dentist at all in the year to June 2024. The consequences are severe. Tooth decay is now the leading cause of hospital admissions for children aged six to 10 in England, with over 35,000 children admitted each year for tooth extractions under general anaesthetic. Those risky procedures are almost entirely preventable.

The lack of access to dental services across the country has a devastating knock-on impact on our country's overall health, evidenced by rising levels of oral cancers in the UK. These include cancers of the tongue, lips, gums, tonsils and throat—the eighth-most common cancer in the UK, with nearly 12,000 new cases recorded in 2023. Eddie Crouch, chair of the British Dental Association, has pointed out that dentists are on the frontline of detecting those cancers before they turn fatal. With early detection, oral cancers have a survival rate of around 90%, but if diagnosis is delayed that drops to just 50%. The ongoing crisis in NHS dentistry is therefore not just a matter of convenience, but a matter of life and death for some patients.

The previous Health Secretary was right when he said that cancer survival should not come down to who won the lottery of life. I urge the Government to heed his words and act with urgency to end the dental deserts, restore children's services before a generation grows up without routine care, and rebuild the services that catch those cancers early and save lives.

Lastly, on Ukrainian dentists who could be working for the NHS, will the Minister acknowledge their qualifications and allow them to practice here? The current situation is ridiculous, with a professor of dentistry in my area, for example, reduced to working as a dental assistant.

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

9.36 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): The phrases “dental desert” and “DIY dentistry” are becoming so normalised that it is easy to forget the human cost behind those terms. In 2025, over 5 million children did not see a dentist at all. Some 60% of adults have also not seen a dentist in at least the two years prior to June 2025. Barriers to accessing NHS dental care remain higher than ever, with workforce shortages, limited NHS capacity and geographical isolation creating an unjust postcode lottery.

Those challenges are often most acute in rural, coastal and deprived communities, as we have heard. The Darzi report found that these communities particularly lack access to NHS dentistry. Across much of rural England, including nearly the whole south-west and much of the east of England, there are fewer than 46 dentists per 100,000 people. Research conducted by the British Dental Association and the *Daily Mirror* found that 96% of dentists in England are refusing to take on new NHS patients—we heard that today. This dental desert is leaving millions without access to dental care, with dire consequences. There is a significant correlation between lower availability of NHS dental care and higher demand on already stretched accident and emergency departments.

Tooth decay is now the most common reason for hospital admission in children aged between six and 10 years. Between 2018 and 2024, over 100,000 children were admitted to hospital due to rotting teeth. This is utterly unacceptable. Our children deserve better.

A 2023 poll found that one in five people who failed to get an NHS dentist appointment turned to DIY dentistry. One dentist in Epsom and Ewell shared his distressing experiences with patients. He described how, in desperation, his patient had resorted to using a pair of pliers to extract teeth, filing down the sharp edges of a broken tooth, and even purchasing temporary dental cement to try to fill an open cavity. This is a not too uncommon story that we hear among our constituents. In a recent survey looking into why people resort to DIY dentistry, 36% of participants said that their pain was so severe they acted out of immediacy, 33% cited the high costs of private care, and 30% said it was the inability to get an NHS appointment. This is a national disgrace. We must fix it now.

The Labour Government have failed to take meaningful action. Their announcement in March to expand dental training schools amounts to only an extra 50 training

[Helen Maguire]

places in real terms. It is a step in the right direction, but it is still a mere drop in the ocean. Even the previous Conservative Government, with their disastrous record on the NHS, overseeing waiting lists of up to 7.6 million, had more ambition. They committed to increasing the number of NHS dental training places by 24% by 2028-29 and 40% by 2031-32. Funding on their watch did fall by 16%, but they did have ambition. To make matters worse, Labour has also quietly dropped its manifesto pledge to deliver 700,000 more dental appointments, having delivered only around 100,000 urgent dental appointments so far. Labour also claims that the integrated care boards have commissioned over 1 million appointments, but commissioning appointments is different from actually delivering them.

The Liberal Democrats are clear: we must take urgent and decisive action. We would implement a £750 million dental rescue plan that would guarantee access to an NHS dentist for all who need urgent and emergency care, which would end the dental desert and DIY dentistry. We would also introduce an emergency scheme to guarantee access to free NHS dental check-ups for children, new mothers, those who are pregnant and those on low incomes. In addition, we would provide guaranteed appointments for all those needing a dental check prior to undergoing surgery, chemotherapy or a transplant. Will the Labour Government implement those calls?

The issues with NHS dentistry cannot be solved with those measures alone. We must also urgently reform the current dental contract, which is fundamentally unfit for purpose, to stop the exodus of NHS dentists and increase access to NHS dentistry. The current system effectively sets quotas on the number of patients a dentist can see on the NHS, as dentists are commissioned to deliver a set number of units of dental activity, or UDAs. The system pays dentists vastly different prices per UDAs delivered, with some practices receiving £30 for each UDA, while others receive over £50 for the identical work.

One dentist constituent of mine told me about his practice's commitment to providing NHS dentistry, but because of the UDA formula, he is compensated the same regardless of whether he fits one or five crowns in a patient. That means that his practice is having to subsidise the high overhead costs, including laboratory fees, to provide those vital NHS services. As a result, his practice is reliant on private dental services as a source of income, without which the business would not be able to survive. That model of NHS dentistry is simply not fit for purpose, and the impact of this system across the UK is undeniable.

While the number of dentists registered to provide care in the UK is at an all-time high of nearly 48,000, having increased by 17% in the last decade, the number of dentists working in the NHS is falling. In England the total number of dentists doing some NHS work is only around 25,000, while the number of full-time equivalent NHS dentists is just 10,727. English dentists have the lowest commitment to NHS dentistry across the UK. Only 38% of them spend at least three quarters of their time on NHS work, compared with 59% in Scotland, 45% in Wales and 39% in Northern Ireland.

In April, Labour announced a consultation on reform of the dental contract, which is due before this summer. But with a new Defence Secretary, a by-election, a potential

leadership contest and possibly a new Prime Minister, this Government are clearly distracted. Those distractions cannot be allowed to delay reform of the contract. Any delay risks the prospect of rolling out a new contract in this Parliament, which is what the country needs and what the Government have promised. Will the Labour Government commit to ensuring that the consultation on the dental contract will take place before this summer as previously stated?

The Liberal Democrats would fix the broken NHS dental contract, using flexible commissioning to better meet patient needs. That would also bring dentists back from the private sector to the NHS. We would also increase the number of dentist training places in the UK and continue to recognise the qualifications of EU trained dentists. NHS dentistry is in crisis and we must act now. Through the implementation of Liberal Democrat policies, people would be able to access the NHS dental treatments they need, ending dental deserts and DIY dentistry once and for all.

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

9.43 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Members for Yeovil (Adam Dance), Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) and Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay), and my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford), on securing this important debate. Madam Deputy Speaker, I once read that nothing you wear is more important than your smile, because it is your smile, and the laughter that comes with it, that brings joy and happiness to the world. In that spirit, I start by acknowledging some progress that this Government have made.

The previous Conservative Government began establishing dental schools in Norwich and Portsmouth, to bring the next generation of dentists, hygienists and dental therapists to local people. We started fixing the roots of dental education, and I am pleased that this Government have continued that, allocating 25 training places to each of those schools. That is of course good news.

As the Minister will know, it has been a long-standing campaign of mine to get a dental school in Lincoln. Excellent progress has been made so far, with the hub-and-spoke model to help rural areas, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) described. The team at the University of Lincoln are just waiting for the final sign off from the General Dental Council and the Privy Council. I am hoping that there will soon be places for Lincolnshire in the plans for dental education.

To help bolster NHS dentistry, in 2024 the Conservative Government consulted on proposals to require dental graduates to work in the NHS for three years after qualifying. This Government's 10-year plan committed to that policy, but I think we are waiting for a consultation to set out the proposals in greater detail. Can the Minister tell us whether it is still the Government's intention to introduce tie-ins to NHS dentistry for dental graduates and when the proposals will be in place?

As the Liberal Democrat spokeswoman, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), said, the previous Conservative Government committed to expanding dentistry training places by 40% over 15 years,

and, despite population growth, there are still more dentists per 100,000 people than there were in 2009. This Government's workforce plan should lay out how many dentists, hygienists and therapists we need to recruit, and how the Government are going to do it. Unfortunately, that workforce plan was due last year, before being delayed until spring '26. It is now summer '26. In response to a recent question, the Minister said that it was due imminently, which I am sure is quicker than "soon" and much quicker than "in due course". If the Minister has time to define "imminently", I would be most grateful.

It is not all about numbers. As the Minister himself has said, the issue is not the number of dentists, but the paucity of dentists who are doing NHS work. There is a case for making the NHS more attractive to dentists in the first place, as we know that dentists are disincentivised from working in the NHS. The main problem with that, as many have identified, is the contract created under the previous Labour Government in 2006. This has been a problem for some time; when I moved to Lincolnshire in the early 2000s, I remember travelling back to Redcar to see my wonderful NHS dentist, Mr Dixon, until he retired.

There are several issues with the units of dental activity model in the contract. First, the units fluctuate bizarrely between practices, creating inequities in payment. Secondly, the UDA does not really equate with the real-time cost of delivering complex care. Thirdly, the UDA does not always cover the costs of care, meaning that dentists may be asked to provide some NHS care at a loss.

The Conservatives started to change those issues by raising the minimum UDA payment and giving care commissioners the tools they needed to address UDA rates locally to better support delivery of care for patients. The former Secretary of State said that he would sort it by meeting the BDA on day one, and I believe that he did in fact meet the BDA straightaway, but there seems to have been little progress since. In April, the Minister promised that a consultation on fundamental contract reform would launch before the summer, but we are now in June—can the Minister say when that will be ready? Does he expect to reform the dental contract in this Parliament, as he promised? The Government are focusing a lot of resources on abolishing NHS England and have cut ICB budgets by 50%. Are they so focused on restructuring that promises to patients are not getting delivered?

Speaking of delivery, the Government promised 700,000 urgent dental appointments and commissioned 1 million. In March, however, they admitted that just 100,000 additional urgent appointments had been taken up. I am aware of some dentists who are staffing appointments on call, on an in-case basis, so how many unattended appointments did the Government pay for? The Minister has now broadened his definition of urgent, but is he confident that we will have the urgent need met, and that it will not be crowded out by his broader definition?

We have heard much about children's teeth. In 2015, 42,209 children were admitted to hospital to have dental extractions due to decayed teeth; by 2024, that had fallen to 30,567—a drop, but still far too many. In 2025, however, that number rose to nearly 34,000. The previous Government introduced a Big Brush Club in south-west England, and I note that was the only region to have a

reduced number of admissions in the year 2024-25 for decay extraction. What has the Minister made of that programme? How does the Government's programme differ from the Big Brush programme? Children need their teeth brushing during the holidays, at weekends and in the evenings—how is the Minister working on ensuring that parents deliver on their responsibilities then? It is indeed their responsibility to ensure that their children brush their teeth twice a day.

The Government's 10-year plan rightly focuses on prevention, and one important preventive measure is the fluoridation of the water supply. The Government's "Water fluoridation: health monitoring" report in 2026 found that children living in areas with a fluoridation scheme had a 20% lower incidence of tooth extractions. Will the Minister say what he is doing to explore expanding water fluoridation to help eliminate tooth decay?

Dentistry is important, because good oral health is not just about our teeth, mouth and gums. Research published in *The Lancet* reports a growing body of evidence suggesting that oral health is closely associated with conditions such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes and Alzheimer's. One's dentist may also identify symptoms of Peutz-Jeghers syndrome, Sjögren's syndrome, nutritional deficits, Crohn's disease and oral cancers.

Delivering on NHS dentistry is important for our wider health too, but so far it feels as though the Government have been all smiles but little action when it comes to making NHS dentistry work for everyone. I hope that the Minister and his new Secretary of State will not seek to blame others, but instead recognise that they now have the levers in their hands—indeed, they have had them in their hands for nearly two years now—and use them to address these concerns, and quickly.

9.49 pm

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): I congratulate the hon. Members for Yeovil (Adam Dance), for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) and for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) on securing this important debate.

When we came into office, we inherited an appalling situation not just in dentistry but right across my primary, community and social care portfolio. The last Government tinkered at the edges—for example, taxpayers footed the bill for their new patient premium to the tune of £126 million, but it had no impact on patients, so we cancelled it as a total waste of time and money. What is more, the previous Government utterly failed to reform the contract, to set up any new training schools or to expand any training places. I am afraid that the end result is this Dickensian state of affairs, where people have been resorting to DIY dentistry and tooth decay is the No. 1 cause of hospital admission for children aged five to nine. Once again, it therefore falls to a Labour Government to fix the problem, and our job is twofold: to get NHS dentistry back on its feet and to make it fit for the future.

We will continue the shift to prevention by backing supervised tooth brushing, water fluoridation, and healthy food and drink for children. We will be consulting on long-term reforms to the dental contract. We have been cracking on with our plan for change to end the misery faced by hundreds of thousands of people unable to get urgent care. To start with, we are on track to have delivered more than 2.5 million additional dental treatments

[Stephen Kinnock]

compared with the same period before the general election. Those have been delivered thanks to our work on cutting the underspend; in July 2024, we inherited shocking annual underspends in dentistry—money that the previous Government could not even get out of the door due to their sheer incompetence.

Sir Ashley Fox: The Minister will recall that when he wrote to me on 23 April, he confirmed that under Labour 4% fewer dental treatments were performed in Somerset than in the same period before the general election. If everything is so wonderful, why is dentistry in Somerset worse now under his watch than it was under the last Government?

Stephen Kinnock: Somerset is an outlier. There are significant problems in Somerset due to access to dentistry, for all the reasons we have talked about in this debate, which are particularly acute in Somerset. I have had calls with a senior official from the ICB there to try to figure out what is going on, because it is an outlier.

We have seen a reduction in the underspend of more than 90%, because under this Government, every penny allocated for NHS dentistry is being invested in NHS dentistry. We are committed to reforming the dental contract within this Parliament, with a focus on matching resources to need, improving access, promoting prevention, rewarding dentists fairly and ensuring that we use the skills of the whole dentistry family. We will publicly consult on future proposals. There is no such thing as a perfect payment model. We are not rushing these changes, because the dental system is complex and we have to get this right.

Adam Dance: I thank the Minister for all his replies to my questions. Can he give me a timescale for when the contract will change? He also mentioned to the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) that Somerset is an outlier, so will he take me up on an offer to visit Somerset?

Stephen Kinnock: I thank the hon. Member for that. As I have said, the contract will be reformed within this Parliament. I would be happy to receive a letter or representations from him with a suggestion along the lines he just set out.

In the meantime, while we are working on long-term reform, our 2026 reform package includes a range of elements, but here are the three highlights. First, we have embedded urgent dental care into NHS practices, making it easier for patients to get support when they need it most. Secondly, dentists can now receive higher payments for treating patients who need urgent care. That means they have extra incentives to provide urgent care on the NHS for issues such as severe pain, infections or dental trauma. Thirdly, from this month, those requiring complex care, such as treatment for severe gum disease or decay in multiple teeth, will be able to schedule a single, planned package of treatment and pay one patient charge for that, rather than having several courses of treatment. That could save them up to £200 a year—that is money going straight back into the pockets of working people.

Sir Julian Lewis: Does the Minister accept that there is a high degree of unanimity in all parts of the House about this terrible situation? Does he also accept that the British Dental Association traces this back to the 2006 contract? What it wants to know is: when are the formal negotiations on a new contract going to begin, and what is the date of the Minister's deadline to introduce the new system in the lifetime of this Parliament, as promised in his general election manifesto?

Stephen Kinnock: I suspect that the entire country blames the situation far more on the 14 years of neglect and incompetence from the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.

We are absolutely committed to delivering a domestic pipeline of dentists. That is vital, but we know that it will take time, so to address the immediate workforce challenge, we have reformed the General Dental Council's exam process for fully qualified dentists from overseas, so that they can register to practice in the UK. Thanks to the action we have taken, over 2,000 extra dentists per year will be registered every year from 2028. They are generally already living here and waiting for the opportunity to get accredited and start practising; they are being blocked only by the uselessness of the previous Government.

We are absolutely committed to making sure that we are training for the future. That is why we have announced the accreditation of two new dental schools, at Portsmouth and the University of East Anglia, and I am delighted to say that each has been allocated 25 new places per year from 2027. This is the first sustained expansion of new dental school places in nearly 20 years, driven forward by this Government and backed by £11 million per annum. There will be a new generation of dentists, training in state-of-the-art facilities.

While I was on my visit to Portsmouth, I told students that this Government would back them once they graduated. Our proposals from December will see better support for staff, with improved access to discretionary payments such as long-term sick pay, funding for annual appraisals, support for career development, and clearer guidance about their benefits and contracts. At the same time, we will now make it a requirement for newly qualified dentists to practice in the NHS for a minimum period, intended to be at least three years. We are laying the foundations of dentistry recovery. We have put a floor under the decline that began in 2010.

