Monday
22 June 2026

Volume 788
No. 19

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 22 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.

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2026
This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament licence, which is published at www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright/.

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

(FORMED BY THE RT HON. SIR KEIR STARMER KCB, KC, MP, JULY 2024)

Prime Minister, First Lord of the Treasury, Minister for the Civil Service and Minister for the Union—The Rt Hon. Sir Keir Starmer KCB, KC, MP

Deputy Prime Minister, Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice—The Rt Hon. David Lammy, MP

Chancellor of the Exchequer—The Rt Hon. Rachel Reeves, MP

Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs—The Rt Hon. Yvette Cooper, MP

Secretary of State for the Home Department—The Rt Hon. Shabana Mahmood, MP

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions—The Rt Hon. Pat McFadden, MP

Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations—The Rt Hon. Darren Jones, MP

Secretary of State for Defence—The Rt Hon. Dan Jarvis MBE, MP

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care—The Rt Hon. James Murray, MP

Secretary of State for Education, and Minister for Women and Equalities—The Rt Hon. Bridget Phillipson, MP

Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero—The Rt Hon. Ed Miliband, MP

Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government—The Rt Hon. Steve Reed OBE, MP

Secretary of State for Business and Trade, and President of the Board of Trade—The Rt Hon. Peter Kyle, MP

Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology—The Rt Hon. Liz Kendall, MP

Secretary of State for Transport—The Rt Hon. Heidi Alexander, MP

Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—The Rt Hon. Emma Reynolds, MP

Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport—The Rt Hon. Lisa Nandy, MP

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland—The Rt Hon. Hilary Benn, MP

Secretary of State for Scotland—The Rt Hon. Douglas Alexander, MP

Secretary of State for Wales—The Rt Hon. Jo Stevens, MP

Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Chief Whip)—The Rt Hon. Jonathan Reynolds, MP

Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Lords—The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Basildon

Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons—The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Campbell, MP

ALSO ATTENDS CABINET

Chief Secretary to the Treasury—The Rt Hon. Lucy Rigby, KC, MP

Attorney General—The Rt Hon. Lord Hermer, KC

Minister without Portfolio—The Rt Hon. Anna Turley, MP

Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office—The Rt Hon. Baroness Chapman of Darlington

Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office—The Rt Hon. Nick Thomas-Symonds, MP

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business and Trade —

Secretary of State and President of the Board of Trade—The Rt Hon. Peter Kyle, MP

Ministers of State—
Lord Stockwood (Minister for Investment) §
Sir Chris Bryant, MP (Minister for Trade) §

Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State—
Blair McDougall, MP
Kate Dearden, MP
Chris McDonald, MP §
Lord Leong CBE

Cabinet Office—

Prime Minister, First Lord of the Treasury, Minister for the Civil Service and Minister for the Union—The Rt Hon. Sir Keir Starmer KCB, KC, MP

Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations—The Rt Hon. Darren Jones, MP

Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office—The Rt Hon. Nick Thomas-Symonds, MP

Ministers of State—
Dame Angela Eagle DBE, MP §
The Rt Hon. Anna Turley, MP (Minister without Portfolio)

Parliamentary Secretaries—
Chris Ward, MP
Satvir Kaur, MP
James Frith, MP §
Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent

Culture, Media and Sport —

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Lisa Nandy, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Ian Murray, MP (Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Stephanie Peacock, MP
Baroness Twycross

Defence—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Dan Jarvis MBE, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
Luke Pollard, MP (Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry)
Lord Coaker

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Louise Sandher-Jones, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)
Calvin Bailey MBE, MP (Minister for Veterans and People)

Education—

SECRETARY OF STATE, AND MINISTER FOR WOMEN AND EQUALITIES—The Rt Hon. Bridget Phillipson, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
Georgia Gould OBE, MP (Minister for School Standards)
The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Malvern (Minister for Skills, and Minister for Women and Equalities) §
The Rt Hon. Sir Stephen Timms, MP (Minister for Social Security and Disability) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Olivia Bailey, MP
Josh MacAlister OBE, MP
Seema Malhotra, MP §

Energy Security and Net Zero—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Ed Miliband, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
Lord Vallance of Balham KCB (Minister for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear) §
Michael Shanks, MP (Minister for Energy)
Lord Whitehead CBE (Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Katie White OBE, MP
Martin McCluskey, MP
Chris McDonald, MP §

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Emma Reynolds, MP

MINISTER OF STATE—Stephen Morgan, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Emma Hardy, MP
Mary Creagh CBE, MP
Baroness Hayman of Ullock

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office —

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Yvette Cooper, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
The Rt Hon. Baroness Chapman of Darlington
Stephen Doughty, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Hamish Falconer, MP
Seema Malhotra, MP §
Chris Elmore, MP

Health and Social Care—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. James Murray, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
Karin Smyth, MP (Minister for Secondary Care)
Stephen Kinnock, MP (Minister for Care)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Baroness Merron
Sharon Hodgson, MP
Preet Kaur Gill, MP

Home Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Shabana Mahmood, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
Dame Angela Eagle DBE, MP (Minister for Security) §
The Rt Hon. Lord Hanson of Flint

Sarah Jones, MP (Minister for Policing and Crime)
Alex Norris, MP (Minister for Border Security and Asylum)

Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State—
Mike Tapp, MP
Natalie Fleet, MP

Housing, Communities and Local Government—

Secretary of State—The Rt Hon. Steve Reed OBE, MP

Ministers of State—
Matthew Pennycook, MP (Minister for Housing and Planning)
Alison McGovern, MP (Minister for Local Government and Homelessness)

Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State—
Baroness Taylor of Stevenage
Samantha Dixon MBE, MP
Nesil Caliskan, MP
Lord Lemos CMG CBE

Justice—

Deputy Prime Minister, Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State—The Rt Hon. David Lammy, MP

Ministers of State—
Lord Timpson OBE (Minister for Prisons, Probation and Reducing Reoffending)
Sarah Sackman, KC, MP (Minister for Courts and Legal Services)

Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State—
Catherine Atkinson, MP
Baroness Levitt, KC
Jake Richards, MP §

Law Officers—

Attorney General—The Rt Hon. Lord Hermer, KC

Solicitor General—The Rt Hon. Ellie Reeves, KC, MP

Advocate General for Scotland—Baroness Smith of Cluny, KC

Leader of the House of Commons—

Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons—The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Campbell, MP

Leader of the House of Lords—

Lord Privy Seal and Leader of the House of Lords—The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Basildon

Deputy Leader of the House of Lords—Lord Collins of Highbury

Northern Ireland Office—

Secretary of State—The Rt Hon. Hilary Benn, MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State—Matthew Patrick, MP

Science, Innovation and Technology—

Secretary of State—The Rt Hon. Liz Kendall, MP

Ministers of State—
Lord Vallance of Balham KCB (Minister for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear) §
The Rt Hon. Ian Murray, MP (Minister for Digital Government and Data) §

Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State—
Baroness Lloyd of Effra CBE
Kanishka Narayan, MP
James Frith, MP §

Scotland Office—

Secretary of State—The Rt Hon. Douglas Alexander, MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State—Kirsty McNeill, MP

Transport—

Secretary of State—The Rt Hon. Heidi Alexander, MP

Minister of State—Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill CBE (Minister for Rail)

Parliamentary Under-Secretaries of State—
Simon Lightwood, MP
Lilian Greenwood, MP §
Keir Mather, MP

Treasury—

Chancellor of the Exchequer—The Rt Hon. Rachel Reeves, MP

Chief Secretary—The Rt Hon. Lucy Rigby, KC, MP

Financial Secretary—Lord Livermore

Exchequer Secretary—Dan Tomlinson, MP

Economic Secretary—Rachel Blake, MP

Minister of State—Lord Stockwood (Minister for Investment) §

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—
The Rt Hon. Jonathan Reynolds, MP (Chief Whip)
Torsten Bell, MP §

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—
Christian Wakeford, MP
Lilian Greenwood, MP §
Deirdre Costigan, MP
Jade Botterill, MP
Taiwo Owatemi, MP

ASSISTANT WHIPS—
Mark Ferguson, MP
Imogen Walker, MP
Gregor Poynton, MP
Shaun Davies, MP
Claire Hughes, MP §
Emma Foody, MP
Jake Richards, MP §

UK Export Finance—

PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Peter Kyle, MP

MINISTER FOR TRADE—Sir Chris Bryant, MP §

Wales Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Jo Stevens, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Anna McMorrin, MP
Claire Hughes, MP §

Work and Pensions—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Pat McFadden, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—
The Rt Hon. Sir Stephen Timms, MP (Minister for Social Security and Disability) §
The Rt Hon. Dame Diana Johnson DBE, MP (Minister for Employment)
The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Malvern (Minister for Skills) §
Baroness Sherlock OBE

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
Andrew Western, MP
Torsten Bell, MP §

His Majestys Household —

LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Lord Benyon GCVO

LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Rosslyn

MASTER OF THE HORSE—The Rt Hon. Lord Ashton of Hyde

TREASURER—The Rt Hon. Sir Mark Tami, MP

VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Sir Nicholas Dakin, MP

COMPTROLLER—Gen Kitchen, MP

CAPTAIN OF THE HONOURABLE CORPS OF GENTLEMEN-AT-ARMS—The Rt Hon. Lord Kennedy of Southwark

CAPTAIN OF THE KING'S BODYGUARD OF THE YEOMEN OF THE GUARD—Baroness Wheeler MBE

LORDS IN WAITING—
Lord Wilson of Sedgefield
Lord Katz MBE

BARONESSES IN WAITING—
Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath
Baroness Curran
Baroness Blake of Leeds

§ Members of the Government listed under more than one Department

---

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING THE CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—Marsha De Cordova, MP

REPRESENTING THE SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE ON THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION—The Rt Hon. Sir Jeremy Wright, KC, MP

REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—Nick Smith, MP

REPRESENTING THE RESTORATION AND RENEWAL CLIENT BOARD—Nick Smith, MP

HOUSE OF COMMONS

The Speaker—The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP

Chairman of Ways and Means—Ms Nusrat Ghani, MP

First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means—Judith Cummins, MP

Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means—The Rt Hon. Caroline Nokes, MP

Panel of Chairs—

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan, Paula Barker, Mr Clive Betts, Dawn Butler, Sir Christopher Chope, Peter Dowd, Clive Efford, Gill Furniss, The Rt Hon. Sir Roger Gale, Carolyn Harris, The Rt Hon. Sir John Hayes, Wera Hobhouse, Dr Rupa Huq, Christine Jardine, The Rt Hon. Sir Edward Leigh, Emma Lewell, Dame Siobhain McDonagh, The Rt Hon. Esther McVey, The Rt Hon. David Mundell, The Rt Hon. Dr Andrew Murrison, The Rt Hon. Mark Pritchard, The Rt Hon. Sir Alec Shelbrooke, Graham Stringer, The Rt Hon. Graham Stuart, The Rt Hon. Sir Desmond Swayne, Karl Turner, Derek Twigg, The Rt Hon. Valerie Vaz, Martin Vickers, Matt Western, Pete Wishart, The Rt Hon. Sir Jeremy Wright KC.