Tessa Munt: I cannot understand why we have to wait an extra year to introduce that provision. It will take three years, while those students are in college, for it to actually kick in, will it not? I am wondering why the Minister does not introduce the measure in September this year, with the new dental students.

Stephen Kinnock: It is because we have to work out, particularly with employment lawyers, exactly how the modalities of a three-year tie-in would work. It does impinge on employment law, so careful thought and consultation is required; it will kick in for the 2027-28 academic year.

We cannot repair 14 years of neglect and incompetence overnight, but this Government have begun the process of rebuilding NHS dentistry, including through reforms to the dental contract that prioritise patients with the

greatest needs. We are taking important steps towards improving access in dental deserts and rural areas, and delivering a better deal for dentists. We are bolstering the workforce with thousands more dentists, delivering more dental school places in underserved areas, and reinvesting nearly £400 million back into NHS dentistry, thanks to our work on the underspend. We are also on the path to delivering 2.5 million additional courses of treatment compared with the same period before the general election.

None of this happens by magic. It is thanks to the decisive action and hard work of this Government. And this is just the beginning. As I have stated many times at this Dispatch Box, I am personally committed to consulting on and delivering fundamental reform of the dental contract by the end of this Parliament, but I make no apology for taking time to get this right. The issues are complex and there is no consensus on the perfect approach. I will continue to work with the sector to understand its concerns, and to listen to patients, and I will ensure that the contract reforms we have introduced this year are just the start of building an NHS dental system of which we can all be proud.

9.59 pm

Adam Dance: It is late; I will be quick, so that we can all go home, brush our teeth and get some sleep. I thank everyone for their contributions to the debate, my co-sponsors—the hon. Members for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson), for Waveney Valley (Adrian Ramsay) and for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford)—and the Minister, who I hope will follow up on what we have discussed today.

I will leave the House with my survey results again: 100% of dentists in Yeovil constituency and 82% of the public are not happy with the progress that this Government have made on fixing NHS dentistry. Let us roll up our sleeves, work across parties and finally get it fixed.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House is concerned about NHS dentistry; notes that over a quarter of a million people have signed a petition calling for urgent action to save NHS dentistry and make it fit for the 21st century; regrets that nearly 14 million people were unable to access NHS dentistry in England in 2025; welcomes the Government's commitment to both tackle and rebuild dentistry for the long term; and calls on the Government to set out a clear timetable for the fundamental reform of the NHS dental contract, and to improve retention of NHS dentists and access for patients across the country.

Carbon Capture Pipeline Projects: Cheshire

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

10 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): I am grateful for today's Adjournment debate on the proposed carbon capture and storage project Peak Cluster, and the implications it could have for communities, landowners, farmers and the countryside across Cheshire and neighbouring counties. The proposed pipeline route cuts through my Chester South and Eddisbury constituency, and so directly impacts constituents in the wards of Christleton and Huntington, Bunbury, Tattenhall and Tarporley.

I have been inundated with correspondence from local people raising significant concerns. I have launched a local survey to gather views, and have received hundreds of responses, which are overwhelmingly in opposition to the project. I will share those concerns to ensure that the voices of people in Chester South and Eddisbury are heard, and will set out why I oppose the Peak Cluster pipeline project.

Let me take a moment to explain what this debate is not about. I am not opposed to reducing emissions, investing in and developing new technology to decarbonise and protect our environment, or making British industry and energy-intensive sectors such as cement and lime production more carbon efficient. However, there is a right and a wrong way to do that, and this must not be done to the detriment of communities across Cheshire, the British taxpayer, who will ultimately foot the bill, or our countryside and rural landscape, which are central to Cheshire's identity. Nor should it be to the detriment of the sectors, particularly agriculture, that we rely on in our local economy. I will touch on these matters in explaining why the project is the wrong choice for Cheshire.

First, it would be useful for me to lay out some of the facts and figures around the project, so that the House better understands what we are talking about. The Peak Cluster project is a proposed carbon capture and storage scheme that is designed to capture carbon dioxide emissions from cement and lime works across Derbyshire and Staffordshire. Carbon dioxide would be captured at industrial sites, compressed, and transported through around 200 km of pipeline running through parts of Cheshire and neighbouring counties, before being sent offshore for permanent storage in depleted gas fields beneath the Irish sea.

On a very simple level, that is what this project is about, and theoretically it sounds positive. Carbon capture and storage will have a part to play in the decarbonisation of industries. Some argue that the project will save the cement and lime production industry, and ultimately help to make the UK greener. Those are noble causes with which I can agree in principle. However, for too long, we have taken a theoretical, hypothetical and ideological approach to reducing emissions, at the cost of energy security, economic growth and the bills that people pay. Through this debate, I will demonstrate that the costs of the project significantly outweigh the benefits. A project on such an enormous scale and of such consequence must not move forward while fundamental questions remain unanswered.

[*Aphra Brandreth*]

Let me turn to the economics of the project. Peak Cluster was established several years ago and became a limited company following significant investment in 2025. We are told that around £60 million has already been committed to bringing the project to its current stage, including substantial support from the National Wealth Fund, contributions from cement and lime producers, and investment from overseas infrastructure interests; yet we are also told that delivering the project could ultimately require investment in the region of £5 billion. That is a seriously significant amount of capital. As we know from previous national infrastructure projects, that will almost certainly not be the final total bill. It will grow. The cost will spiral, and ultimately the timeline will extend—and who will pay for this? It will be the taxpayer who ultimately foots the bill.

At a time when every area of public expenditure is rightly subject to scrutiny, when energy bills are already soaring, and when public finances remain under pressure, we should be asking hard questions about whether this represents the best and most effective route to decarbonisation. I would argue that it does not. The business model appears heavily dependent on carbon pricing mechanisms and Government policy. Indeed, the fundamental incentive for producers to pay for carbon capture and storage rests upon the existence of carbon costs, which make emitting carbon dioxide increasingly expensive. That raises a number of important questions that I hope the Minister can help with in his remarks. What assumptions have been made about future carbon prices? Is the project economically viable at today's carbon price, or does it depend upon the hope that the price will rise significantly over time? What assessment has been made of the risks, should future Governments alter or repeal elements of the emissions trading framework? Perhaps most importantly, what is the total potential expenditure for taxpayers?

My constituents deserve a clear and straightforward answer on that point because, ultimately, what does Cheshire gain from this project? The carbon dioxide is not being captured in Cheshire; the cement and lime works are not located in Cheshire; and the principal industrial benefits are not accruing to Cheshire. No jobs will be created and no industry will be brought to Cheshire, yet Cheshire's communities, farmers, landowners and countryside are expected to accommodate a substantial amount of infrastructure required to make the project possible. That understandably raises questions about fairness and whether the balance between costs and benefits has been properly considered. It will be for the Secretary of State, ultimately, to make the final decision on this project, and I hope that when he does, he will consider closely the impacts for Cheshire.

Peak Cluster's supporters argue that the project will help preserve the UK's cement and lime industries, safeguard industrial jobs and contribute towards our net zero ambitions. Those are serious objectives and deserve to be taken as such. Of course, Cheshire is a patriotic county, and we would not be selfishly against the national interest; however, I do not think the project is clearly in the national interest. There is a broader strategic question: even if we accept the need to decarbonise cement production, and I do, are we investing in the right solution?

John Whitby (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): The hon. Lady asks what is in it for the residents of Cheshire. The scheme—if it goes ahead, of course—will capture 3 million tonnes of carbon every year. That is the equivalent of a quarter of all the emissions from the counties of Derbyshire and Staffordshire every year, so that is a benefit for the residents of Cheshire, as it is for the residents of Derbyshire and everyone else's constituencies in the country. Does she agree?

Aphra Brandreth: The point that I am getting to in my speech is that, yes, there are things that are in the national interest, but is this really the best use of investment to get the most effective outcome? The question is whether spending £5 billion on a pipeline really is the best way to safeguard the future of this industry and to improve the environment. Peak Cluster's central proposition is that we should continue producing cement broadly as we do today, and then capture, compress, transport and store the resulting emissions. That requires capture facilities, compression stations, hundreds of kilometres of pipeline, offshore storage infrastructure and—by the project's own admission—significant public and private investment. Yet across the United Kingdom and internationally, alternative low-carbon cement technologies are advancing rapidly. One notable example can be found just a short distance from my constituency in Wrexham, where Material Evolution has developed an ultra-low carbon cement manufacturing process, which uses industrial by-products and innovative production techniques to avoid many of the emissions associated with traditional cement production. The company states that its process can reduce emissions by up to 85%, compared with conventional Portland cement processes. Importantly, this is not simply a laboratory experiment, but a commercial-scale operation already supplying the construction industry.

Some supporters of Peak Cluster make a fair point when they argue that some emerging technologies remain limited in scale and cannot yet meet all future demand. That may well be true today, but the issue for the Minister, and for us in this House, is not simply what works today, but what will work over the next 20, 30 and 40 years. Carbon capture seeks to manage emissions after they have been produced. These emerging technologies seek to avoid producing the emissions in the first place. That distinction matters. We should not be rushing to a solution, because surely prevention is better than cure. That means supporting emerging low-carbon cement technologies, building on the expertise of local engineering firms that can look for innovative solutions, and expanding access to reliable, low-carbon energy through technologies such as small modular reactors.

We should be encouraging a range of solutions that can deliver lower emissions, stronger industry and greater energy resilience for the future. Before committing to a project of this scale, the Government should demonstrate that they have properly assessed alternative low-carbon cement technologies, and have compared their costs and benefits with those of the carbon capture and storage infrastructure proposed by Peak Cluster. I would welcome the Minister's views on that.

Another theme that emerges time and again in correspondence with residents is their frustration, not simply with the project but with the process surrounding it. Many constituents feel that decisions are being made

before local communities have had a meaningful opportunity to engage. Infrastructure projects on this scale can succeed only when communities have confidence that they are being listened to, and that their concerns have the potential to influence outcomes. Consultation is not just about informing; it is about listening and taking on board what is said.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab): The hon. Member is giving a very balanced presentation of the differing views and arguments, and she hits on a really important point: a number of residents feel that this consultation is not really a consultation, and that the decisions have already been made. We should all be united in urging Peak Cluster to raise its game on this.

Aphra Brandreth: I thank the hon. Member for giving way. As a fellow Cheshire MP, he will understand how important this is to all our constituents. Their views must be heard loud and clear.

I am holding a public meeting with Peak Cluster this Friday, so that its representatives can hear directly my constituents' concerns. I want to recognise the fact that Peak Cluster has engaged with me and local stakeholders. While people have strong views on this issue, I was disappointed to hear concerns shared by the company relating to some abrasive behaviour directed towards its staff. That is clearly unacceptable, and I urge people to engage in respectful debate.

I believe that there is a strong case for greater public engagement before any final decisions are taken. Confidence in this project will come not from technical documents, but from meaningful dialogue with the residents, farmers and landowners who are most affected.

Turning to the environmental and agricultural concerns, Peak Cluster has emphasised that the project aims to deliver biodiversity net gain. Representatives have explained that more trees would be planted than removed, and that habitats would be restored following construction. Those commitments are welcome. However, the reality is that the project will leave a negative footprint on Cheshire, no matter what efforts are made to mitigate it. Ancient and historic woodland cannot be recreated overnight. The hedgerows that have lined Cheshire's fields for generations cannot be replaced overnight. Prime agricultural land used for grazing or arable farming will be affected.

Many responses to my survey have questioned whether sufficient weight is being given to the environmental value of the countryside through which the proposed route may pass. It seems to me that tearing up the Cheshire countryside is not an environmentally sound response to an environmental problem.

Alongside concerns about the natural environment, many constituents have also raised questions about safety. They have pointed to incidents involving carbon dioxide pipelines overseas, and asked what lessons have been learned from those experiences. I recognise that the United Kingdom operates under a robust regulatory framework, and that direct comparisons with incidents elsewhere are not always appropriate. Nevertheless, these concerns are understandable. In a letter to me, the Minister said that the Health and Safety Executive has carried out a public consultation on proposals to extend

major hazard legislation to that sector, to strengthen further the regulatory framework. Can he provide more detail on that?

I now wish to focus on farmers and landowners. Cheshire relies heavily on the agricultural sector for its economy, and if this project is to go ahead, it is essential that it listens to the voices of farmers. I have spoken to the National Farmers' Union, and drawing on those conversations, and well as its consultation, it is clear that serious concerns remain unanswered. For example, consideration must be given to the lifespan of the project, and to whether its benefits truly justify the potential damage to productive agricultural land. Farmers have asked for firm assurances that the pipeline will carry only carbon dioxide, with no future shift to other gases such as hydrogen. They have asked how the agreed 1.2-metre pipe depth will be monitored over time to ensure that it does not rise and compromise farming operations or safety. They have asked for clarity on how biodiversity net gain will be delivered, including whether any additional land required will be secured voluntarily through fair negotiation with landowners. Can the Minister guarantee today that there will be no compulsory purchase of land to deliver this project?

Ultimately, at a time when our farmers and rural businesses are under significant pressure, there must be measures to protect their livelihoods and not add further strain, safeguarding day-to-day operations and addressing practical realities such as the movement of cattle between grazing and milking. Those questions need to be answered, as do many more regarding environmental, ecological and agricultural concerns. It is not just farmers who will be affected, but angling clubs, fisheries and many others. If the Secretary of State is to have the final decision on this project, it is important that the Minister can assure my constituents that a fair hearing will be given to their concerns, because too often the rural voice is ignored.

We can all agree across the House that reducing carbon emissions is a noble cause, but at what expense? A £5 billion price tag that will no doubt increase, huge disruption across Cheshire, economic cost with no benefit for our communities, and our landscape, beautiful countryside and prime agricultural land damaged and depleted from its original state. The arguments, in my opinion and that of my constituents, and people across Cheshire, speak clearly that this project is not suitable, practical, cost-effective or forward thinking, and I firmly oppose it.

No one disputes the need to reduce emissions, or the importance of supporting British industry. No one disputes the need to find practical ways to decarbonise sectors such as cement and lime production. But surely we have a duty to ask whether a £5 billion project requiring hundreds of kilometres of pipeline across our countryside, backed by significant public support and carrying profound implications for farmers, landowners and local communities, is truly the most effective route available.

My constituents are not asking for special treatment, and they are not rejecting innovation or opposing environmental progress; they are asking for evidence that the project represents the best option. They are asking for transparency about the costs and risks, and for honesty about the impact on our countryside and rural economy. They are asking whether sufficient consideration has been given to emerging alternatives that may reduce emissions at source, rather than requiring

[Aphra Brandreth]

the construction of major carbon transport infrastructure. Above all, they are asking that decisions that could affect their communities for generations are not taken before those questions have been properly answered. I therefore urge the Minister to address the concerns I have raised, and to provide reassurances not only to my constituents, but to all communities across Cheshire who feel that their voices must be heard.

10.19 pm

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): I congratulate the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) on securing the debate and on her work gathering her constituents' views. I genuinely welcome the tone that she has taken. As a personal reflection, I miss the fact that a great many subjects that we used to debate in this place used to be debated in that tone, with a genuine desire to get the right outcome, with a bit less heat and a bit more substance. I hope that we can get back to that in debates about the energy sector.

I will come to the points raised by the hon. Lady in a moment. I recognise that the project she mentioned has a lot of interest from her constituents, as well as those in neighbouring constituencies, but it is part of the wider carbon capture industry in the UK, so before I come to those specific points, I will take a moment to explain our wider position on carbon capture.

Carbon capture, usage and storage will decarbonise industry and power in a way that drives economic growth and supports jobs, as well as our climate goals. Through CCUS we can produce flexible, low-carbon power, displacing the use of unabated gas when renewable energy sources such as solar and wind are not available. CCUS will be critical. I welcome the hon. Lady's recognition that our pathway to reducing our carbon emission matters, and that the route we take to get there matters as well. In our view, carbon capture plays a part in that.

I was reflecting on the commitment by previous Governments to this. The shadow Energy Secretary, the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), put it very well in December 2023, when she was the Energy Secretary:

"Thanks to the UK's geology, skills and infrastructure, we are in a unique position to lead the way on carbon capture technologies." I welcome those comments because they set out the right approach to take, but I think there are now some new ideas among Conservative Front Benchers.

CCUS at home is one part of the story, but the story is also about how we export that technology and expertise abroad. McKinsey recently forecast that the global investment in the industry could be worth up to £135 billion by 2035. We want the UK to be at the forefront of that and to capture as much of that potential as possible. We have several advantages that make us well placed to take that forward. Our first clusters in the UK are projected to support an average of 4,800 direct jobs, while the sector as a whole can deliver up to 50,000 jobs and £2.8 billion of gross value added by 2050, and includes jobs included in north-west England and north Wales.

The question of how we reduce emissions from cement has been referenced. The HyNet cluster, which I visited a few months ago, and Padeswood cement works are examples of projects that are moving forward where

carbon capture technology not only reduces our emissions and creates jobs in the process, but protects jobs at the cement works that have been rooted in that community for decades. This is about protecting our industrial base as well as building what we need for the future. Although I welcome the hon. Lady's important point about low-carbon cement, this is not an either/or situation. There should be a place for innovation. Where we see technological solutions coming forward, we should support them as much as possible. I agree with her point about prevention being better than cure, but we also need to protect the industries that we have and the jobs that go with them. I hope that we can do both.