Secretary—Lynn Gardner

House of Commons Commission—

The Speaker, The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP (Chair), Marianne Cwynarski CBE (Director General), Mr Shrinivas Honap (External Member), Tom Goldsmith (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Administration), Elizabeth Honer (External Member), The Rt Hon. Steve Barclay, MP, Rachel Blake, MP, The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Campbell, MP (Leader of the House), Bobby Dean, MP, The Rt Hon. Jesse Norman, MP, Nick Smith, MP

Secretary to the Commission—Lloyd Owen

Assistant Secretary—Edward Potton

Commons Executive Board—

Tom Goldsmith (Clerk of the House and Head of the House of Commons Administration) (Chair), Marianne Cwynarski CBE (Director General), Sarah Davies (Clerk Assistant and Managing Director, Chamber and Participation Team), Dr Grant Hill-Cawthorne (Librarian and Managing Director, Research and Information), James Rhys (Managing Director, Select Committee Team), Vicky Rock (Finance Director and Managing Director, Finance, Portfolio and Performance), Saira Salimi (Speaker's Counsel), Richard Shoreland (Managing Director, People and Culture), Andy Smith (Managing Director, Parliamentary Digital Service)

Secretary to the Board—Hannah Bryce

Speaker's Secretary and Chief of Staff—Helen Wood

Speaker's Counsel—Saira Salimi

Speaker's Chaplain—The Venerable Andrew Hillier

Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards—Daniel Greenberg CB

THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-NINTH PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 9 July 2024]

FOURTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 788**

THIRD VOLUME OF SESSION 2026-2027

House of Commons

Monday 22 June 2026

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

New Members

The following Members took and subscribed the Oath required by law:

Lara Bird-Leakey *for* Arbroath and Broughty Ferry
Douglas Lumsden, Aberdeen South
Right honourable Andrew Murray Burnham, Makerfield.

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

School Food Standards

1. **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to improve the nutritional standards of school food. [900519]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey): I am delighted to see the enthusiasm for our reforms to school food. We want children to enjoy eating tasty, healthy food at school. That is why we are updating school food standards for the first time in a decade and putting young people's voices at the heart of our plans. We will publish the new standards in September alongside our record expansion of free school meals, driving down poverty and delivering a revolution in school food.

Jim Dickson: Mr Speaker, I know that looking at me you would never guess that my children are now well past school age, but when they were at school—long past Jamie Oliver's campaign against turkey twizzlers—the school food served was still not as healthy as it should have been, so I am delighted by the Minister's assurance that the Government have consulted on the first update to school food standards in a decade. I am, however, slightly puzzled by the phased approach to improving the drinks served in secondary schools until September 2028. Will the Government consider speeding up the timetable and moving towards alignment with primary schools, so that we do not miss a crucial opportunity to improve the health of our young people?

Olivia Bailey: Alongside updating the standards, we also want to support schools to implement them. That is why, alongside developing new governance and compliance proposals, it is right that we give schools the time they need to prepare and embed the new standards, including phasing some changes in secondary schools. The consultation on our proposals closed just over a week ago and we will consider all responses carefully.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I recently visited Ralph Allen school in my constituency and saw how students were leading the way in improving the standard of their food. They have created a vegetable bed in an empty space, and are now offering vegan and vegetarian choices. How will the Department support schools in pupil-led improvements to their food?

Olivia Bailey: I thank the hon. Lady for that really important question and I am really glad to hear of the fantastic example in her constituency. It is really important that our approach to food is embedded right the way across the school curriculum, whether that is children planting their own vegetables in schools or designing

their own menus. That is why, as part of our consultation, we have been listening to young people's voices. Young people will continue to be at the forefront of our new school menus.

SEND Improvement Plans: Multi-academy Trusts

2. **Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): What assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of planned SEND reforms on the ability of local authorities to effectively co-operate with multi-academy trusts on the delivery of local area SEND improvement plans. [900520]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): Through the national consultation and local special educational needs and disabilities reform plans, we are ensuring that multi-academy trusts play a key role in SEND reforms. New national inclusion standards will create shared expectations for all schools around inclusive education, and the SEND reforms make clear our expectations that all multi-academy trusts and schools work in partnership with local authorities to ensure the needs of every child in an area are met.

Clive Jones: I thank the Minister for her answer. Without clear levers, accountability cannot be guaranteed and the Department cannot ensure that SEND reforms translate into consistent, high-quality support for children and their families on the ground. Will the Minister clarify what specific and enforceable powers local authorities will have to ensure that multi-academy trusts play their full part in delivering local area SEND plans?

Georgia Gould: The Government will be setting national standards for all schools, including multi-academy trusts. National inclusion standards will be developed by an independent expert panel and all schools will need to ensure they are delivered. We are also introducing new inspections for multi-academy trusts that will focus on a range of levers, including the importance of inclusion in education. Through our focus on area partnerships, we are really clear that every player, whether schools, health services or local authorities, needs to work together to deliver for children.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Special needs specialists in schools in my constituency have raised with me their concerns about the shortage of educational psychologists. A mum of a profoundly disabled child, who I met on Saturday, raised concerns about the shortage of occupational therapists. What are the Government doing to address the additional needs of that specific group of people?

Georgia Gould: I really appreciate that question. Making educational psychologists, occupational therapists and speech and language therapists far more accessible for students in mainstream education is at the heart of our reforms. We are investing £1.8 billion in the new Experts at Hand service, which will start from September. As part of that, we are also investing £40 million into training new educational psychologists and speech and language therapists, developing the workforce to ensure that all children have access to an inclusive education.

Apprenticeships

3. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to support apprenticeships for young people. [900521]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): Under this Government, apprenticeship starts by young people are up. We are going further and investing an additional £1 billion to support 50,000 more young people into apprenticeships with the new foundation apprenticeships, and providing £2,000 for smaller employers when they hire young apprentices.

Jerome Mayhew: There is no correlation between what the Minister says and what is happening on the ground. In Broadland and Fakenham, in the last year the number of apprenticeships has dropped by 20%. It has not gone up; it has gone from 150, down to 120. If the Minister thinks that more apprenticeships are a good idea, why does he not sign up for 100,000 new ones, and support the Conservative new deal for young people?

Josh MacAlister: I think we should look at what people do, not what they say. This is a Government who are reversing the decline; apprenticeship starts by young people reduced by 40% under the previous Government. We are taking a range of steps, including supporting small and medium-sized enterprises, and giving greater flexibility in the apprenticeship system, all to create an extra 50,000 opportunities for young people.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a governor at two educational institutions, and I chair the all-party parliamentary group on sixth form education. My question is on access to the apprenticeship register, because in Stoke-on-Trent, great companies such as the Spark Group are struggling to get the registration they want in order to grow their offer to young people. They are limited by the £100,000 de minimis for subcontracting, but they have young people who want to take on the apprenticeships they are offering. Will the Minister set out what this Government might do to change that, and will he agree to meet me and the Spark Group so that we can look at ways it can give young people the opportunities they want?

Josh MacAlister: My hon. Friend is a fierce champion for apprenticeships and technical education. I am happy to meet him to discuss those matters further. The Minister for Skills, my noble friend Baroness Smith in the other place, has taken a whole series of actions with the Secretary of State to reform our apprenticeship system, opening it up to create tens of thousands of additional opportunities for young people.

Schools Funding

4. **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to increase levels of funding for schools. [900522]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): I am pleased to say that this Government are driving record investment in our schools, with the core schools

budget increasing by £1.7 billion this year. That includes funding that allows us to reform the special educational needs and disabilities system, training our teachers, making our schools more inclusive, and ensuring that every child can achieve and thrive.

Sarah Coombes: Eaton Valley primary school in West Bromwich has enthusiastically embraced net zero, and the Government have supported it by putting solar panels on the roof, providing a battery to store the power, and installing electric vehicle charge points in the car park. Those measures are already saving the school hundreds of pounds in energy bills every week. Will the Government look to roll out similar schemes, which reduce carbon emissions and allow more money to be invested directly into teachers and pupils, across further schools in the Black Country?

Bridget Phillipson: Yes, we will. We a rolling out the GB Energy solar programme to around 350 schools and colleges. We are also unlocking private finance investment in solar and energy efficiency for schools and colleges, with pilots planned for later this year. I am pleased to hear about the impact of the scheme in my hon. Friend's constituency. A school local to me in Sunderland recently shared that they had saved £4,000 this year through being part of the scheme, which they are using to put on more school trips and activities. We are saving schools money on their energy bills, which will allow them to invest more in driving up standards and teacher quality.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): St Andrew's primary school in Shifnal in my constituency is about to see a multimillion rebuild—or a new build in phases. Most of that money, but not all, will come from the Department for Education. Will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that the funding is delivered, so that the school continues to offer the extra 25 places, as well as the 26-place nursery, that are part of the scheme? We have had false starts before, but this needs to be delivered—we need commitment from the Government.

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for raising what is obviously a very important case in his constituency. I will ensure that I look into the concerns he has raised and, if it would help him to meet a Minister to discuss it further, I will ensure that that is arranged, too.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): With the growing obesity and mental health crises among our children and young people, quality physical education has never been more important, yet annual funding for PE will be slashed by a staggering 22% under the new PE and school sport partnerships network, with primary schools hit particularly hard. To make matters worse, these cuts are being hastily rammed through midway through the school year, leaving teachers, parents and sports co-ordinators completely stranded. Can the Secretary of State look parents and teachers in the eye and claim that cutting sports budgets mid-term is giving every child the opportunity to get on?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with where the hon. Lady started, which is that PE and sport—call it access to high-quality sports coaching, provision and resourcing in terms of capital investment in schools—are incredibly important. Alongside the work we are doing on school food to ensure that children get a great meal at lunch time in particular and our huge expansion of free school meals, we have committed more than £1 billion of investment into the work to establish that new PE and sport partnership. We are ensuring that primary schools are supported through that process with transitional payments and support, as well as working closely with leadership organisations to ensure that schools have all the information they need as we move towards the new system, which has been widely welcomed by sporting bodies and other organisations as opening up opportunities for more young people. I would be happy to discuss the subject further with the hon. Lady, because I think there has been some misunderstanding about the approach we are taking around transitional protections and support for primary schools.

Children of Military Families: Educational Support

5. **Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of educational support provided to the children of military families. [900523]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): We are deeply grateful for the service of military families and recognise the additional pressures that military life puts on the education and family life of those families. We are working closely with colleagues in the Ministry of Defence to address this area. Schools receive service pupil premium funding to address challenges including mobility and family separation, and we are improving special educational needs and disabilities support for families who move frequently, including proposing new digital individual support plans and education, health and care plans to make those moves easier.

Mr Forster: Brookwood primary school in Woking educates a significant number of military children because Army Training Centre Pirbright is nearby. Those children have their education disrupted because of the nature of their parents' vital work in the armed forces. In this Armed Forces Week, will the Government look at what further support they can give, including by increasing the service pupil premium, which has gone up by just £20 in two years?

Georgia Gould: I am visiting a garrison in North Yorkshire in similar circumstances soon to talk to families and schools about the particular pressures they face in supporting children with that high level of mobility. We are working closely on this matter, as I have set out, particularly through the SEND reforms. Time and again, I hear from military families that one of the biggest barriers for them, where there is an additional need, is how hard it can be to move from place to place. I have set out some of the changes we are making, but it is an area that we are looking at closely, and I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss it further.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): This morning I had the honour of taking part in the flag raising ahead of Armed Forces Day in Thurrock in my home patch. I reflected that while the impact of service is one of pride, there is also a big impact on the families of the men and women who bravely serve our country, and

particularly on those with special educational needs and disabilities. What measures is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that when a child with SEND follows their parent due to their military service, they are not adversely impacted?

Georgia Gould: As I have set out, it is far too hard to move SEND provision from place to place in the country at the moment. The changes that we are making—introducing national inclusion standards, national specialist provision packages and digital individual support plans and EHCPs—will make a massive difference in making it far easier to move provision. We are absolutely consulting on this; I continue to talk to military families and welcome their engagement on this important issue.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): In this Armed Forces Week, I want to draw the Minister's attention back to the issue she has just been discussing. I have heard too often from the service families in my area that when they need to move, their child's EHCP, which they have spent some time arguing for, does not automatically follow them. That not only disrupts the child's education but makes it much harder for the family to move together; often the person serving has to move first. I implore the Minister not just to come up with digital solutions but to work closely with the Ministry of Defence to address this crucial matter.