I welcome the chance to talk about the specifics of the Peak Cluster project, which the hon. Lady particularly wants to talk about. I also welcome the conversations that I have had with a number of other hon. Members over the past few months on this issue. My hon. Friends the Members for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), for Chester North and Neston (Samantha Dixon), for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), for Ellesmere Port and Bromborough (Justin Madders), for Derbyshire Dales (John Whitby), for High Peak (Jon Pearce), for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick), who joins me on the Front Bench, and the Mayor of the East Midlands, Claire Ward, have all raised questions, some very similar to those raised by the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury. They are legitimate questions about how we ensure that safety is a paramount consideration—

Several hon. Members rose—

Michael Shanks: I will take interventions in a moment—I have clearly started something. The major thrust of the hon. Lady's speech was about how the voices of communities are heard in the consultation process.

Justin Madders: I am grateful to the Minister for acknowledging that a number of colleagues have contacted him about this issue. In particular, I will speak on behalf of my Wirral colleagues, including my hon. Friends the Members for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick), for Birkenhead (Alison McGovern) and for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle). None of them are able to participate in the debate because of their Government positions, but they have been engaging, as the Minister says. One of the things they are quite keen to emphasise is the allegation that the Government have already made a decision on this matter because the National Wealth Fund has supported this particular project. Will the Minister address that?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The National Wealth Fund is independent in the decisions it makes. It has clearly made decisions based on the Government's ambitions on carbon capture, but on this particular project it made investment independent of my Department, which has not made any funding commitments to the Peak project. That should be seen as just a decision for the National Wealth Fund and not as any wider support from the Government at this stage.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): As the Minister will know, the proposed route runs through Macclesfield, so I have a number of constituents and communities who are concerned about it. They have questions that we

should accept in good faith—questions about the route, about public safety, which the Minister is coming to, and about the environmental impact. Does he agree that they deserve proper and full answers to those questions? There should be a proper and full consultation.

Michael Shanks: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I will come on to that point. I appreciate the importance of consultation, but I thought the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury put it very well. Consultation is not a briefing exercise; it is a listening exercise, and a reshaping of things on the basis of what we hear back. I will say more about that in just a moment.

Let me be really clear about how this project is being developed. The Peak project is being developed independent of Government and is at an early stage. It is crucial that developers engage fully with local communities as they develop the proposals, and they will have to work towards introducing a proposal into the planning system. I have been very clear with developers directly that the project has to take local views into account and offer clear benefits to local communities. If that does not happen, the submission will simply not be taken forward. I am aware that proposals have received a number of local stories in the press and that a public petition has received many signatures.

Let me echo something that the hon. Lady said. There is a way to engage in this process. Robust comments are important, as people care deeply about these things, but abuse targeted at either those involved in the project or hon. Members is not a productive way to take this work forward. I hope that there will be a process in which people feel they can genuinely participate.

As I understand it, the Peak Cluster has plans for more extensive consultation later this year, before any final proposals are made. No decision has been made by the Government either to support the project or on the development consent order process, which will be completed

once the proposal is submitted and will be completed in the way that these processes always are—in a quasi-judicial way, by the Secretary of State.

Let me respond to a couple of specific challenges raised in the debate. On safety, it is really important to make the case to the public that carbon capture is a very tried-and-tested technology that has been deployed across industry and power generation at scale for a long time. Geological carbon dioxide storage has been in operation for decades, and Norway has stored CO₂ since 1996, with more than 20 million tonnes stored so far. Our regulatory regime rightly has to raise the safety levels to ensure that continues.

The hon. Lady raised a number of other points, which I will happily pick up with her in more detail, but let me make a final point in closing. We want to be a Government who drive forward on reducing our carbon emissions and build the technologies of the future, but we do not govern by diktat. The views of local communities matter—they matter deeply to me, but also to the Secretary of State and to this process. The only way this works for everyone involved is if those views are taken seriously, and if communities feel that their views are taken seriously by all those involved. We must also all recognise the really important benefits that come from carbon capture and the pathway we are on as a Government. That is the balance that we seek to achieve as a Government—taking the views of local people seriously, but also building the infrastructure that this country needs for the future. I genuinely thank the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury for bringing this debate before the House, and my hon. Friends for contributing to it.

Question put and agreed to.

10.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 15 June 2026

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

State Pensioners: Personal Allowance

4.30 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk)
(Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 740671 relating to personal allowance for state pensioners.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I pay tribute to the petitioner, Tim Mason, and the 120,000 people who have signed the petition, including hundreds in my constituency in the Scottish Borders. I come to this debate with a simple starting principle: those who have worked hard throughout their life should have dignity and security in retirement.

Tim got in touch with me prior to the debate to explain why he created the petition. His story is worth sharing: he receives a pension from the Royal Mail of about £400 per month, but once he receives his state pension, that Royal Mail pension is reduced to about £290 per month. His motivation for starting the petition was that many other pensioners will undoubtedly find themselves in the same position, paying tax on relatively small pensions for which they have worked hard and saved throughout their life.

There are growing concerns that increasing numbers of pensioners are finding themselves liable to pay tax on their pensions. That is because the triple lock has increased the state pension year on year, while personal tax allowances have remained frozen. As a result, some pensioners are required to complete a self-assessment tax return, while others receive unexpected tax bills from HM Revenue and Customs. Many pensioners do not have substantial incomes and have limited savings; it can therefore be both distressing and deeply worrying for those hard-pressed pensioners to deal with tax demands. As the organisation Silver Voices has highlighted, taxing the state pension risks undermining the very principle of a retirement safety net, which was designed to ensure that people can afford life's basic necessities in retirement.

Pensioners face many other challenges too, such as higher heating and fuel bills. We cannot forget that it was this Labour Government who so cruelly stripped away the winter fuel allowance two years ago as one of their first acts in government. In Scotland, the SNP Government did the same. Although the partial U-turn last year was welcome, many pensioners spent a winter cold in their homes, and some pensioners still do not receive the support on which they had previously relied.

When the Conservatives came into office in 2010, the previous Labour Government had already subjected pensioners to a pension tax raid worth more than £100 billion, and had delivered a paltry 75p-per-week increase in the state pension. Improving the lives of pensioners had to be a priority, and that is why the triple lock was introduced. It was the right thing to do and, as the Leader of the Opposition has made clear, the Conservative party stands by it. The introduction of

the triple lock saw the basic state pension increase by £3,700 between 2010 and 2024. At the last general election, my Conservative colleagues and I stood on a manifesto commitment to introduce a “triple lock plus”, guaranteeing that the state pension and the tax-free personal allowance for pensioners would always rise by inflation, earnings growth or 2.5%, whichever was the highest.

A view has evolved among some people, particularly online, that pensioners are all wealthy and that they enjoy multiple holidays, drive expensive cars and own second homes that they rent out to younger generations. That may be true of a very small minority, but it is simply not the reality for the vast majority of pensioners, especially in my constituency in the Scottish Borders.

We should celebrate the fact that one of the landmark achievements of successive Governments over the past 30 years has been the reduction in pensioner poverty. There was a time not so long ago when 28% of pensioners lived in poverty. By 2024, that figure had fallen to just 12% for pensioner couples and 16% for pensioners overall. Poverty among pensioners is now lower than in any other age group in the United Kingdom. Many pensioners still struggle, however, and pensioner poverty is often the result of disadvantages that accumulate over a lifetime, long before retirement.

We can and must do much more to improve the lives of pensioners. These are changes that would benefit many other people in our country. Take stamp duty land tax, or land and buildings transaction tax in Scotland: many pensioners would like to downsize and move into a home that is better suited to their needs, particularly once their children have left home, but those taxes, which can amount to thousands of pounds, are one of the biggest barriers preventing them from moving on. We should therefore scrap stamp duty and LBTT entirely. Doing so would benefit the whole country, help pensioners to move into more suitable homes if they so wish and potentially free up capital and free up family homes for younger people seeking to get on the housing ladder.

Heating is one of the highest costs that pensioners face, and older people are often more exposed to rising energy costs. This Labour Government came to office promising to cut energy bills by £300, but household energy bills have risen by £294. We need to bring energy bills down, and we can do so by scrapping renewable energy subsidies, abolishing the carbon tax and cutting VAT on household energy bills. These measures would make a real difference to pensioners, helping them to keep more of the money they have worked hard for and saved throughout their life. They would deliver real, tangible benefits that would improve the lives of pensioners right now.

We should not and cannot forget the hard work and often the sacrifices that pensioners have made. They have worked hard and contributed to our society. I hope that the Minister will listen carefully to the concerns raised by the petitioner Tim Mason, as well as the thousands of people who have signed the petition.

The purpose of this debate is not simply to consider one particular proposal, but to consider the broader concern expressed by many pensioners about the interaction between the rising state pension, the frozen tax thresholds and the financial pressures that many older people continue to face. The triple lock has undoubtedly made a significant difference to pensioners' incomes. It remains

[John Lamont]

one of the most important reforms introduced by the previous Conservative Government: it has helped to improve financial security in retirement and has played an important role in reducing pensioner poverty.

Whether a separate personal allowance for pensioners is the right solution is a matter on which hon. Members may hold different views, but the petition demonstrates that these concerns are real and are shared by many people across the country. Pensioners have worked hard, paid their taxes, raised families, built communities and, in many cases, served or fought for our country. They deserve dignity, security and peace of mind in retirement. I look forward to the Minister's response to the important issues raised by Tim Mason, and the many thousands of people who have supported his petition.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Will Members please bob if they wish to speak? Okay—not the most popular debate. It usually goes back and forth, but by process of elimination, I call Alison Griffiths.

4.37 pm

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for opening this incredibly important debate, and I thank the Petitions Committee for scheduling it today.

I represent the communities of Rustington and East Preston, often described as the state pension capital of Britain. For them and for thousands of others across my Bognor Regis and Littlehampton constituency, this debate is not about Treasury spreadsheets or tax theory, but about their day-to-day finances and whether they feel the system is treating them fairly. They have worked hard and paid in throughout their life and are now looking at a situation in which the state pension continues to rise while tax thresholds remain frozen. They are asking a simple question: why are more and more pensioners being drawn into paying tax?

It is important to be clear about what sits behind that concern. The issue is not that pensioners have suddenly become wealthier; it is that frozen tax thresholds mean that the tax system reaches further into people's incomes each year. That is why people feel so frustrated. They see their state pension increase on paper, only to find more of it being taken by the taxman. It affects more than pensioners—workers, families and businesses are feeling the effects of frozen thresholds, too, and across the country more people are paying more tax despite no change in the headline rates—but pensioners often feel it particularly acutely because many are living on fixed incomes and have less flexibility to absorb the additional costs.

The Government regularly tell people that they have not increased income tax rates. However, pensioners, who are a savvy bunch, can see exactly what is happening. They do not need a Treasury briefing to understand where more of their income is being taxed each year. The Chancellor chose to extend the freeze in the personal allowance until 2031. That was a political choice. It means that more pensioners will continue to be drawn into the tax system year after year. Ministers cannot make that decision and then act surprised when pensioners ask questions about fairness.

What concerns me most is the uncertainty. Last year's Budget included an announcement that pensioners whose sole income is the state pension should not have to deal with small tax bills through the simple assessment process from 2027. Yet my constituents still do not know who will qualify, how the system will work, when the details will finally be published or how pensioners will be protected from unexpected tax demands. Those are reasonable questions, and people deserve answers.

There is also a broader principle at stake. At the previous general election, the Conservatives set out a different approach: we argued that the tax-free allowance for pensioners should keep pace with the state pension, so that people could benefit from rises in the state pension without constantly worrying that frozen thresholds would erode those gains. Whether or not Members agree with that approach, at least it sought to address the underlying problem. The Government's approach so far has been to extend the freeze, promise further details at some future point and ask pensioners to wait. My constituents deserve better. In Rustington, in East Preston and across Bognor Regis and Littlehampton, pensioners want clarity, fairness and above all a Government who recognise the contribution that they have made throughout their working life.

I am not here to write the Budget from Westminster Hall, but I am here to say very clearly that pensioners in my constituency should not find themselves paying more and more tax simply because thresholds remain frozen year after year. I hope that the Minister will provide some answers today.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) *rose*—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. It is at my discretion whether I allow you to speak, Sir John, as you were not here at the start of John Lamont's speech. Theoretically, I could be mean and say no, but I will be nice.

4.43 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am extremely grateful for your indulgence and generosity, Dr Huq. I wish to speak because I have enjoyed correspondence with the Minister at the Treasury Bench on exactly this subject on behalf of constituents who have written to me. Not only has he replied to me to address the concerns of my constituents, but so have his ministerial colleagues in the Treasury—such is the volume of my correspondence that it is too much for him alone to handle. It reflects the widespread concern among my constituents about the freezing of thresholds and the effect on pensioners, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths) has so admirably and ably highlighted.

At the heart of this matter is a fundamental principle, which is that we owe a particular and special debt to those who have given a lifetime's work to this nation. That is why a previous Government introduced what is known as the triple lock. I need not rehearse the argument for it at length today, except to say that in my judgment it is entirely legitimate and justified. Once it has been promised, it cannot be taken away—that is the political reality—but it has pushed more and more pensioners into taxation as thresholds have been frozen.

Each year, more pensioners pay tax who should never have paid tax at all. That is not an entirely new phenomenon: I remember my father, who had a small works pension, paying tax in his 80s. He has been dead for more than 20 years, but he said to me then, “I am 85 and still paying tax. Is that really appropriate?” My answer then, like my answer now, was no. It is not appropriate for people on relatively modest incomes to be drawn into tax because of the freezing of thresholds.

I endorse entirely what my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton said, but—with your further indulgence, Dr Huq—I want to make two other points. I want to make a case, as I have before in this very Chamber, for the WASPI women. Those women were caught out by a change in the provision of pensions due to an alteration in the age at which women retired. They have suffered an injustice; that is not just my consideration or judgment, but that of the ombudsman, who accused the Government of maladministration. Those women, too, deserve a hearing.

Before you call me to order, Dr Huq, and tell me that I am digressing from the subject at hand—

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): You have read my mind.

Sir John Hayes: My final point is that the Government have options to take and choices to make. Of course, pensions are funded from the welfare budget. There are those, perhaps including some Members on the Conservative Benches, who say that the triple lock is no longer sustainable. The Minister himself might have flirted with that idea in an earlier life when he was a thinker, not a doer—[*Interruption.*] No, he ran a think-tank. Now he is a man who does things; then, he was a man who only thought about doing things.

I take the view that the welfare budget is burgeoning because a large number of people of working age are claiming benefits, not because they are unable to work because they are profoundly disabled, infirm or otherwise incapacitated—for those people, I stand firm and do so proudly—but because they choose not to work and to let others work and pay tax, including those pensioners drawn into taxation by the freezing of thresholds. Pensioners have every right to ask why they should struggle, as many do; we know of pensioner poverty. I have the figures here: 2.2 million pensioners are in relative low income before housing costs, and 1.3 million are in relative low income after housing costs. We know that pensioners are struggling, and they will say, “Why should we do so when others, who could work, choose not to? Why have the Government failed to recognise that?”

Notwithstanding his change of status, I suspect the Minister still thinks seriously about these things from time to time, when he is not busy doing the other duties that are a necessary part of governing, including replying to my correspondence. I am sure he must have considered this issue in the broad-minded way for which I know he is famed. For heaven’s sake, let us raise thresholds. Let us protect pensioners. Let us cut welfare, but cut it wisely and reduce the benefits of those who choose not to help themselves. Welfare is a safety net, is it not? It should always be for those who cannot do without it.

With those few thoughts, I leave the matter to the wisdom of the Minister and to the remainder of the Chamber—but I stand firmly and squarely behind the very appropriate advocacy of my hon. Friend the Member

for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton for the pensioners in her constituency, and I stand with the pensioners in mine.

4.49 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. The Liberal Democrats have said clearly that we think it is both wrong and unfair that the Government have implemented a stealth tax grab that will hit some of the lowest-paid and most vulnerable the hardest, by maintaining a freeze on income tax thresholds that hits ordinary families, people on low incomes and the group we are discussing today: pensioners. An estimated 600,000 people were dragged into paying income tax for the first time this April, while a further 580,000 were pulled into the higher 40p rate.

Raising tax thresholds is the best and fairest way to cut taxes. Liberal Democrats would advocate that as a way to reduce income tax for everyone at every stage of life, taking the lowest-paid, including state pensioners, out of income tax altogether when public finances allow. When we were in government, we raised the personal allowance, taking millions of people out of income tax, putting money back into people’s pockets and helping ensure that work and hard-earned state pensions would pay.