Georgia Gould: Last week, I met a Minister from the Ministry of Defence and we discussed exactly that issue. I have heard from service personnel who have turned down jobs as a result of being worried about provision for their child if they move. This issue is a massive priority for the Government, and we are working on it.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): I thank the Minister for all her work on SEND issues, particularly in relation to service families, and for meeting me, service families and personnel through the work of the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces community. Those service families took so much strength from the fact that the Minister was there to listen to them. Will she make a commitment that service families will be recognised within the work on all future SEND reforms?

Georgia Gould: I would really like to thank my hon. Friend and the chair of the APPG for organising that meeting; it was an impactful conversation. Members have spoken today about service families really struggling to navigate the SEND system. The people I spoke to welcomed some of the changes I have set out today, but they also set out new ideas, which we will be looking at as part of our response to the consultation.

Small Rural Schools

6. **Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): What steps she is taking to support small schools in rural communities. [R] [900524]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): The Government recognise the essential role that small schools play in their communities, many of which are in rural areas. The national funding formula for schools accounts for the challenges faced by small schools in rural areas by providing additional funding through the lump sum and the sparsity factor.

Steff Aquarone: I was deeply saddened last week to receive from the Minister the news that Corpusty school will close from September. Across North Norfolk there are small rural schools just like Corpusty, and they are worried that they might be next to face closure. The Department for Education's research and guidance about running a small rural school was conducted eight years ago and published in March 2019. That is about to be six Prime Ministers ago. Will the Minister commit to undertaking new research and publishing up-to-date guidance so that small rural primary schools can be protected in future?

Georgia Gould: I welcome the hon. Member's taking the time to meet me to discuss the situation in his constituency and the pressure that falling birth rates are having on small schools. I have subsequently followed up on our conversation by meeting his local council about how we can work in partnership to support his constituency and the wider Norfolk area as it faces those pressures. I am happy to continue conversations about the Government's work to support rural schools, which we are prioritising and funding, as I set out.

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): Small rural schools in Suffolk all face an uncertain future. I met with the brilliant Stephany Hunter, head of Barningham school, who explained the difficult problem of per-pupil funding in her very small classes. I would like to see more affordable housing in villages for young families by changing the rural exception sites. Does the Minister agree that village schools have a very special place in the heart of our rural communities?

Georgia Gould: I wholeheartedly agree with my good friend, who is a great champion for rural schools; they have a very special place at the heart of our communities. The national funding formula allocates funding based on a consistent assessment of need. The lump sum is particularly beneficial to small schools, which are most reliant on the element of funding that is not driven by pupil numbers.

School Rebuilding Programme: Sefton

7. **Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): If she will make it her policy to prioritise Hudson primary school, Sefton, in the school rebuilding programme. [900525]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): We inherited the reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete—RAAC—crisis and years of decay in the school estate. Labour is investing almost £20 billion in the school rebuilding programme to rebuild over 750 schools across England. Over 500 schools are already in the programme, with well over half already in delivery. We will select a further 250 schools by early 2027.

Bill Esterson: Hudson primary school in my constituency does a brilliant job. It is a family hub, it specialises in support for children with SEND and autism, and it has a nursery, but its building, which is 80 years old, suffers from a high water table that brings damp, mould and structural problems for the building—as does occasional flooding. Will the Minister give Niki Craddock, the excellent headteacher at Hudson primary school, her team and all the children they serve the news that he will look favourably on—

Mr Speaker: Order. Please, come on. I have a lot of people to get in, Bill. Do not take complete advantage.

Josh MacAlister: I thank my hon. Friend for his advocacy for Hudson primary school. He has spoken to me before about the excellent performance of the school and its headteacher. We will be selecting the 250 schools for the school rebuilding programme by the end of the year and announce them at the start of next year. It will be based on those schools that have the most acute need in terms of their building state. I am happy to discuss that further with him.

SEND: Improvement

8. **Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to improve the SEND system. [900526]

16. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to improve the SEND system. [900534]

23. **Tom Gordon** (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to improve the SEND system. [900542]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): Children with special educational needs and disabilities have been let down for too long. We are determined to transform their experiences and outcomes. We are working with young people, parents and professionals to create a system where needs are identified and met early and schools have the training, resources and physical environments to be inclusive for all children. We will end the postcode lottery for children with complex needs, with stronger national standards for specialist provision and a new role for the best specialist schools as centres for excellence.

Max Wilkinson: Recent events lead me to believe that we will have an in-depth discussion about regional funding inequalities in this country. With that in mind, may I draw Ministers' attention to the f40 group of local authorities, and in particular Gloucestershire, within which my constituency falls? In the last couple of weeks, I have met Caroline Parker from Gloucester Road primary and Rachel Penney from St Gregory the Great school, who told me that there is a particular problem with the provision of SEND in the f40 area. Will Ministers meet me so that I can tell them in more detail about that problem?

Georgia Gould: I would be delighted to meet the hon. Member to discuss funding. As he knows, it is an area that we are heavily investing in, with £4 billion going into early intervention to support children with special educational needs and disabilities. We will be consulting on how we fund special educational needs and the formula in the future, and I would be happy to discuss that.

Sarah Green: Like local authorities across the country, Buckinghamshire council submitted its SEND improvement plan on 19 June, but it will not receive a decision on deficit relief until 21 September, after the school year has started. With a cumulative deficit of over £45 million already on the books, it is being asked to plan blind. Will the Minister meet me to discuss what support will be available to councils like Buckinghamshire if such applications are rejected, and to discuss bringing forward the decision timeline?

Georgia Gould: Many hon. Members across the House have talked to me about the issues with local authorities' delivery on SEND. The Department is determined to hold local authorities to account and ensure that they are all doing everything they can to support children and young people. We are putting in significant funding and support, but it is critical that that support really transforms things for children. We are carefully looking at all the SEND reform plans that have come back from local authorities and ensuring that they are of sufficient quality to turn things around, but we will be working with local authorities who need more support.

Tom Gordon: I have been campaigning for a number of years to get the special school at Bilton Woodfield open. It was first set to open in September 2024, then it was delayed to September 2025, and we have now been told that it will open in September 2026. It beggars belief that a school that has had millions of pounds spent on building and funding it is sat empty when we have a SEND crisis in Harrogate and Knaresborough, and across the country. Will the Minister meet me, apply pressure to the school trust and the local authority, and ensure that no further delays are made to the opening of the special school so that we get it open on time in September and do not fail a further generation of SEND kids?

Georgia Gould: I would be happy to meet the hon. Member, and I did not get a chance to say that I am also happy to meet the hon. Member for Chesham and Amersham (Sarah Green). These are critical issues, and we want to see provision come forward.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): Can the Minister provide an update on the Experts at Hand offer, and in particular how the £2.1 million that will be given to my local authority, the London borough of Bexley, can be used to support disabled children across Bexleyheath and Crayford?

Georgia Gould: We have set out guidance on investment for local authorities and I know that local authorities around the country are busy building that offer. I was in Rochdale last week, where the amazing work going on with speech and language therapists in schools has seen a more than 80% reduction in waiting lists for children. We are really excited about the opportunity to bring these vital experts—specialist teachers, speech and language therapists and many others—directly into schools, and as we have heard, there is work going on to start this in September.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I am delighted that St Martin's primary school in Scarborough is establishing a brand new targeted mainstream provision centre, backed by funding from this Labour Government. Does my hon. Friend agree that our plans to deliver more TMP places will mean that the many children in my constituency who are currently not in school due to unmet needs will be able to return to school and resume their education?

Georgia Gould: Absolutely. We are investing £3.7 billion into creating 60,000 new specialist places, and I have heard from families how life-changing it is to have that provision in their community. Children who have been out of school, sometimes for years, are now back in education. Earlier we were talking about the issues affecting rural schools, and there are real opportunities to create inclusion bases in schools around the country.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Just a few months ago, the *TES* reported that the Government had frozen the high needs funding block, which special schools rely on. Headteachers are warning that the Government's decision means that children will not get the support they need due to a lack of funding. The Minister may well point to the Experts at Hand service, but it is not the same and does not come close to meeting what each school will have lost. How can she justify freezing the high needs funding block when the demand for special schools is rising, the demand for education, health and care plans is rising, and the Government's reforms are years away?

Georgia Gould: When we came into Government, we made a significant increase to the high needs block, precisely because we knew that investment in special educational needs and disabilities was desperately needed. Hon. Members across the House will know that the current system has been failing for a long time. We are acting to reform the system, but we are also investing £4 billion into early intervention, £3.7 billion into capital places and £200 million into teacher training and supporting local authorities with their deficits. This is something we are taking absolutely seriously. It is at the heart of our agenda, and we are acting where the previous Government failed.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): As a former teacher, I know that these SEND reforms are not just necessary but vital for young people in my constituency of Harlow and beyond. Does the Minister agree that reforms in Harlow will be strengthened by multi-academy trust-level inspections and Ofsted's welcome of the new focus on inclusion?

Georgia Gould: I very much agree that Ofsted inspections of multi-academy trusts are a really important lever in ensuring that inclusion is part of the decision making of all trusts and all schools.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): First, we heard that Ministers were trying to rig the SEND consultation with pre-written responses. Now it has emerged that the Department for Education-funded charity Contact, which supports local parent carer forums, has issued guidance stating that parents may be blocked from these groups if they dare to publicly criticise Government policy. Why are Ministers so determined once again to stifle any criticism of their reforms by silencing the very families whose opinions matter the most? Will the Minister ensure that this outrageous guidance is reversed?

Georgia Gould: That is just not true. In considering this issue, I have spent time with MPs from across the House and the families that they represent, and I cannot put into words the thought and care that so many MPs have put into holding surgeries and bringing groups together. I have talked to families with Liberal Democrat MPs, with Labour MPs and with many Conservative MPs. This is an area that everyone is taking really seriously. We have talked to families from all parts of the country with very strong views, and we are continuing to do that as part of our consultation.

Teacher Recruitment and Retention

9. **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): What steps she is taking to recruit and retain teachers. [900527]

12. **Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to encourage teachers to remain in that profession. [900530]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Since entering Government, we have turned the tide on the teacher retention and recruitment crisis left behind by the Tories. We have achieved over 70% of our 6,500 additional teachers target. There are now over 4,600 more teachers in our secondary and special schools, as well as our colleges, compared with when Labour entered Government. We are also keeping our brilliant teachers in place, with the latest statistics showing one of the lowest leaver rates on record.

Sarah Olney: A Public Accounts Committee report published last summer found that the Department for Education not only lacked a plan for recruiting the additional teachers that Labour pledged in its manifesto, but did not understand why teachers are leaving the sector. Despite the Secretary of State's saying that the Department is on track to meet an already revised and narrower target, this month's DFE report found that there are 1,907 fewer teachers overall since Labour came to power. What further steps is the Secretary of State taking to recruit and retain our teachers?

Bridget Phillipson: We have published the delivery plan that the hon. Lady referred to, so I suggest that she goes away and reads it. When she does so, she may also be interested to know that primary pupil numbers have fallen by more than 84,000 since last year, and that that is set to continue until at least 2030, because of the historically low birth rate in our country. This Labour Government are improving teacher pay, improving workload and addressing the wider pressures that schools face, especially on child poverty. I am incredibly proud that this Labour Government will lift more children out of poverty than any Government ever.

Ian Lavery: The working lives of teachers and leaders study last year showed that almost three in 10 teachers were expecting to leave the profession in the next 12 months, and 90% of the people who have left or are intending to leave cite high workload and stress as the most common reason. There are more teachers leaving the profession than coming into it. What is my right hon. Friend's Department doing to ensure that we retain as many of these fantastic, critical workers in the profession as possible?