By contrast, the Conservatives and Labour have frozen it again and again. That has left us in a position in which the state pension is nearly equal to the threshold. The full rate of the new state pension for 2026-27 is £240.30 a week, or £12,547.60 a year, while the standard personal allowance is £12,570 a year. It is an absolutely tiny gap.

The Chancellor has said that state pensioners will be exempt from paying income tax. We support that exemption, which is all well and good, but we need the Government to publish more information on how they are going to guarantee it if they continue their policy of freezing the tax threshold. With less than a year to go, people will understandably be worried. They urgently need clarity about which specific process they will have to follow and a cast-iron reassurance that they will not fall through the cracks.

Ultimately, stealth tax rises are not only dishonest with voters, but a completely inadequate and ineffective way for the Government to paper over the cracks in their economic plan. There is no better way to get the economy growing than to make everybody feel better off; the best way to balance the books is to grow our economy, and the quickest way to do that is to repair the damage of the terrible Brexit deal by negotiating a new UK-EU customs deal. A better trade deal would be a huge boost to our public finances, and the best and fairest way to end the crisis in the NHS, boost our defence capabilities and look to reduce the unfair tax burden that people have shouldered for the last few years.

The Liberal Democrats are clear that everyone deserves a chance to enjoy a decent retirement where they can live comfortably, whether in my Witney constituency or anywhere else in the country. We strongly opposed the Government’s decision to remove the winter fuel payments. We welcomed the Chancellor’s U-turn in that case, restoring payments to pensioners with incomes of £35,000 or less, but we continue to call on the Government to backdate payments to those who lost out and to confirm that the £35,000 threshold will be uprated with inflation each year.

[Charlie Maynard]

We were proud when in government to introduce the triple lock. It was desperately needed after years of the real value of the state pension falling, as was set out very well by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). We will always fight to guarantee that pensions keep pace with the cost of living. We want to develop measures to end the gender pension gap in private pensions and ensure that working-age carers can save properly for retirement. We would also like to see improvement to the state pension system by investing in helplines to ensure quicker resolution of underpayments, and an end to the scandal of lost top-up payments through an overhaul of the processing system and provision of proper receipts.

In summary, I urge the Government once again to reconsider the freeze on tax thresholds, which has dragged millions of people into paying more tax at a time when cost of living pressures are hitting people at all stages of life really hard. Raising the thresholds would ensure that pensioners, as well as working-age households, got a fairer deal. The Government should stop using stealth tax grabs to paper over the bigger issues in the economy and boost trade to get the economy moving, making everyone feel better off. Finally, I ask the Minister to spell out how he will ensure that people on the state pension are not dragged into paying income tax on it, so that we can give peace of mind to older people on low incomes.

4.54 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Thank you, Dr Huq, for your stewardship of this important debate. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for introducing the debate. Most importantly, I thank the 119,000 people who signed this petition, 247 of whom are from my constituency of Wyre Forest. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths) for also raising this issue, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) for bringing up the WASPI women, and the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard), who needs hearty congratulations on getting Brexit into this debate—well done to him.

This is a timely debate, and I agree with the wider point at the heart of the proposal that the petition seeks to address. We are all facing a higher tax burden thanks to this Government's choices and policies, and we are all really struggling with cost of living rises—again, thanks to this Government's tax choices on employment. Pensioners, instead of living with the dignity in retirement that they have worked so hard for and deserve, have a greater financial burden placed on them. Now we have the prospect of the Chancellor of the Exchequer floating more tax rises in the next Budget. That is deeply concerning for all of us, but especially for those on low incomes. I hope that this Minister, who played a key role in the last Budget, will be able to rule out tax rises in the next Budget at the Dispatch Box here today.

The thrust behind the petition is very clear, but first we must understand the historical context of how the pension system works. That context goes back over a century to 1921, when the Government of the time

struck a deal with future pensioners. The basis of that deal was that people could save money into a fund from untaxed earnings; the Treasury would contribute to that fund the tax that would otherwise have been paid. Then the fund would be allowed to grow without being subject to any tax during its lifetime. At the time of retirement, the fund would be used to provide an income for the pensioner but, importantly, that income would be treated as taxable income. It would be replacing the earnings that that individual would have been generating, had they still been in work. In 1946, when the state pension was introduced, that pension payout was to be subject to tax in exactly the same way that private pensions were back in 1921.

That system has remained unchanged ever since. The simple contract between the state and the pensioner has not changed at all since 1921. It is important to underline this point. Successive Governments maintain that a pension, whether state or occupational, is a form of income. Specifically, it is treated as a replacement for earnings. However, there have been breaks for pensioners, most notably the exemption from paying national insurance contributions. Today, a pensioner will be asked to pay income tax above the tax-free threshold, but they will not be asked to pay national insurance, as the working population do.

Where we can absolutely agree with the wider sentiment of the petition is that this Government are confusing the pension landscape. In their first 20 months, the Labour Government have not been the pensioner's best friend. Prior to the last Budget, the Chancellor flew a few kites about reducing the tax-free lump sum. That resulted in pensioners withdrawing £3.9 billion in one-off lump sums from their pensions between October 2024 and October 2025. That was an increase of nearly 30% on the year before. When the Budget was actually announced, the Chancellor raided unused pensions in her inheritance tax calculations—a policy that will bring more families into paying inheritance tax and will mean that fewer people can pass money on to their loved ones when they die.

However, this petition talks specifically about the personal allowance. The last Government made a decision to help those in the bottom decile of earnings by increasing the tax-free threshold at an accelerated rate. That helped pensioners as well as lower-earning people, and over time it brought the state pension to a level below that of the tax-free threshold. That has two benefits: first, there is no tax for state pensioners, and secondly there is no tax return to be filled in by state pensioners. But now this Government are choosing to freeze income tax thresholds until 2031, and the Government have extended the freeze because of their economic mismanagement.

The Chancellor, in her first Budget, stated:

“From 2028-29, personal tax thresholds will be uprated in line with inflation once again. When it comes to choices on tax, this Government choose to protect working people every single time.”—[*Official Report*, 30 October 2024; Vol. 755, c. 821.]

As I say, that was her first Budget. After promising to not extend the freeze—something we would have supported—she went back on her word and chose not to protect hard-working people. That matters to pensioners, because the state pension will soon rise above the income tax threshold due to the triple lock, which we all agree is a good thing to remedy the ills that happened when the

state pension fell to, I think, about 13% or 14% of average earnings. That means that pensioners will now have to start paying income tax on—[*Interruption.*] I am being heckled by the Minister.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. You are chuntering from a sedentary position, Minister.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): I will chunter from a standing position shortly.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Your time is near.

Mark Garnier: I am sure that the Minister will chunter intelligently at some point.

In our 2024 manifesto, the Conservative party proposed the triple lock plus to stop this problem happening. It would have exempted the state pension from income tax, as the threshold would have risen at the same rate as the triple lock. Now it seems that this Government might be considering using our policy, albeit in a slightly cack-handed way.

The Government have proposed that basic-rate state pensioners will not have to fill in a tax return, although this seems to be a specific sort of form-filling break for the over-67s rather than an actual hiking of the allowance. However, in a Treasury Committee hearing recently, a director at His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, Cerys McDonald, stated that the policy would be included in the next Finance Bill. She said:

“We will be working with the Treasury and Ministers to bring forward legislation to support the policy intent in the next Finance Bill.”

Of course, we welcome the Government effectively taking our policy and exempting those who are on a state pension, but we do not have any detail as to how this plan will work. Pensioners deserve clarity. Perhaps the Minister could confirm today that the proposals to which Cerys McDonald referred will be introduced.

It is not just policy that is blighting pensioners. *The Sunday Times* has highlighted that up to 8.7 million pensioners have been overcharged on their tax bill by an apparently careless taxman. That means that as much as £43.5 million was collected in error last year. I am pleased that HMRC is putting that right and that the fix should be finalised in the summer, but it has been working on this for a year. It is taking far too long. Will the Minister set out what he will do to resolve the situation and confirm to the House when it is fixed?

This petition is well-intentioned and it is correct that we are all facing a higher tax burden than ever before. As has been reported, many pensioners are being overcharged on their tax bill. The Government need to get a hold of this situation and do more to reduce the tax burden on pensioners, because, as we have heard from many Members today, they deserve dignity and security in their retirement, but they have been left wanting by this Government.

I look forward to hearing from the Minister whether he is willing to raise the tax-free threshold, as identified in this petition, from £12,500 or thereabouts to £25,140, and will then maintain it at 200% of the working person's tax-free threshold. Will he agree with the petition, or will he rule out that proposal today?

Finally, I have been shadowing the Minister for about 18 months now. He is a very decent gentleman and I enjoy shadowing him. I wish him the very best of luck in the upcoming reshuffle after the by-election on Thursday.

5.2 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): It is a pleasure to speak in the debate with you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for opening it and for rightly highlighting and celebrating the fall in pensioner poverty, while noting that that is no grounds for complacency about what happens in the years to come.

I also thank the select but high-quality group of hon. Members who have chosen to speak and to share their insights, and the honourable members of the public who contributed their own voices to the debate by signing the petition. As we have heard, over 100,000 have done so. I suspect that many more people would have at least shared the sentiment behind the petition of wanting to support our pensioners in retirement. This Government certainly do. The real question is how that is best done. Do we have clear enough priorities that can be delivered on, and delivered on at times when there are many other competing pressures?

Our priorities as a Government, when it comes to supporting pensioners, are twofold: raising the state pension and rescuing the NHS. The foundation of the vast majority of pensioners' incomes is, of course, the state pension, which we have heard a lot about today.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I recently met a constituent on the basic state pension who told me that rising living costs were leaving him worse off in real terms. What consideration have the Government given to reviewing pension thresholds? In particular, is a phased increase over several years being explored?

Torsten Bell: I thank my hon. Friend for her question. Our approach is to increase the basic pension and the new state pension in the years ahead, because pensioners, as well as the population as a whole, have seen living standards pressures in recent years. As her constituent's case shows, the foundation of not all but the vast majority of pensioners' incomes is the state pension. The yearly amount of the full new state pension is projected to rise by about £2,100 over this Parliament, reflecting our manifesto commitment to uprate via the triple lock throughout this Parliament.

I enjoyed the discussion of the triple lock and the praising of the raising of the level of the state pension from the lows we saw before. It is interesting that—one, two, three, four—four Conservative Members neglected to mention that the pension had to be rescued because of policies put in place by Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. Decoupling pensions and leaving the uprating significantly behind the level of earnings in the population is why we saw pensioner poverty rates rise to 30% over the course of the 1990s. Everyone has limited time and there is only so much we can choose to—

Mark Garnier: Will the Minister give way?

Torsten Bell: Of course. I look forward to the denunciation of the hon. Gentleman's previous Prime Minister.

Mark Garnier: It is interesting that the Minister raises that point. He will no doubt remember that Chancellor Gordon Brown raised the state pension by, I think, 50p a week. Did he support that policy by one of his predecessor Chancellors?

Torsten Bell: He was not my predecessor, because I am the Pensions Minister and Gordon Brown was never a Pensions Minister. Does the hon. Gentleman know who was? Margaret Thatcher. Gordon Brown oversaw big falls in pensioner poverty. Why? Because he introduced pension credit in the early 2000s. That then drove the huge falls in pensioner poverty that we saw in the 2000s, supported by increases in private pension savings that came through during those years. So, yes, I do endorse the record of that previous Chancellor, even though he is not a predecessor of mine.

Hon. Members will know that the basic and the new state pensions increased by 4.8% in April; I think it is a matter of cross-party consensus that that is a good thing. It will boost pensioner incomes by up to £575 a year. We are also protecting the poorest pensioners with a 4.8% increase in the pension credit minimum guarantee.

Alison Griffiths: I am delighted to hear about the increase in pensions. The Minister can tell us what they increased by, but can he perhaps tell us what they were reduced by with the taxation that they were then dragged into?

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Order. I am not sure that this is entirely appropriate—

Torsten Bell: It is for the Chair to decide what is appropriate, but I will come on to the question of fair rates of tax. We should be clear and transparent in how we talk about this issue: any increase in the rate of the state pension is always significantly greater than any increase in tax that follows from that increase due to our not having tax rates of over 100%. It is important that we are heard to say that to people. I will come on to the rates of tax in a second. It is obviously an important part of this debate, given the nature of the petition.

The single biggest betrayal of older generations today is not anything to do with pensions. It is the state of the NHS that we inherited: an NHS that our pensioners in particular rely on and that in 2024 was letting far too many of them down. Here is one fact that it is hard to get over: over one in five of those aged over 75 were on English NHS waiting lists, which soared to over 7 million. One in five people over 75 were left on an NHS waiting list. That is what letting down pensioners looks like, and our priority is to turn that around. The number of those waiting has fallen by over 400,000 since we took office. That progress reflects reform, but it also reflects resources, with £26 billion additional investment supporting 5 million appointments.

The need to turn around the NHS is something that I think we all agree on. It is slightly telling that there was no mention of the NHS in the previous contributions. As I am also a Treasury Minister, it is my job to remind all hon. Members that we can will the ends, but not the means. As always, that applies particularly to the Liberal

Democrats, who gave up connecting the two several years ago. Delivering the funding to raise the state pension and rescue the NHS involves choices.

The hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) talked about one area in the welfare space and about choices there. I gently say to him, having seen the work of the Department under the previous Government, that there was no plan then. Under the current Opposition, there still is no plan to change the welfare system, but they also claim that changes to the welfare system would fund their proposals on defence and on tax. It is implausible that they would make any difference in this area.

Sir John Hayes: The hon. Member has undersold me: I am right honourable, as he ought to know, really. Leaving that to one side, he will know that £253 billion is spent on non-pensioner welfare benefits. Many of those are entirely laudable—as I described when I spoke, the chronically sick, the infirm and profoundly disabled people deserve benefits, and I want those to be bigger and better—but many are not. The Government have ducked that responsibility. Whether previous Governments did, too, is not the point: this Government are in power, power brings responsibility and the Minister has the responsibility to tackle welfare.

Torsten Bell: I apologise to the right hon. Member for underselling him, but I think that he is also underselling the work that this Government are doing. Changes to the flawed welfare system that we inherited are already taking place. In April, we reduced the financial incentive put in place by a previous Conservative Prime Minister that provided people with a strong incentive to label themselves as too sick to work and therefore did not provide them with any employment support whatsoever. We are bringing forward other measures month by month. Members will see progress in the next few months, in terms of offering people support if they hire young, unemployed people. Changes are happening right now.

I have discussed the choices on the welfare side. Given the nature of the petition, I want to come on to how those choices include tax, because those who made the effort to sign the petition deserve to know where we stand. Not a single Member set out their views on the petition's proposal clearly, but we owe some honesty about that for the quality of the debate. The reality is that no political party will deliver a doubling of the personal allowance for pensioners. If any Member disagrees with that, now is the moment for them to stand up and set out their support for the petition, but I suspect all Opposition Members will agree. Why is that? It would come at a very substantial fiscal cost of several billion pounds each year. That is inconsistent with the priorities I have set out, including on the state pension and the NHS, which I think most hon. Members share.

Too often, debates on this topic do pensioners an injustice by pretending that most of them are not already paying income tax. The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Alison Griffiths) said a little about that, but the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) explained the situation exactly: the system, as it was set up, has always been that state and private pensions are taxable. The vast majority of pensioners are already paying income tax; over 80% of pensioners were doing so by the end of the previous Conservative Government.

The question is whether we can keep the contribution that is asked of pensioners—and workers, for that matter—down by making other changes to our tax system. That is what the last Budget focused on: making the system fairer by asking those who can afford to contribute more to do so, not least by taxes on those with the most valuable properties. As he has done in many of our interactions, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest opposed some of the changes that we set out on inheritance tax, salary sacrifice and the rest, but that would mean less money for the NHS or higher tax rates on pensioners, workers and others—there are consequences to our choices.

It is true that we have extended the personal allowance freeze that was put in place by the previous Government. That reflects the need to protect the state pension, rescue our NHS and make sure that public finances are put on a sustainable footing. I am not hiding from the consequences of that policy decision, but the UK has one of the most generous personal tax allowances in the OECD and the G7. It is important to note that our income tax system is progressive; it is not about just who comes into tax but how much tax people pay. Those who have more contribute more, which is exactly as it should be. The impact of the freeze is that higher rate taxpayers, on average, will contribute roughly three times as much as a basic rate taxpayer; the majority of pensioners who pay tax do so at the basic rate or not at all.

Although I have been honest that doubling the personal allowance for any particular group is not a remotely realistic prospect, our tax system recognises pensioners. The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk mentioned the 2010 Government's record on the triple lock, but he slightly missed the abolition of the age-related personal allowance, a very generous version of which the petition calls to have brought back. The hon. Member for Witney (Charlie Maynard) praised the coalition Government but somehow also forgot to mention the abolition of the age-related personal allowance. Our tax system recognises pensioners in other ways, not just by that position, which was abolished under the coalition Government.

As the hon. Member for Wyre Forest set out, those over the state pension age pay no national insurance. Older generations also tend to benefit most from the multiple tax allowances, not least the £1,000 savings allowance for basic rate taxpayers. The personal allowance will continue to exceed the basic state pension and the full new state pension this year, but, as several hon. Members have set out, the Chancellor has also promised

that we will ease the administrative burden for pensioners so that they do not have to pay small amounts of tax via simple assessment from 2027-28. I have heard hon. Members' requests for more detail on that in the near future, and the direct answer to the question from the hon. Member for Wyre Forest is that those changes will be included in the forthcoming Finance Bill.

I recognise the substantial support for the petition, which is as it should be. Pensioners who have worked hard all their lives deserve a decent retirement. The best way to deliver that is for this Government to continue their work to rescue the NHS and increase the state pension throughout the course of this Parliament, and, as we look to future generations of pensioners, to put in place a stronger private pensions system. That is what the Pensions Commission is looking at right now, which I think has cross-party support, because we want to know that tomorrow's generations of pensioners will also look forward to the retirement we all want to see them enjoy.

5.15 pm

John Lamont: I did not anticipate having 45 minutes to speak, but I will do my best to fill the time. I thank Mr Mason for starting this petition and the 120,000 people who signed it. I also thank the right hon. and hon. Members who have participated in the debate; there was perhaps more quality than quantity on this occasion, but it was a very good debate and a lot of useful points were made.

It is remarkable how often Mrs Thatcher and Brexit can still creep into some of these debates, but legitimate concerns were raised by the petitioner and those who signed the petition about how the tax system interacts with the state pension in particular. The Minister was very clear about the choices the Government have made, and I think that we all accept that the highest-paid pensioners should be paying tax, but the main thrust of this petition is about those at the bottom end of the income stream who are now creeping into the tax system, which I do not think any of us intended. Pensioners deserve protection and clarity, and they need to know the Government's intentions for how they will be protected and looked after in their retirement.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 740671 relating to personal allowance for state pensioners.

5.17 pm

Sitting suspended.

Brain Cancer

[PAULA BARKER *in the Chair*]

[Relevant documents: First Report of the Petitions Committee of Session 2015–16, Funding for research into brain tumours, HC 554, and the Government response, Session 2016–17, HC 292; and Oral evidence taken before the Petitions Committee on 27 May 2021, on Brain tumour and childhood cancer research, Session 2021–22, HC 242.]

6 pm

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 738881 relating to brain cancer research and treatment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker. I thank Sarah Bainbridge and the rest of Brain Cancer Justice for creating the petition that has led to this debate. Although it was established only last year, it has already built a remarkable campaign and secured support from more than 109,000 people for the petition—well done and thanks very much. The petition calls for increased funding to accelerate discoveries and clinical trials, improved access to whole-genome sequencing with personalised treatment and the protection of the right of patients to try innovative treatment options.

It is not the first time that Parliament has debated this issue. Just over a decade ago, a petition calling for greater funding for brain tumour research received more than 120,000 signatures, which led to a Petitions Committee inquiry report.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I am very glad that my hon. Friend has brought this debate to us. The petition to which he refers was in memory of the son of my constituent; his name was Stephen Realf, and sadly he died in 2014. The petition calls for increased funding to reach parity with the funding for leukaemia and breast cancer. Stephen's father Peter is in the Chamber today. Would my hon. Friend care to comment on the importance of the work done by Stephen Realf's sister Maria back then in raising the profile of this vital issue?

Paul Davies: I absolutely agree. I have spoken to Peter, and it was remarkable what they did then. The inquiry—there have not been many petition inquiries—was a result of the work they did, and it has certainly made sure that the subject has not gone away. That petition recognised that brain tumour patients have been failed “at every stage” of the research and funding process. As a result of that and the inquiry, some progress followed: a task and finish working group was established, and in 2018 the Government pledged £40 million for brain tumour research. However, by 2024 only £15 million of it had been delivered. Many further petitions have been brought forward by campaigners, but meaningful progress continues to stall.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the moving way in which he is opening today's debate. It has been really heartbreaking to hear from my constituent Hayley about the battles that her granddaughter Lily has had to go through to try to find effective treatments for her brain tumour. The Brain Tumour Charity has highlighted that fewer than 40% of patients with brain tumours are informed about clinical trials. Does my hon. Friend agree with its recommendation

that the Government need to reflect on how every eligible patient can be informed about, and ideally have access to, clinical trials to ensure that the widest possible range of treatment options is available?

Paul Davies: Absolutely. That is a key element of the work that needs to be done to help patients with this issue. I will refer to that later, but it is fundamental. We know that, without that research, nothing will improve and we will continue to see the terrible conditions and quality of life that people have to face.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On the brain tumour research consortium, I understand that none of the moneys to which the hon. Gentleman refers have made it to Northern Ireland's research facilities. Does he share my concern about the need to ensure that the money reaches the whole United Kingdom to benefit our collective research, including at Queen's University Belfast, and find a cure for everyone in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Paul Davies: I was not aware of that, but clearly it is unacceptable and makes no sense whatever. We really need to use our experience right across this nation. I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

It is a fact that in the UK brain tumours remain the biggest cancer killer of children and of adults under the age of 40. Approximately 13,000 people are diagnosed each year. For those who are diagnosed with a high-grade brain tumour, the five-year survival rate remains just 12.9%.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Emma has long been committed to achieving justice for people with brain cancer and has been writing to me about it ever since I became an MP. She has highlighted the survival rate of 12.9%. As we have already heard, research funding in this area is very low, at just 1% to 2% of overall cancer research funding. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to increase the research funding to improve that five-year survival rate?

Paul Davies: Absolutely. I use the word again: it is fundamental. Without it, there is no real way forward. We will continue to repeat the same treatments that we have seen for many years. Those treatments are not fully effective, as we know, so we need research to develop new and innovative approaches.

I have referred to some statistics, but we have to remember that behind every statistic is a family. Each family are pursuing every available treatment, and all too often they are turning to crowdfunding to travel overseas in search of a cure, because significant barriers continue to block progress here at home.

Workforce shortages also limit access to care. Only 40% of patients have a clinical nurse specialist, and there is a 30% shortfall in consultant radiologists. Early-career researchers lack funding and support, which pushes talent away from this field. That is especially damaging because scientists from diverse disciplines are essential for the development of new treatments.

System failures also prevent the limited available funding from reaching patients in a meaningful way. Whole-genome sequencing is not routinely available at diagnosis, and access to a clinical trial remains severely restricted.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): The Mount Vernon hospital in my constituency has a cancer centre, both for trials and for treatment. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that one of the key asks that we all have of Government is to improve the international join-up so that the people doing this research can tap into the expertise of the clinicians treating patients in other countries, who in turn can learn from the expertise in the UK? Too often, because these tumours are very rare, identifying effective treatments and effective numbers for trials can be difficult for one single hospital or clinical institution.

Paul Davies: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct. This work cannot be done by just one centre, either in this country or elsewhere in Europe or the world. It certainly makes sense to connect expertise more, both within our nation and with our partners, particularly in Europe but also across the US.

As of May this year, only 15 active trials were available to brain tumour patients, compared with 54 for pancreatic cancer, which is another disease of unmet need.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): A constituent of mine, Daniel, passed away while he was part of the BRAIN-MATRIX study. Daniel's tumour progressed from stage 2 to stage 4 before the pathway could properly inform his care. Does my hon. Friend agree that much more needs to be done, not only to improve primary care recognition and referral pathways for brain tumours, but to maximise access to clinical trials?

Paul Davies: Yes, I do. At the front end, we need to improve diagnosis. I have personal knowledge of that through my youngest daughter. Unfortunately, it took some time for one of her friends to be diagnosed with this awful disease, and he is now at a similar stage, where it is extremely difficult for him to receive the treatment he needs. Diagnosis is extremely important.

Clinicians continue to raise concerns about the collection, storage and use of tumour tissue, despite the fact that it is vital to supporting research and innovation. Unfortunately, NHS trusts differ markedly in capacity and resources, creating a postcode lottery for diagnosis and advanced treatments. As we know, brain tumours are complex; there are more than 100 distinct types, nearly 40% of patients in England are diagnosed in emergency care, and the blood-brain barrier limits the effectiveness of medicines.

Such challenges have led many to dismiss tackling brain cancer as "too difficult". That is clearly still an obstacle. We have to break the view that brain cancer falls into that box. In my meetings with campaigners, patients and families, their frustration with that notion is unmistakable. They know, as we do, that with the right support these barriers can be overcome.

The Government have recently announced welcome initiatives, including those in the Rare Cancers Act 2026, the national cancer plan and the brain tumour research consortium, supported by the £13.7 million to unite 48 hospitals, universities, cancer centres and charities in partnership with patients. However, that must be seen as just the first step. Much of this activity simply disburses the remainder of the existing funding pledged, and brain tumours still receive just 3.2% of national cancer research funding.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I have been contacted by constituents on behalf of young adults and children who are fighting for access to treatment. I am afraid that this all became far too real for me this time last year, when a dear friend of mine was diagnosed with glioblastoma; they are now in palliative care, probably with only a short time to live. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to boost Government funding into research? As he said, too many companies think that this is just too hard to do, so we need a Government initiative, in partnership with the amazing life sciences innovators in our universities up and down the country, as well as those in industry, to really crack this problem so that families do not face this devastation year after year.

Paul Davies: The simple answer is yes, I totally agree. The hon. Lady has summed it up perfectly.

In 2023-24, charities provided 74% of all investment, which of course left just 26% coming from Government. There is a clear link between funding and survival. Investment enables more clinical trials, better patient recruitment and improved access to innovation. I therefore call on the Government to set out how much funding will be ringfenced, and to raise their contribution to between £45 million and £50 million by 2029 in line with the recommendations from Brain Tumour Research.

At the same time, we must recognise that funding alone will not deliver the progress we urgently need. The wider research and innovation environment must be reformed so that discoveries progress more efficiently into clinical development and patient access. Discovery research is essential, yet many innovations still fail to cross the translational valley of death, where fragmented, high-risk and unsupported pathways cause breakthroughs to stall.

Stronger collaboration between institutions is needed to accelerate early-stage research, and the Government should also clarify the role of UK Research and Innovation within the national cancer plan, given its central contribution to discovery science. In addition, health technology assessment reform is required so that appraisal bodies adopt fairer and more flexible cost-effectiveness thresholds for rare and less survivable cancers, including brain tumours.

Patient awareness is essential. As Professor Kathreena Kurian highlighted, many patients are left unaware that they must give consent for their tumour tissue to be used in advanced diagnostics and research. Every eligible patient must have proactive conversations with their clinical team about research opportunities. Greater participation is essential to attract investment, and when trials are easier to set up and recruit for, commercial and academic partners are more likely to set up further studies in the UK.

Alongside that, we must address an issue repeatedly raised by patients and families: the right to pursue innovative treatment when standard options have been exhausted. Too many families find themselves travelling abroad, seeking repurposed drugs or raising money online to access treatments. No family should be forced to remortgage their home, empty savings or appeal to strangers online simply to pursue the possibility of more time. These improvements depend on one further requirement: strong national leadership. Currently, no single body within the Government, NHS England or the wider health system holds clear ownership of brain

[Paul Davies]

cancer outcomes. Where responsibility is spread everywhere, accountability exists nowhere. Patients deserve to know who is responsible for delivering change.

Before I close, I will return to the reason the petition exists. In October 2022, Sarah Bainbridge's daughter Jess was diagnosed with glioblastoma, an aggressive brain cancer that, until then, her family had never heard of. Jess underwent treatment, including two operations, but her family soon realised that once the standard options were exhausted, very few alternatives remained. Like many other families, they found themselves searching beyond established pathways. Jess died in November 2023. She was just 35 years old, and had three children: Alfred, who was five, and one-year-old twins Billy and Alba. In Sarah's words:

"If I am honest, we have needed Jess every single day since she died, and we still do."

This is not just Jess's story; it is the story of thousands of families across the UK. Following Jess's death, Sarah met Georgie Maynard, a young mother living with glioblastoma. Although their circumstances were different, they shared the same frustration: that patients and families were still facing many of the same barriers identified decades earlier. Together, they founded Brain Cancer Justice, not for sympathy or recognition, but to call for urgent change. It was my privilege to meet with Brain Cancer Justice in the lead-up to this debate, and I encourage Ministers to do the same.

This should not only be about recognition or reassurance but about ending broken promises, raising ambition and protecting delivery. Patients and families have waited long enough: we must turn "terminal" into "treatable".

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry to all hon. and right hon. Members, because I will have to impose a two-minute time limit straightaway, and it is clear that we will not get everyone in.

6.18 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee with his extremely well thought-through and detailed opening remarks. I pay tribute to the many individuals who have campaigned, and to the advocacy groups that work tirelessly, to improve outcomes for brain cancer patients. As the petitioners request, investment in research is key. I join them—some are my constituents—in calling on the Government to increase research funding and to go further in legally enshrining the right to try genome sequencing, trials, immunotherapy, and repurposed drugs and vaccines.

I will use my time to highlight some of the progress that has been made in treatment options, because there is some hope. Trials in the USA have shown very promising results for sonodynamic therapy as a treatment for children with the brain cancer known as diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma. DIPG is an inoperable brain tumour primarily affecting children, and it is deemed terminal on diagnosis. The only form of treatment

offered is radiotherapy, which may prolong life for a few months at best. On average, the survival rate is less than 10 months.

Sonodynamic therapy uses focused ultrasound to produce a light that interacts with an administered prodrug. It is being worked on now in the USA and progress is being made. I am delighted to say that St Mary's hospital in London is following suit with some promising results. I am therefore keen to understand from the Minister what the Government's plans are for rolling out this type of therapy across the UK, and in particular for rolling it out to trials of vulnerable children who are willing to get involved.

I conclude by paying tribute once again to those of my constituents who signed the petition and want to see the Government do their bit.

Paula Barker (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Member for setting a fine example of keeping to the time limit.

6.20 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I thank the Petitions Committee and my friends from Brain Cancer Justice, who I affectionately think of as the provisional wing of the all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours.

In July last year, we launched Margaret's trial at University College London hospital. Thanks to the donations of thousands of supporters and the work of brilliant researchers and clinicians under Dr Paul Mulholland at UCLH, we are testing whether immunotherapy before surgery can help newly diagnosed glioblastoma patients. It is exactly the kind of innovation that we need more of. I was not prepared to wait for the institutions that we look to for progress. We decided to do it ourselves, and that is precisely what we are doing.

We have five people on the trial and space for 11 more. I urge anyone who hears of anybody diagnosed with glioblastoma to consider our trial. It is for newly diagnosed patients pre-treatment. It is free. It is available. There will be excellent care. The trial will not only hopefully extend the lives of those who decide to go on it, but give us the information to find out how we can use repurposed drugs to treat this truly terrible cancer as early as possible.

6.22 pm

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): My brother-in-law Pip Harding, who is with us in the Public Gallery today, was diagnosed with a glioblastoma in March 2024 and given nine months to live. He is still here today, thank God—looking amazing—because he received treatment that cost a huge amount of money, which was crowdfunded. That highlights a very uncomfortable truth in our society: the treatment is there and available, but only for those who can crowdfund or afford it.

I will not go through the challenges, because I know the Minister is well aware of them, but I will talk about the needs. We need clear national accountability for improving brain tumour outcomes. We need sustained and protected investment in brain tumour research so that the funding finally reflects the devastating impact of this disease. We need brain cancer care to be recognised as genuinely time-critical, because while tumours can progress in weeks, the system responds in years. We need

a truly national brain cancer clinical trials pipeline, and we need the routine collection and storage of fresh frozen tumour tissue for all brain cancer patients.

For families facing diagnosis today, the cost of delay is measured not in statistics, but in lives. The science is advancing. The clinicians are ready. Patients and families are demanding action. The challenge for all of us now is to ensure that the pace of policy finally matches the pace of the disease.

Will the Minister set out how the Government will deliver on these priorities: clear accountability, greater research investment, improved access to clinical trials, routine access to genomic testing and tissue preservation, and better outcomes for brain tumour patients by the end of this Parliament? How will Parliament be able to hold the Government accountable for delivering them? If the system cannot match the pace of brain cancer, it will continue to fail and “terminal” will remain the outcome. We must move from “terminal” to “treatable”, so other families can have the second chance that we have now had with our Pip.

6.24 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): First, I thank all those families in my constituency who have been raising funds for years for the Brain Tumour Charity. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh), who has pioneered our debates on this issue over recent years so effectively, and I thank my friend Sonya Kean, who has consistently brought me up to speed on all the recent developments.

I just want to ask one question, which comes out of the opening speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies). Let me just run through again the stats from the Brain Cancer Justice provisionals, as they have been described: there is a 30% shortfall in consultant radiologists, which he referred to; only 40% of patients report having access to a clinical nurse specialist; there are only 40 consultant neuro-oncologists nationwide, so there are huge regional gaps; many trusts lack dedicated trial nurses and clinical nurse specialist support; 60% of pathologists report inadequate staffing and resources; and there is no mandatory neuro-oncology training or protected research time.