Bridget Phillipson: I know that my hon. Friend values the contribution of our teachers as much as I do. High-quality teaching is the single biggest factor in good educational outcomes for our children. We are improving pay and taking action on workload. I am also proud that we are doubling maternity pay—the first major change in maternity pay for teachers in more than 25 years. That is essential in a profession that is primarily female. By ending the Tories' two-child limit and lifting half a million children out of poverty, we will ease the strain on teachers, who for too long have had to step in where Governments have failed.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The Secretary of State knows that the figure she has quoted to the House excludes primary schools. The Labour party manifesto promised to increase the number of teachers by 6,500, funded by the party's education tax, yet this morning the DFE website says that there are now 1,900 fewer teachers than in 2024. Daniel Kebede, the general secretary of the National Education Union, says that the overall fall in teacher numbers makes a mockery of this Government's promise to increase teacher numbers. He is right, isn't he?

Bridget Phillipson: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman goes away and has a look at the pledge that we made in our manifesto, which is that we would recruit the teachers where we needed them most. I am afraid to say that the birth rate in this country is at an historic low. There are more than 80,000 fewer primary school children across our country. It would be madness not to take that into account. I would suggest that he had a word with his boss about how the maths and logic stack up, but given that she was in government when the Conservatives crashed the economy, I am not sure that I should recommend it.

Further Education Pathways

10. **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve further education pathways. [900528]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): As detailed in "Post-16 pathways: implementation plan", we are creating coherent pathways, aligning learning with the skills that employers need and improving progression. New V-levels, the expansion and improvement of T-levels, and clearer level 2 pathways will support young people's progression to higher study, apprenticeships or employment.

Laura Kyrke-Smith: Every time I have been to Buckinghamshire College Group in Aylesbury I have met fantastic staff who bring decades of professional experience to their roles and have a deep commitment to the young people. However, many further education colleges, including ours, are struggling with staff recruitment and retention, in part because staff pay is higher in schools. As we do this brilliant work to expand technical education opportunities through FE colleges, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that FE staff salaries are competitive and that FE colleges can continue to attract the best talent out there?

Josh MacAlister: I thank my hon. Friend for drawing the House's attention to Bucks College Group and the work it does in her constituency. FE colleges have autonomy over staff pay. We have provided an additional £190 million for colleges and 16-to-19 providers for this financial year, which is broadly equivalent to the schools pay award. We have also set out positive new developments on FE teacher training support.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): I recently met Alex Miles, managing director of Yorkshire Learning Providers, and heard a worrying tale that differs greatly from what the Minister has told the House today. I heard that established apprenticeship standards are being defunded and that new product foundation apprenticeships that no employer in Yorkshire has asked for are being rolled out. Yorkshire Learning Providers has no partisan points to make; it just wants to ensure that young people can get into work with an apprenticeship standard that works for them and for employers. Does the Minister accept that the Government are not getting this right and that he needs to look at this again?

Josh MacAlister: I thank the right hon. Member for the question and the serious spirit in which he asks it. We are providing £9 billion of funding for 16-to-19 programmes in the 2026-27 academic year. We are making a wider range of changes to further education support, qualification routes and apprenticeships to directly respond to the kinds of criticisms from providers and employers that he refers to, and I genuinely believe that the Government have got that right. If there are particular aspects that Alex Miles wants to write to me about, I will be happy to take a look.

SEND Provision: Finance

11. **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): What financial plan she has for improving SEND provision. [900529]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): We are committed to prioritising early intervention and making major increases in investment in SEND, investing £4 billion more over three years. That includes £1.8 billion so that every community has experts on hand, £1.6 billion to settings for early intervention and over £200 million to train every teacher.

Bradley Thomas: Looking out to 2028-29, there is a £2 billion gap between what the Government say they will be spending on SEND and what the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that SEND spending will be in that period. That will risk children across Worcestershire being forced to fit into a box that does not fit their needs. What steps will the Government take to address that?

Georgia Gould: The Government are investing in special educational needs and disabilities, as I have set out. We have set out substantial investment over the next few years. We are currently consulting on special educational needs and disabilities reform. We will set out final plans on that reform after we have carefully looked at all the considerations.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Many parents rely heavily on SENDIASS—special educational needs and disabilities information, advice and support services. We know that these services are free, impartial and vital for parents. Given that we expect demand on these services to increase, how will the Minister ensure that local authorities have the necessary financial and practical resources to maintain the independence and quality of SENDIASS?

Georgia Gould: I have heard from many families how critical SENDIASS is. We are continuing to fund SENDIASS, and in our consultation on SEND we included a question on how we can better support parents and on what investment we need to put in to do that, so it is an area that we are looking at.

School Rebuilding Programme

13. **David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): What progress the school rebuilding programme has made. [900531]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): We are investing almost £20 billion in the school rebuilding programme to rebuild over 750 schools up to 2034-35. Some 500 of those are already in the programme—we have a further 250 to select, which we will do later this year.

David Smith: Young people in Berwick in my constituency have been taught for over a decade in a crumbling high school—the only high school in the town in a wide surrounding area. Following sustained calls from families in Berwick, the Conservative county council promised five years ago to rebuild Berwick academy. A planning application has now been submitted after missing the 2022 round. The school applied for the school rebuilding programme in April. Can the Minister reassure my constituents that Berwick academy will still be considered for the SRP funding, even as works are scheduled to begin later this year?

Josh MacAlister: Despite those delays, I can confirm that the school will be considered for the school rebuilding programme, despite those avoidable delays. I thank my hon. Friend for his continued advocacy, both raising it personally with me on a number of occasions and writing to me on multiple occasions.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): Tiverton high school has been on various lists for a rebuild since 1999. I am genuinely grateful to the Department for Education for the work that has gone on behind closed doors since my election in 2024. However, there is still a worrying lack of commitment in public from the Department. Will the Minister give a commitment in the House to have the Department write to me, to Mid Devon district council and to Devon county council with a full update on the specifics of the school rebuilding programme for Tiverton high school, to provide the certainty that my constituents require.