I have just one question, because it is important to give the Minister time to respond to the debate. I just want to know what immediate action will be taken—now—to address the workforce shortages and how we can develop, in a very limited time, a workforce strategy that addresses some of the issues identified in this briefing.

6.26 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker. I was reflecting with my constituents Greg and Sally, whose son has a brain tumour, when I met them in my constituency office this morning—they also attended the all-party parliamentary group meeting a few weeks ago—on what has actually changed since I last spoke in a Backbench Business debate on brain tumours in 2023, and the sorry answer on funding is not a lot, and certainly not enough. In the few moments I have in the debate this afternoon, I want to cut to the chase and ask

the Minister some direct questions about how we get that money spent and how we get real results to find cures and ways to prolong lives.

To start on that, we must have a clear breakdown of the total spend on brain cancers by year over the last decade and how that breaks down by actual treatments; research into treatments, including into how much has been spent on trials; research into other areas with a bearing on brain cancer outcomes; research into how each of those involves artificial intelligence; and infrastructure. Specifically, I would very much like the Minister to address the issue of how the Government are planning to make the radical change in approach to brain tumour detection and treatment that is necessary for the UK to achieve its ambition to move from the fourth to the first quartile for survival in nine years. That is a worthy ambition, but we need to see the detail and the concrete steps that will be taken. It will involve answering big questions about artificial intelligence and other innovations.

What I will say in my last few seconds is, given that brain cancer is the biggest killer of under-40s, we need to challenge the idea that it is really a rare cancer and ask whether the definition of “rare” is fit for purpose in the modern age.

6.28 pm

Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): I will use my time today to share the words of Jackie Hall, mum of 14-year-old Max Hall. She says:

“Dear Members of Parliament,

Max should be worrying about school, football, friends, and what he wants to be when he grows up. Instead, our family is living with the reality that he has a high-grade brain tumour and that there is no cure available to him.

We have discovered that many of the treatments currently offered to children with aggressive brain tumours have changed very little over decades.

What makes this even harder is knowing that before Max’s diagnosis, he suffered headaches for around a year.

Max is funny. He is kind. He is intelligent. He is brave beyond words.

He is a child who deserves the same urgency, investment, innovation, and hope that would be demanded for any child standing in front of you today.

Children with aggressive brain tumours cannot wait years for discussions, consultations, reports, and strategies.

We need meaningful investment in brain tumour research.

We need greater access to clinical trials.

We need better awareness and earlier diagnosis.

If this were your child, would you be satisfied with the options available?

Please do not let another generation of children face the same future.

Yours sincerely,

Jackie Hall

Mum to Max”.

I will not stop until I get Jackie answers and get policies changed for young people like Max. Mandatory MRIs for long-term sufferers of headaches would be a good start, but after 12 years of warm words and broken promises, the motto of my constituency is deeds, not words. In the name of Max, Jackie and their family, and for the sake of all the people who are suffering, now is the time for this Government to be the one who finally deliver.

6.30 pm

Charlie Maynard (Witney) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for speaking on behalf of the petitioners, and I thank the petitioners, who are in the Public Gallery today, for all the work they have done. A particular shout out goes to Sarah—I am thinking of Jess. The issue is not rare. In my constituency alone, Claire in Appleton lost her husband, William, while Stevie in Appleton lost her dad Bubba a month ago tomorrow. In Farmoor, Cumnor and Besselsleigh, three people are fighting for their lives, including my sister, Georgie. Her courage and determination has been fantastic.

I want to focus on a few things. First, I want to advocate for flash frozen tissue nationally, on a mandatory basis. The genetic code in those tumours is the key to solving that cancer and fighting it. At the moment, we are taking a lot of those tumours out and putting them in the bin. That is killing people. If we had a mandatory focus on that at scale, it would be more possible economically, in addition to our moral duty to keep everybody alive for much longer. We should try to push towards that, so that we have whole-genome sequencing of those tumours. That is key to making the UK a leader, and it would drive a lot of research funds into the UK. I ask the Minister to consider that.

I have another request for the Minister. There is no single accountable lead for brain cancer now. Thanks to the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), the Rare Cancers Act 2026 introduced a lead, which is equivalent to 0.1 full-time employee. The national cancer plan has put £5,000 towards a lead. Getting a rare cancer lead who is full time and fully accountable would be a great help.

6.32 pm

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. It is great to see Members in the Chamber in such great numbers. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) for her determination in this area. Through her sheer force of nature, she has raised the funds to start these trials that are now ongoing in memory of Margaret, who we all miss dearly. That is testament to her sheer determination to put this situation right. We are all behind her.

Unfortunately, the experience described by so many Members today—such as that of Margaret, of my cousin Ewan and of so many of our constituents, where fit, healthy individuals are told that there are no further treatments available for them and there is nothing to try or test—is too common across the country. It is what so many of our constituents are told.

I want to press the Minister on some points. As a Government, we have announced more training places in recent weeks. To the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), there are just 40 neuro-oncologists with a specialism in brain cancer around the country. Are we allocating some of those training places specifically to solve this problem of the pipeline of doctors coming through? There are just 15 trials going on for brain cancer, compared with 54 for pancreatic cancer. What measures is the NHS taking to inform patients of the trials available to them?

Members are in the Chamber today in great numbers, which sends a clear message to the pharmaceutical industry that we want more emphasis on trials in this area. We will not stand for their inaction any longer. For too long, they have put brain cancer in the “too difficult” box. By showing up in these numbers today, we are showing that the market is failing patients and that they must act. The Government must also use all levers at their disposal to act on this.

6.34 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Behind every statistic is a human face. For me, it is my senior parliamentary assistant, Dan Horrocks—a father, husband, a four-time cancer survivor and a brilliant colleague who has fought this disease for 14 years. We are incredibly proud of Dan’s strength and his tireless campaigning, for which he was deservedly awarded the British Empire Medal in the new year honours list.

Dan’s journey began with persistent headaches. Three separate GPs missed it. It was only caught because of the keen eyes of a local optician at a free eye test. That is the first hurdle: diagnosis. Far too often, symptoms are dismissed as routine migraines, but the second hurdle is even more devastating. Once a patient is diagnosed with an aggressive glioblastoma, they are offered the NHS gold standard of treatment: surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy. Let us be honest: that gold standard has barely changed in decades. It is designed to manage the disease for a short time, not to cure it, and when it runs its course, our constituents are effectively told to go home and to prepare to die.

These outcomes do not happen by accident. They are the direct result of structures and choices made over many years. When a clinical trial does happen, like the groundbreaking trial established in memory of Margaret, the sister of the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh), it happens because a handful of grieving, determined people refuse to take no for an answer.

If it requires extraordinary political intervention just to start one trial, the system is fundamentally broken, and we need a radical shift. First, we must demand clear, measurable targets, specifying exactly how many clinical trials we expect to see, how many patients will be recruited and who is accountable. Secondly, we need an immediate, aggressive focus on repurposing existing licensed drugs that already control other cancers to see whether they can cross the blood-brain barrier and save lives today. We cannot allow the next generation of patients to be left stranded. Dan and the thousands of families like his are not asking for miracles; they are looking for justice.

6.36 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is wonderful to see you in the Chair, Mrs Barker. There cannot be many areas of policy where campaigners are asking not for more money, but simply for money that has already been promised to be used. I really hope that the Minister can offer some good news today about the remaining £23 million to £25 million, because there are so many areas where it could make a big difference—and fast. There are doctors and scientists who can see this money but cannot reach it. It is an enormous waste of talent, goodwill and, importantly, hope.

We are three years beyond the point at which all of the £40 million should have been awarded already, yet at the last indication not even half has been issued and spent. That must be beyond frustrating for so many families across the country. Colleagues will have heard me speak about my two amazing constituents Khuram and Yasmin. Their daughter Amani tragically passed away from a glioblastoma in February 2023 aged just 23. Before her death, the family organised Luton Walk of Hope. Amani spoke to those attending, and her words summarised the mission of so many cancer sufferers:

“It might be too late for me, but I want to make a difference for others.”

As Amani’s cancer progressed, her parents had to fundraise £100,000 for treatments. No one should have to fundraise to access a drug that could save their lives. Amani’s mum, Yasmin, is in the Public Gallery. She has said that all the fundraising they do is in the hope that brain tumour diagnosis will not have to be a life sentence for others. But brain tumour sufferers and their families need more than hope; they need concrete promises and actions that follow through. That means the dedicated money being spent, expert doctors being listened to, improved diagnosis, timelines for research being set—and, importantly, honoured—and clinical trials being massively expanded. The urgency felt by families needs to be mirrored by policymakers in Whitehall.

6.38 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your guidance, Mrs Barker. In April 2025, my constituent Phil was diagnosed with aggressive, incurable glioblastoma. Due to the tumour’s location, surgery was not possible, and Phil was given a prognosis of just 12 to 18 months. As parents of two young children, Phil and his wife found themselves navigating a complex system and researching treatments, clinical trials and emerging therapies, and doing so pretty much on their own. Despite evidence suggesting that immunotherapy could help Phil, NHS funding for treatment was denied, and he could only access it through his own tenacity and pharmaceutical company support. Phil’s experience is typical for brain cancer patients, represented by everyone here and beyond: limited treatment options, barriers to clinical trials and being forced to fight your own corner to get anywhere at all.

I thank Phil and his family for sharing his story with me and allowing me to share it with you, Chair, and with the Minister. I also thank the 1,241 people who signed the petition in my constituency, many of whom are directly affected. Alongside everybody here, we simply ask that the Government deliver the full funding promised for brain tumour research. Given that only 12% of patients get to participate in trials, we also ask the Government to ensure comprehensive access to those trials for Phil and for everyone.

6.40 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the 54 constituents of Newport West and Islwyn who signed the petition calling for an increased focus on tackling brain cancer.

I will speak about Owain’s law, a campaign that seeks to end the postcode lottery across the UK in accessing brain tumour tissue freezing. That is critical for preserving

the fresh DNA and RNA samples needed for later advanced genomic testing, clinical trials and personalised treatment. The current postcode lottery in accessing fresh brain tissue freezing means reduced treatment options for many and barely improving survival rates for decades.

I was really pleased to meet Ellie James again last week, after her husband Owain died from a grade 4 brain tumour aged just 35. During his treatment, Owain and Ellie pursued a personalised cancer vaccine using Owain’s tumour tissue. However, just 1 cm of the 7 cm tumour removed during the surgery was fresh frozen. While that allowed three personalised vaccines to be made, when the tumour returned no further treatments could be made. Owain later died in June 2024. No one had discussed with Owain or his family how the tissue would be preserved or the implications of that decision.

Like others, I again press the Minister on whether she will set out a funded delivery plan to close these gaps in freezer capacity. No one should have a postcode lottery on those important matters of life and death. Will she commission new national guidance on the removal and freezing of suitable brain tissue following diagnosis? Owain’s tragic case needs to be learned from if we are to improve treatments for those with brain cancer. Relatively small investments, which are already waiting to be spent, could close the postcode lottery in freezing capacity, ensure uniform quality of care and have the potential to be truly transformational.

6.41 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mrs Barker. There are moments that remind us why we are MPs and what we are here to do, and there are people who do the same. Archie Goodburn is one of those people.

I met Archie when he was 23. He is an elite athlete—a Commonwealth swimmer for Scotland. However, Archie has an inoperable brain tumour, and through the most unforgivable sequence of events he was being denied access to a drug that clinicians told him could make a difference and ultimately save his life. The drug is called Vorasidenib. It has been successfully trialled in our health board in Lothian and was available in other parts of Scotland, but not for Archie in Edinburgh. Instead, he was told he could have chemo or radiotherapy, both of which have side effects that could affect his cognitive and—terrifyingly for a potential Olympic athlete—physical ability.

Archie’s story illustrates what is wrong with our current approach to brain cancer—to its research, treatment and the patients themselves. Archie and his family have done a fantastic job, but they should not have to. The money that was promised for brain cancer research 10 years ago is still not fully disbursed or spent. In the petition there are specific asks to ringfence not just that money, but new money; to have a dedicated full-time brain cancer lead who has personal experience of the disease; and the right to use drugs that are licensed in this country already for other conditions to see if they work for brain tumours. I feel that the Government are open to those suggestions, because when I raised Archie’s case in the Chamber, a Health Minister came to find me in the Tea Room to talk about it. Another stopped me in Portcullis House to ask about it. I know that the will is there, and I ask the Minister that she carry it through.

6.44 pm

Chris Evans (Caerphilly) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) for bringing up the case of my constituent, Owain James, whose wife is here in the Public Gallery looking upon us. I will be quick—I would love to talk more about Owain's case, but my hon. Friend has done that quite eloquently.

There should be no more cases like Owain's. He was 34 years of age. There was an opportunity to save him. If we had frozen his tumour properly, there might have been an opportunity for more vaccines. Ellie and I recently met the Minister, who was helpful, to talk about freezers that freeze to minus 80°; I understand that NHS England is looking into that issue, and the Minister said that a mapping programme would take place. I wonder whether that mapping will take place, and how it will progress in the future.

Further to that, the most important thing is updated guidance. The guidance should not compromise diagnosis, which must always come first; but once the tissue needed for diagnosis has been secured, services should be encouraged to maximise the amount of sustainable brain tumour tissue that is fresh-frozen and stored. Will the Minister confirm whether NHS England will issue or update guidance to relevant neuropathology units on fresh-freezing suitable brain tumour tissue, so that patients do not lose future options that might be valuable? Will the Minister also look at surgical consent protocols? One thing that came over from Ellie's story is that Owain was not sure of the options available to him. Informed consent needs to be given, and it needs to be the consent of the patient. Will the Minister also look into that?

On a personal point, I wonder whether, on those changes being put in place, they could be designated "Owain's law". That would be a tribute to Ellie, to her campaigning and above all to the daughter Owain left behind. I know the Minister is compassionate and caring—she was involved in this campaign since long before she was appointed Minister—and I know she will bring good news today.

6.46 pm

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): I am particularly keen to speak in this debate, having had a constituent write to me powerfully on behalf of a close relative with a brain tumour. That constituent rightly highlighted that we must and can do better, not just on research and on improving access to innovative treatments, but in supporting those with brain tumours and their families while they are going through any such treatments.

I pay tribute to the petitioners, many of whom are in the Public Gallery, and to fantastic charities and organisations, including Brain Cancer Justice and many others, for their work. I also pay tribute particularly to the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) who, through her passion and determination, has done so much to raise awareness of this issue in this House and beyond. More importantly, she has not just spoken about that passion, but turned it into a reality for many people. We need to focus on access to innovative treatments when all else has not worked, and on the need for research and progress—something we call for in this debate—but also to do more in real time to support those with brain tumours.

I have several questions for the Minister. What progress have the Government made on implementing each measure in the Rare Cancers Act? On behalf of my constituent who wrote and posed questions, I ask the following. What Government investment is committed year by year to research into brain cancer and its treatments, particularly brain cancers of paediatric patients and young people? How many clinical trials relating to brain cancer are expected to start in the UK this year? What assessment have the Government made of the adequacy of incentives to industry in the 2021 legislation for clinical trials in this area, for research and for participation in the orphan drugs regime?

In this place, and in life, there is a time to act, and I believe that this is that time. We have huge potential and huge talent in this country. Let us help to focus that on saving more lives and giving more precious time to more people.

6.48 pm

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): One of my constituents, Joseph Towers, has experienced at first hand the brutality of brain cancer and the delays in treatment that affect people across the country. I am short on time, so I will say these few things directly to the Minister. The UK ranks 22nd out of 29 wealthy nations for our five-year brain cancer survival rate. Other countries are doing it better and we can improve too. One area that we need to improve immediately is access to drug trials. My constituent Joseph was simply lucky to get on to a drug trial; many are not. There are also delays in rolling out medicines once they are approved. His drug, Vorasidenib, had its approval set back by three months because of discussions on changes to its quality-adjusted life year scores.

What are the solutions? We need the full-time brain cancer specialist within the national cancer plan. We need to spend the money that is already allocated and, of course, ensure future funding. People living with brain cancer need to be allowed access to trials and drugs that are not specifically designated for brain cancer. We are very short on treatments; tumours are often inoperable, so drugs are the main way forward. As the petition says, genome sequencing is vital for developing and delivering treatments. We need to understand the market forces determining which conditions get privately funded by pharmaceutical companies, and fill the gaps where needed.

We also need to make sure that bureaucracy does not delay drug trials. Yes, drug trials take time to ensure safety and efficacy, but too often what takes up time is delays in approval and funding, rather than the science. When patients are excluded from a trial—for proper scientific reasons and for the veracity of the trial—I would argue for compassionate access to those drugs alongside the trial.

We owe it to Joseph, to the families who have contacted us ahead of the debate and to every person who will receive this devastating diagnosis to do better and to move far more quickly than we are moving today.

Paula Barker (in the Chair): I call Ann Davies.

6.50 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Mrs Barker; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. It is a privilege to talk today on behalf of

my constituents about the impact of living with a brain tumour. They have raised four similar concerns: far too little research, the need to improve therapies, a lack of clinical trials and the preservation of tissue. Improvements in those areas would give those living with brain tumours a fighting chance to survive and thrive.

One person who has been able to thrive after her diagnosis is my constituent **Mared**. Mared was a hugely talented singer-songwriter who went by the stage name of **Swci Boscawen**. She was 26 when her brain tumour was diagnosed; after receiving surgery, she lost the ability to sing and compose, but in recovery she discovered a passion for art as a form of therapy. She adopted the new name of **Swci Delic**, and her musical creativity changed to artistic creativity. She lives locally. Her cancer is still there, but she lives a fulfilling life within her physical ability. Her artwork can be seen around Carmarthen town, created with the engagement of local young people. **Nathan**, who was in school with my daughters, is also living with a brain tumour, and his story is very similar to Mared's. Both of them started with GP visits because of severe headaches, and both eventually received brain scans that confirmed their diagnosis.

My ask of the Minister is very simple: can we please have a greater percentage of funds for brain tumour research, as well as clinical trials and further treatment options for patients, leading to better outcomes for our young people? Today I have been given the privilege of being the voice for Mared, Nathan and others like them, and I hope that the Minister will be able to address their concerns.

6.52 pm

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Barker.

Brain cancer is one of the most devastating diseases facing families across our country, and it kills more people under the age of 40 than any other cancer. I want to highlight the experience of one of my constituents, **Ellen**. Her husband **Jason**, an Army veteran from Mansfield and a father of two, was diagnosed with a brain tumour. Ellen told me that when they received the diagnosis, their "world completely fell apart". Since then Jason has relied on private treatment, including treatment overseas, at a significant cost to the family, and has struggled to access clinical trials despite wanting to take part in them. Their experience raises an important question: are we doing enough to ensure that brain tumour patients can access every possible treatment opportunity?

I would welcome an update from the Minister on what can be done to improve access to clinical trials for brain tumour patients. I pay tribute to the outstanding work of the Brain Tumour Research centre of excellence at the University of Nottingham; through advanced imaging, genomics and innovative new approaches, it is helping to drive progress in the fight against this terrible disease. For families like Jason's and Ellen's, this is not an abstract policy issue, but a daily reality. We owe it to them and to all those affected by brain cancer to support research, improve diagnosis and give this disease the urgency it deserves.

6.54 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

I speak on behalf of my constituents and the people of Northern Ireland, who are facing a quiet but devastating crisis. By the year 2035, the number of brain tumour cases in Northern Ireland is projected to skyrocket by some 36%. Those are our mothers, our fathers, our siblings and our children—yet today, despite the standard pipelines of surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy, the average survival time for an aggressive glioblastoma remains a heartbreaking 15 months. Queen's University Belfast's Johnston cancer research centre is making massive, globally recognised strides. Our local clinical teams are exploring rapid nanopore sequencing to drop diagnosis times from weeks to mere hours. I put on record my thanks to Brainwaves NI, which is fundraising all the time in Northern Ireland.

I have three asks of the Minister. The first is UK-wide collaboration, working directly with the Northern Ireland Department of Health to ensure that our local institutions are fully integrated into all national brain cancer clinical trial networks, which they are not at present. The second is to support the pooling of resources, so that promising lab discoveries at Queen's University can break through the bureaucratic barriers and reach patients at the bedside even faster. The third is to address the practical hurdles for families, ensuring that if a cutting-edge trial is available only across the water, financial support for travel is readily accessible to my constituents in Strangford and across Northern Ireland.

Our scientists have the will and our patients have the courage. I gently say that this Government—my Government, my Minister—must do more to provide the backing.

6.55 pm

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I pay tribute to all those who signed this petition and to Brain Cancer Justice. I have been invited to speak this evening by one of my constituents, **Owen Sutton**, who currently lives with a brain tumour. He was diagnosed at university and is now an ambassador for the Brain Tumour Charity. Some 13,000 people are diagnosed with a brain tumour every year. When I counted earlier, there were 35 people in this room—that is equivalent to the number of people diagnosed every day.

Research from the Brain Tumour Charity has also estimated that there are huge long-term costs associated with the low survival rates of brain cancer. Loss of earnings and long-term care costs amount to £18.7 billion, which is felt by both the economy and the NHS. Currently, brain tumours account for just 3.2% of the national cancer funding, despite being the biggest killer of adults under 40.

Patient polling found that less than half of respondents had been informed of the option to participate in a clinical trial, with just 12% ultimately taking up that opportunity. I therefore support the national cancer strategy's ambition to make the NHS the first choice venue for clinical trials, but I also advocate that perhaps a right to try option should be incorporated into that—something Owen wanted me to mention.

In keeping with the universal values of the NHS, we hope that all those affected by brain tumours can have access to world-leading treatments, so I support calls to increase the funding and to spend the money that we

[Sarah Edwards]

know is already due to be spent. We must all carry the strength and inspiration of Owen's story, choosing hope over fear and turning the terminal into the treatable.

6.57 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I will begin by paying homage to a young girl by the name of Eiliyah: when her tumour took over her right hand, she began to learn to draw with her left, because she loved arts and crafts more than anything else. When she could not dart around any more, she started to bum-shuffle everywhere. She was unfortunately diagnosed with DIPG, one of the most aggressive childhood brain tumours known to medicine. The family had a bit of hope but, before proper treatment could start, the tumour returned again. Her family could only watch as she lost her movement, her speech, her sight and finally her ability to eat. She died on 2 May this year, surrounded by those who loved her. She was just a child.

Eiliyah's aunt asked me quietly to speak for her today, but I would like to speak quietly also for my own sister, only a handful of years older than me, who went from full of life to grade 4 glioblastoma and then death in under six months. During that time, she was barely offered any treatment at all, and what she was offered was decades old. That is the heart of the problem: as we have heard today, brain cancer is the biggest cancer killer of children and adults under 40, yet our survival rates lag behind most of Europe. Nowhere is that cost clearer, as we have heard, than on tissue freezing, so will the Minister commit to a national standard for tissue freezing?

I ask the Minister for three things: first, to increase brain cancer research funding urgently and substantially, with ringfenced investment for diseases such as DIPG; secondly, to ensure that every patient can access whole-genome sequencing; and, finally, to enshrine the right to try—the right to reach clinical trials, innovative treatments and immunotherapies even when standard treatment has failed. Treatments have not meaningfully changed in decades. Eiliyah deserved better; my sister Shahida deserved better; Owain deserved better; the families who will hear the words “brain cancer” for the first time this week deserve better. I urge the Minister to act, and to act now.

7 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Barker. I thank the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for securing the debate. He is a true champion for people suffering with brain cancers. I also pay tribute to and recognise the excellent work of the hon. Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh).

I pay tribute to everyone who worked hard on this important petition, especially Georgie Maynard and Sarah Bainbridge. It was a privilege to join Georgie and other campaigners in March to submit the petition to No. 10. A brain cancer diagnosis is utterly devastating and life changing. More than 12,000 people a year are diagnosed with this brutal condition.

Cameron Thomas (Tewkesbury) (LD): Zoe Wilson was a well-loved English teacher, a dedicated mother to her two boys, John and Mark, and wife to Matthew. She was the kind of neighbour who delivered fresh baked goods to your doorstep. Will my hon. Friend remember her with me, and thank Matthew for his continuing work, ever since losing her, for better outcomes for others?

Clive Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for talking about Zoe Wilson. For her family, it must have been absolutely devastating to have had that diagnosis. I am happy to mention her, alongside him, in the debate.

Brain cancer has one of the lowest survival rates of any type of cancer, with only a quarter of adults surviving five years after they have been diagnosed. Diagnosis is often too late, and access to groundbreaking treatments is not widely available. It is a scandal that so many people live in treatment deserts and are forced to drive long journeys for treatment, often after weeks of waiting for it to begin. My Liberal Democrat colleagues—I am sure everyone in this Chamber—believe that everyone deserves high-quality care, no matter where they live. That is why we have long been calling for an end to the postcode lottery in healthcare.

Shamefully, the UK is lagging behind comparable nations in brain cancer treatment. I recognise that research into brain tumours is uniquely challenging, and yet with our world-beating life sciences sector, universities and the NHS, the UK should be a world leader in cancer research. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I welcome the national cancer plan. The plan's commitment to improve early diagnosis of brain cancers, to introduce new target treatments and to incentivise research and investment in rare cancers, including brain cancer, are positive steps forward, but turning those commitments into impacts will need leadership, investment and accountability, all of which are proving difficult in an NHS engaged in a distracting and costly reorganisation, at a time of already highly constrained resources and unprecedented demand.

Furthermore, the plan's goal for the UK to be in the top 25% of countries for brain cancer survival rates by 2035 could be seen as a lack of ambition, given the potential of the UK life sciences and research sector. For the UK to become a world leader in cancer research, the Liberal Democrats would pass a cancer survival research Act, requiring the Government to co-ordinate and ensure funding for the least survivable cancers, including brain cancer.

Siân Berry (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): Does the hon. Member agree that the Government should clarify more details of the funding announced, the funding allocated and the funding actually paid out under the existing funding plan since 2018, and should work harder to speed up the distribution of funding, not just the amount of funding that is in the pot?

Clive Jones: The hon. Member makes a very good point, and I absolutely agree with her. In that context, it is shocking that much of the funding promised for research in honour of Dame Tessa Jowell in 2018 is yet to be spent. Still about 75% of brain cancer research funding comes from charitable organisations; not enough comes from the Government.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): This is an issue close to my heart, because I lost both a friend and a mentor in the late, great Tessa Jowell to this dreadful disease.

Brain cancer has also impacted many of my constituents and their families, including Lorna, who is currently supporting a family member through her diagnosis. So, given that there are 13,000 new cases recorded each year and research spending lags behind need, does the hon. Gentleman agree that much more must be done to deliver better and more effective treatments?

Clive Jones: The hon. Member is absolutely right that we need to spend more on investment in research and treatment.

In addition, the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission estimates that just over two thirds of treatment centres in England currently offer whole-genome sequencing, which is essential to provide improved diagnosis and treatment options. Advances in genomics have offered great promise to people with brain cancer and the UK has taken steps to become a world leader in genomic research. However, progress has stalled, with genomic services across the UK not being set up to facilitate research. To ensure that brain cancer patients do not miss out on potentially life-saving treatment, the UK's national test directories need to be expanded.

Sadly, many people with brain cancer were let down by the last Conservative Government, who broke their promise on a 10-year cancer plan, which would have made a real difference to patients. The national cancer plan will hopefully be an opportunity to address meaningfully many of these issues, including patchy data collection and shortages in the cancer workforce.

On that last point, it is worth mentioning that we, NHS staff and patients are still waiting for the long-delayed workforce plan. It was due in the spring, but we will soon be in mid-summer. A workforce plan is so important. We need further investment in the research workforce, with support for clinical and non-clinical career development to build our research capacity. As others have already said today, the development of a proper and improved workforce plan is desperately needed.

That is why the Liberal Democrats would start a fellowship programme for US cancer scientists who have seen their funding gutted by Donald Trump. We would waive burdensome fees and bureaucracy for international researchers. Astonishingly, global talent visas for top researchers cost £6,000 per person for a five-year visa. So, a leading scientist has to find £24,000 if they have a partner and two children who they want to bring to the UK with them. That is much more expensive than most of our competitor countries, where the cost is typically £200 or £300 per person. Do we really need to make it so expensive for much-needed research talent to come to the UK? And can the Minister look at this issue?

For the sake of patients and their families, I hope that—

Monica Harding: Does my hon. Friend agree that what is needed right now is leadership, and that the large number of MPs in this Chamber today are looking towards the Minister and urging her to lead on this issue?

Clive Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that very good intervention, which is also very timely as I come to the end of my speech. She is absolutely right that leadership is needed. I have every confidence in this Minister that there will be some leadership, and I think that the large number of MPs in this Chamber today shows that there are many people in this Parliament who want her to succeed and to show the leadership that we need.

7.8 pm

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship this evening, Mrs Barker. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for opening this important debate, and to other right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to it. I also pay tribute to Brain Cancer Justice and to all the people—over 109,000 in total—who signed this petition to ensure that we have had the opportunity to debate this important issue here today.

At its heart, this debate has been about the patients, families and loved ones whose lives have been irreparably changed by a brain tumour diagnosis. For many families, of course, that diagnosis arrives suddenly, although too often it is also delayed.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): My constituent from East Grinstead, Holly Vivian, an NHS nurse, is very concerned about late diagnosis, particularly given her own medical training, saying that she was concerned and was not diagnosed until she had her second child because of pregnancy symptoms. Whether it is the constant headaches that we have heard about today, or light vomiting, it is really important to give those patients the best chance to be heard.

Dr Shastri-Hurst: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for sharing Holly's story, which sadly, is far too frequent. I remember from my time in clinical practice that those subtle signs were sadly sometimes missed. We need to do much more to ensure that our clinicians are aware of them so that they can make an early diagnosis.

Of course, when those diagnoses arrive, it is inevitably devastating. It turns lives upside down in an instant. Parents are told that their child has a condition with few treatment options, husbands and wives are forced to confront an uncertain future and children become carers. Families who should be planning birthdays, holidays and life milestones instead find themselves navigating endless hospital corridors, scans and treatments. Behind every statistic is a person and behind every policy discussion is a family desperately hoping for more time.

Today, I want to particularly recognise the courage of those families whose stories have been shared, often while living through the most unimaginable grief, so that others might one day have a better chance. I also want to pay tribute to the remarkable charities, researchers, clinicians and campaigners who have worked tirelessly to keep this issue on the national agenda: organisations such as the Brain Tumour Charity, Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission, Brain Tumour Research, Cancer Research UK and countless others that have not only supported patients and families, but have driven forward research, awareness and innovation.

Jim Shannon: To add to that collection of notable charities and individuals, Brainwaves NI has done substantial fundraising and has helped to add to the research at Queen's University and others. There are many others, and we cannot mention them all, but every one has done a grand job and we owe a debt to them that can never be repaid.

Dr Shastri-Hurst: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. There are countless charities that have done a huge amount of work, and what they are doing is making a tangible difference to people's lives.

Sadly, brain tumours remain one of the most challenging forms of cancer. In many instances, outcomes are no better than when I worked as a doctor in neurosurgery almost a decade and a half ago. The less survivable cancers taskforce has highlighted that one-year survival rates for less survivable cancers, which include brain cancers, remain significantly lower than the average across all cancers. Despite advances in medicine, outcomes for many patients have not improved at the pace that we would all wish to see. That is why the concerns raised by the petitioners are so important. Quite rightly, the petition calls for greater investment in research, wider access to whole-genome sequencing and stronger support for innovative treatments. Those are priorities that cannot be ignored any longer.

However, before I turn to those challenges, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the progress that has been made. The National Institute for Health and Care Research has established the brain tumour research consortium, which has brought together dozens of organisations to co-ordinate research and is backed by up to £25.5 million of investment. The recently enacted Rare Cancers Act 2026 represents another significant step forward, and I want to commend the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) for his work in bringing that legislation on to the statute book.

The establishment of the national speciality lead and a dedicated cancer registry service have the potential to improve co-ordination and data collection and strengthen research. The national cancer plan has recognised rare cancers as a priority area and committed to expanding successful models such as the Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission. Those developments are of course all welcome. As His Majesty's loyal Opposition, we supported the Rare Cancers Act throughout its passage through Parliament because we recognise that patients with rare cancers deserve the same urgency, focus and ambition as those with more common conditions.

However, the reality is that legislation alone does not save lives; the real test is the effectiveness of its implementation. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister could update us on what progress has been made in establishing the new structures required under the Rare Cancers Act. In particular, has the national speciality lead been appointed? When will the rare cancer registry become fully operational? How will success be measured? Patients and families deserve to know when they will begin to see tangible benefits from the legislation that Parliament has passed.

The petition also raised important questions about research participation and access to innovation. The Tessa Jowell Brain Cancer Mission highlighted that fewer than 5% of eligible adult brain tumour patients

were able to access whole-genome sequencing because of limitations in tissue sampling and biobanking capacity, which is deeply concerning. Genome sequencing has enormous potential to improve the understanding of tumour biology, identify personalised treatment pathways and increase participation in clinical trials. However, opportunities remain unevenly distributed across the country. The Brain Tumour Charity has also highlighted significant variations in infrastructure and staffing across neuro-oncology centres.

Helena Dollimore: As the hon. Gentleman describes, there is a postcode lottery in the treatment that people can access. In Hastings, a patient has to do a four-hour round trip to Brighton hospital to receive their basic treatment. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we must address this postcode lottery in brain cancer treatment?

Dr Shastri-Hurst: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that when someone is facing a devastating crisis, but has to travel excessive distances to get the treatment they deserve, there is something wrong with the system.

If we are serious about accelerating research, we must ensure that every patient has a fair opportunity to participate in it. That requires investment not only in laboratories and technology, but in a workforce that supports research and clinical innovation. What specific action are the Government taking to address those disparities and ensure that advances in research can benefit patients regardless of where they live?

The petition also reflects a wider frustration felt by many families facing brain cancer. When conventional options are exhausted, patients understandably look to emerging treatments and clinical trials with hope. Such hope is entirely understandable, but at the same time we must maintain rigorous standards of safety and evidence. The challenge for us as policymakers is not choosing between innovation and safety; it is ensuring that innovation can be assessed, trialled and adopted as quickly as possible, when the evidence supports it. That is why clinical research capacity and trial recruitment matter so much, and it is why access to cutting-edge treatments must remain a key priority.

On that point, the Government have committed to increase spending on branded medicines, and they have set out ambitious objectives for expanding participation in commercial clinical trials. Of course those ambitions are welcome, but they must be matched by delivery. The Office for Budget Responsibility has estimated that increasing spending on branded medicines will carry significant costs over the coming years, so can the Minister explain how the Government intend to fund those commitments? Patients need confidence that the announcements we hear today will be translated into treatments tomorrow.

Similarly, while we welcome the publication of the national cancer plan earlier this year, questions remain about its implementation. The shadow Health and Social Care Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew), supported the ambitions set out within the plan. However, he quite rightly called for clear, funded milestones, and those questions remain unanswered. When will the Government publish measurable targets for rare cancers, and how will progress be reported?

For all the challenges that we have discussed today, it is important that we recognise the reasons for hope. Medical research continues to achieve what once seems impossible. Just a few years ago, diffuse intrinsic pontine glioma was regarded as one of the most devastating childhood brain cancers, with very few children surviving beyond two years. However, through participation in innovative clinical trials, a young boy from Belgium named Lucas Jemeljanova experienced something quite extraordinary. Having been diagnosed at six, he entered the trial and, over time, scans showed a shrinking tumour, which eventually disappeared altogether. Lucas is now 13, and he is considered cured.

With every breakthrough that provides a scientific curiosity, the challenge before us as a Government, as an Opposition and as clinicians and researchers is to ensure that those breakthroughs happen more quickly and often, so that they can reach patients quicker. That is what the families behind this petition are seeking, and they deserve no less.

7.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mrs Sharon Hodgson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mrs Barker. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Paul Davies) for introducing the petition on behalf of the many people who signed it and secured the debate today. It has been so well attended, as we can see from the number of Members here and the fact that the Gallery is full, which really shows its importance.

Earlier this month, I was honoured to join a meeting of the all-party parliamentary group on brain tumours, which was also very well attended, and to hear the personal stories and lived experience shared by those affected by brain cancer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh) for her tireless work as the chair of the all-party group and for her committed campaigning on behalf of brain cancer patients in memory of her sister Margaret McDonagh, who so many of us knew so well and remember so fondly.

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): A remarkable North Somerset constituent, Jane, is watching this debate. Having been diagnosed in March last year with an incurable brain tumour, Jane has asked me to speak in the debate, because she wants us all to understand what it feels like to be told, “Treatment will manage your tumour, not cure it.” Does my hon. Friend agree that my constituent Jane is not just brave, but amazing?

Mrs Hodgson: Absolutely. I cannot think of a worthier cause than turning brain cancer from terminal to treatable. That is something that we can absolutely all get behind. I am especially grateful to Brain Cancer Justice, which led the campaign for the petition and this very well-attended debate, as well as Brain Tumour Research and the Brain Tumour Charity. They all do fantastic work advocating for people diagnosed with a brain tumour and their loved ones.

Since this Government came into office, over 232,000 more people got a cancer diagnosis or an all-clear on time, about 42,000 more patients started treatment on time, and rates of early diagnosis are hitting record highs. A lot has been done, but there is a lot more to do, especially on rare and less common cancers. That is why

my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), made sure that the national cancer plan would be the first plan in history to have a chapter dedicated to rare cancers.

There are not enough treatment options available for people with brain cancer. I have spoken to so many patients and campaigners who are searching for that glimmer of hope on clinical trials. This desperate search takes a real toll on them, not to mention their families and carers. We will prioritise their access to specialist treatment and multidisciplinary teams, and we want to ensure that all patients with rare cancer can benefit from the best care available. We will work with charities to make sure that patients are getting the right information to manage their cancer care. We are rolling out Jess’s rule and tracking cancer diagnosed in emergency settings.

Greg Smith: Notwithstanding the important points raised by the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst), about robust safeguards in the testing of new treatments, the United States has legislated for a right to try for those who have got to the point at which they have little other option left. Will the Government look to that model to ensure that brain tumour patients can have the right to try innovative new treatments?

Mrs Hodgson: I am certainly happy to look at the model in the US around the right to try.

I also want to update the House that we are appointing a national clinical lead for rare cancers, who will sit on the national cancer board. The benchmark is to improve outcomes and five-year survival rates for 14 less common cancers, including brain cancer. I know that Members will all hold us to account on that score.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): I join the Minister in paying tribute to the many brain cancer patients and their families who have campaigned for change. They include Joanna and Dennis from Beckenham and Penge, who lost their son Ollie at just 29 years old, and Tessa Jowell, who brought national attention to brain cancer nearly 10 years ago when she was diagnosed. I had the honour of working for her, and she would have been my neighbouring MP. I do a lot of work with the Tessa Jowell Foundation; tomorrow is their gala dinner in the Olympic Park, another legacy of Tessa’s. Will the Minister support the foundation’s calls for faster access to trials, including the right to try, precision medicine, equitable care regardless of postcode and—as Tessa would say—patient-centred care, helping people to live well with cancer and not simply die of it?

Mrs Hodgson: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the late, great Tessa Jowell in this debate. I had the privilege of being the shadow Health Minister and speaking in one of the debates we had in the House, and her legacy does live on.

I must move on, because I want to talk about brain cancer research.

Charlie Maynard: Will the Minister give way?

Mrs Hodgson: This will have to be the last intervention.

Charlie Maynard: On the fully accountable lead, there are two positions: one has £5,000 in funding and one is 0.1 of a full-time employee. Will the Minister commit to one person who is fully funded and fully accountable, please?

Mrs Hodgson: I will come back to the hon. Gentleman's point. I really do have to get through some things and respond to the number of people who spoke about brain cancer research, because nearly all hon. Members mentioned that.

Through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, we have directly invested more than £32 million since the general election. My hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley and so many other colleagues mentioned the £40 million commitment for brain cancer research in 2018 and the fact that it had not all been spent. Prior to the general election in 2024, that was the case, but I can confirm that since the general election, the spend from NIHR programmes alone has now been in excess of £40 million since 2018.

That £40 million is not a funding ceiling. We will continue to fund research that is recommended by our funding committees and independent peer reviewers. That includes more than £25 million for the NIHR brain tumour research consortium, which brings together 48 organisations across the UK in a national, co-ordinated effort to help deliver better research faster. We are also partnering with Cancer Research UK, providing almost £3 million to co-fund the brain tumour centres of excellence; this collaboration will accelerate the delivery of innovative treatments to patients. We will continue to build on our investments and fund high-quality brain cancer research.

As we reaffirmed in the national cancer plan, the Government will implement the Rare Cancers Act in full, starting with the appointment of an NIHR national specialty lead for rare cancers this summer. That appointment is under way, and that person, once appointed, will make sure that we are delivering research for patients. Implementing the Act will also make it easier for researchers to connect with patients living with rare cancers, including brain tumours, and streamline recruitment into clinical trials.

Our 10-year health plan will make the UK a global leader in clinical research, because we want every patient in the country to have the chance to sign up to a clinical trial should they wish to do so. The hon. Members for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) and for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding) and my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Steve Yemm)

all asked me about clinical trials. We have announced a clinical trials accelerator, Be Part of Research, which allows users to search for relevant studies and register their interest.

I turn to brain tissue freezing and to the specific points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Caerphilly (Chris Evans) and so many others. Earlier this month, I met him and other colleagues, as well as Ellie James, the campaigner for Owain's law. Can I just say how moved I was? My hon. Friend knows that no one can fail to be moved by Ellie's story. She spoke for many people, not just in Wales but across the United Kingdom, and I have asked the NHS to take action.

NHS England has completed a gap analysis of the need for freezer capacity, as my hon. Friend mentioned, and is looking at how to support services to provide an equitable expansion of that capacity. I have also asked the Department and NHS England to work with professional bodies, including the Royal College of Pathologists, to review tissue retention guidance and consent processes, which is what we discussed. We are looking at ways to support trusts to expand freezer capacity, and I will be happy to update colleagues in the autumn.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) asked me about workforce. We will be publishing the 10-year workforce plan imminently; it will set out action to create a workforce ready to deliver the transformed services set out in the 10-year health plan.

I want to end by saying that I do not see it as my job just to represent the Government to patients and campaigners. It is also my job to be their voice in Government, and I take that role very seriously. For the last 20 years, I have sat where other Members are or where the shadow Minister is, so I completely understand where everyone is coming from. I think I am going to run out of time, but 35 Back Benchers have spoken—

Paula Barker (in the Chair): Order.

7.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Monday 15 June 2026

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Meningitis B

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mrs Sharon Hodgson): Today, I am announcing a meningococcal group B immunisation programme to protect those at highest immediate risk of MenB disease this autumn.

Meningococcal disease is a serious but uncommon illness caused by meningococcal bacteria. It can lead to meningitis—inflammation of the lining of the brain—and sepsis. Meningococcal disease is life-threatening and can result in life-changing disabilities such as amputations, hearing loss, and brain damage. It is fatal in around 10% of cases. There are multiple strains of meningococcal bacteria, including MenA, MenB, MenC, MenW, and MenY. The NHS already offers the MenB vaccine to infants and the MenACWY vaccine to adolescents and young adults.

Earlier this year, we saw the fastest growing and largest MenB outbreak ever seen in the UK in Kent and there have been more MenB clusters than normal this year, some of which have been larger than normal. There is therefore significant uncertainty about the level of risk MenB poses this year, with it being plausible that the bacteria are now more likely to cause disease. I have asked the department to undertake further work to better understand whether the clinical risk has changed.

During the outbreak earlier this year, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, which provides expert independent advice on our vaccination programmes, was asked to re-examine eligibility for the MenB vaccination programme. As we await full JCVI assessment, I have decided to offer vaccination as a one-off, targeted programme to the group at highest immediate risk from MenB this autumn. In line with the JCVI's assessment of the relative priority, I have made this decision now to ensure that vaccination will be available from July to mitigate risk from the start of the new academic year in September.

People currently in the year 13 age group in England and Wales—those born between 1 September 2007 and 31 August 2008—will be eligible for vaccination. All people within this date of birth range will receive this offer irrespective of their education plans. Comparable approaches will be taken in Northern Ireland and Scotland for their equivalent school years, year 14 and S6 respectively.

People under 25 years of age attending higher education or living at some residential further education settings for the first time in the 2026-2027 academic year will also be eligible for vaccination. Based on the available data, the UK Health Security Agency estimated that the relative risk of invasive MenB disease in first-year university students is substantially greater than in their peers. Postgraduates or those starting a second—or later—year will not be covered by this offer, as we are prioritising those at highest immediate risk this autumn. I am encouraging international students who are coming

to the UK to study to have at least a first dose before travelling to the UK to ensure both doses can be received before the expected peak of disease in October and November.

MenB vaccination protects only the recipient. The MenB vaccine is highly effective: vaccine effectiveness is estimated to be between 85% to 95%. MenB outbreaks will still occur, but vaccination will better protect those at the highest immediate risk.

The JCVI is updating its assessment of the appropriate eligibility for routine MenB vaccination, which will be provided to Ministers in due course. I will consider that advice before making any longer-term decisions regarding MenB vaccination.

Two doses of the MenB vaccination are required for protection. Further information on how to access the vaccine will be published in the coming weeks. I strongly encourage eligible people to come forward from late July to receive both doses before the new academic year. The offer will be available across all four UK nations.

[HCWS113]

HOME DEPARTMENT

UK Policing: EU Vehicle Registration Tool

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): From today, UK police will have access to an EU tool to check vehicle and keeper details to support criminal investigations. This reciprocal data sharing will provide an additional avenue of investigation in tackling cross-border crime as well as serious crimes committed in the UK.

This capability will play a crucial role in assisting police in the UK and across Europe in cracking down on a multitude of crimes including trafficking of illicit substances, sexual offences and serious assaults (including murder). It will also assist the police in monitoring suspicious activity such as minor driving-related offences.

A simple search on a secure web portal will return results in 10 seconds and, in the case of a match, will provide police with the name of the vehicle keeper and important information about the vehicle. The results will also include markers on cars flagged as stolen, which can be used by police forces in helping to tackle the issue of car theft in the UK.

Vehicle registration data exchanges are provided for in the UK-EU trade and co-operation agreement and this step will contribute to our ongoing efforts to deepen the close co-operation between UK law enforcement and their European counterparts.

[HCWS110]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

“Growing up in the Online World” Consultation

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Liz Kendall): I will be updating the House via an oral statement later today.

[HCWS112]

TRANSPORT

Third Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):

I am pleased to inform the House that the Government published the third cycling and walking investment strategy—CWIS3—on Friday 12 June 2026.

Investing in active travel delivers benefits across every aspect of life—improving physical and mental health, boosting economic growth, cleaning up our air, and giving people of all ages real affordable transport choice to cut the cost of living.

The strategy sets out a vision that walking, wheeling and cycling are safe, easy and accessible choices for everyone. This is supported by an ambitious target that by 2035, 55% of all short stages in towns and cities will be walked or cycled.

The strategy includes three new statutory objectives:

- Enable more people, particularly the least active, to benefit from physical activity through active travel;
- make active travel the easy and integrated choice; and
- improve safety for people walking, wheeling and cycling.

Over the five years of the strategy (2025 to 2030), we will focus on enabling millions more children to walk, wheel and cycle to school by providing safe, coherent networks that connect schools, high streets and homes. Alongside this, through the work of Active Travel England, we will establish the basis for a national active travel network by connecting the high-quality local routes already built, funded or planned.

Beyond the CWIS3 period, we are introducing an ambitious target that 60% of children aged five to 16 will usually walk or cycle to school by 2035.

The strategy projects over £4.5 billion of investment in active travel across the CWIS3 period, including £1.1 billion of funding for Active Travel England.

The strategy marks a fundamental shift in how active travel ambition is set, delivered and integrated into local transport networks. It is the first locally-designed national

strategy—delivered in line with our ambitious programme of English devolution supported by record multi-year funding.

Alongside the strategy, I am laying before Parliament a report which outlines progress in delivering the previous—second—cycling and walking investment strategy for the period 2021 to 2025.

[HCWS111]

WORK AND PENSIONS

ILO Convention on Biological Hazards in the Working Environment

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): I would like to inform the House that today the Government will place a copy of the International Labour Organisation biological hazards in the working environment convention (No. 192), in the form of an explanatory note, in the Libraries of both Houses. The explanatory note will also include the accompanying biological hazards in the working environment recommendation (No. 209).

Convention No. 192 and recommendation No. 209 were adopted at the 113th session of the International Labour Conference in June 2025. The convention establishes international standards to strengthen the prevention of, and protection against, biological hazards in the workplace, including through arrangements for preparedness and response to accidents and emergencies.

The Government support the aim of the convention and recommendation, which is to strengthen protections for workers against biological hazards through prevention, preparedness and effective enforcement. However, the Government are not in a position to ratify convention No. 192. While UK policy broadly aligns with the objectives of the convention, consultation has identified that some legislative and procedural changes would be required for UK ratification. The specific reasons are set out in the explanatory note. The UK will continue to consider ratification in the future.

[HCWS109]

Written Corrections

Monday 15 June 2026

Other Corrections

RUSHANARA ALI

Legacy of Jo Cox

The following extract is from the debate on the Legacy of Jo Cox on 11 June 2026.

Rushanara Ali:...And we must not forget the far-right extremist, radicalised on the internet, who attacked my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) in 2010.

[*Official Report*, 11 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 509.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Stepney (Rushanara Ali):

Rushanara Ali:...And we must not forget the **religious** extremist, radicalised on the internet, who attacked my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms) in 2010.

JOE POWELL

Grenfell Tower Fire: Ninth Anniversary

The following extracts are from the debate on Grenfell Tower Fire: Ninth Anniversary on 11 June 2026.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): This Sunday will be the ninth anniversary of the Grenfell tower fire. With thousands of others, I will join the silent walk on father's day to remember the 72 people who lost their lives in an entirely preventable and foreseen tragedy, and to support families who lost parents, siblings and children in unimaginable circumstances.

[*Official Report*, 11 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 536.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell):

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): This Sunday will be the ninth anniversary of the Grenfell tower fire. With thousands of others, I will join the silent walk **a week before** father's day to remember the 72 people who lost their lives in an entirely preventable and foreseen tragedy, and to support families who lost parents, siblings and children in unimaginable circumstances.

Joe Powell:...The last report shows that 20 of 61 recommendations are complete and 40 are in progress.

[*Official Report*, 11 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 537.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Kensington and Bayswater (Joe Powell):

Joe Powell:...The last report shows that **21** of 61 recommendations are complete and 40 are in progress.

ORAL ANSWERS

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Monday 22 June 2026**

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