Josh MacAlister: Yes, I can do that.

Antisemitism on University Campuses

14. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle antisemitism on university campuses. [900532]

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): Antisemitism has no place on university campuses or in our society. Universities must take strong action to tackle antisemitism, including by enforcing disciplinary measures and improving transparency. More widely, we are taking action across the education system, investing £7 million across schools, colleges and universities to combat antisemitism, ensuring for the first time that every child learns about the Holocaust, and I have commissioned an independent review into what further action we can take to tackle this poison in our schools and colleges.

Bob Blackman: The fact is that antisemitism and anti-Jewish hatred is rife in campuses across our country. The Secretary of State is right that it is up to vice-chancellors and principals to ensure that Jewish students feel safe on campus, but the sad reality is that a recent survey shows that only 3% of Jewish students feel safe to report antisemitism. Will the Secretary of State take prompt action to ensure that vice-chancellors do their job so that those committing antisemitic attacks are expelled from universities, and indeed if they are foreign students, they should also be deported?

Bridget Phillipson: The hon. Gentleman has long campaigned on this issue and has a strong record in making clear his commitment to tackling antisemitism wherever it is found, and I share that commitment. I want to thank the Union of Jewish Students for its "Time for Change" report. I spoke recently at a launch event attended by vice-chancellors, where I made it clear that I expect universities to take action against antisemitism, which is completely unacceptable. Too many Jewish students on campus have been subject to harassment and intimidation. That is unacceptable and vice-chancellors must act.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Minister.

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) rightly highlights the scourge of antisemitism on our campuses. Against that backdrop, is it not extraordinary that the Government have chosen to deny students access to the Office for Students free speech complaint scheme while extending it to everybody but students, which I raised with the ministerial team on 20 April? The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education—the body to which students are directed instead—is nothing but a legal dead-end for students who are subject to discrimination because of their beliefs. What message does it send to Jewish students facing intimidation and harassment that their complaints are treated differently from those of academics and visiting speakers? Will the Government introduce meaningful sanctions, including funding consequences, for universities that repeatedly fail to protect them?

Bridget Phillipson: I recognise the very real issue that the hon. Gentleman identifies, and I think there is a commitment across the House to tackling antisemitism

in all its forms wherever it arises. But there is a fundamental point of misunderstanding here: students do have clear routes of redress and of complaint where things go wrong, and I am absolutely clear with university vice-chancellors and others that there can be no place for antisemitic hate speech on our campuses. Freedom of speech matters in our institutions, but antisemitic hate speech is not freedom of speech.

PE and Sport Premium: Primary Schools

15. **John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of planned changes to the PE and sport premium for primary schools on school budgets. [900533]

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): We are determined to reverse the declining rates of activity for children and the stark inequalities we see across the country. We have confirmed £1 billion in funding for PE and school sports over three years to create stronger local partnerships to revitalise PE and school sports.

John Glen: I thank the Minister for that answer, but I visited Woodlands primary school and Matthew Kitley 10 days ago. He has been there for 17 years and works extremely hard to make very limited resources work for the pupils, 60% of whom receive the pupil premium. He tells me that £17,000 has been taken off the budget that he has set for this coming year, a really difficult settlement, and that is all taken from the PE budget. So can the Minister explain what is happening for this immediate financial year, where there is a shortfall for numerous schools across the country, including many in my Salisbury constituency?

Georgia Gould: At the moment, too many children do not have access to sport and are not meeting the recommended 60 minutes of daily activity, so it is critical that we build something that supports schools, like the one the right hon. Gentleman mentioned, with national bodies to provide those opportunities. The funding breaks down into £580 million to build the new PE and school sport partnerships network, £200 million for improved facilities, and the rest for transitional support for schools through the year before we build the new service. There will be transitional support in place, but we will build something that is better for schools. I am happy to have a discussion with him to clarify matters.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): I say to the Minister that the Government cannot do more if they are making a 22% cut to funding. The whole nation is watching the world cup and millions of children have recently competed in their annual sports days, yet the Government snuck out this massive cut to PE and sport funding during the recent May half-term. The Secretary of State said that this is a misunderstanding, but it is not; it is a 22% cut that will have serious consequences for millions of children and it will hit the disadvantaged the hardest. Senior headteachers describe it as

"a funding cut dressed up as an initiative to boost PE and sport in schools".

It is hastily rolled out and will hurt the poorest children, so why are the Government doing it?

Georgia Gould: Only half of children meet the chief medical officer's recommendation of 60 active minutes a day. Although well intentioned and despite huge efforts from primary schools, the current system is not doing what it needs to do to turn the situation around. We know through talking to national bodies that a partnership model that brings our huge national resources, the energy from the world cup and the different clubs that are out there together with local schools is going to transform that investment. We are investing £1 billion over three years. I was in local government when the Conservatives cut youth clubs and community sports facilities, but we are investing.

Topical Questions

T1. [900544] **Ian Roome** (North Devon) (LD): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson): The safety of our youngest children is of the utmost priority to this Government. Early years settings should be places where children receive the best start in life, and where they are safe and happy. That is why we will provide Ofsted with additional funding to strengthen safeguarding measures, with over £4.5 million this financial year and at least £8 million in future years. That will mean an additional 3,000 unannounced visits a year, an increased number of inspectors for larger settings and more face-to-face registration interviews before providers open, alongside accelerating modernisation of Ofsted digital systems. This builds on recent changes on whistleblowing so that staff can share concerns quickly and with total confidence. I will be setting out further changes shortly, because nothing is more important than keeping our youngest children safe.

Ian Roome: This year, two of Devon's school food providers have shut down due to rapidly rising business and food costs. The Government school food standards consultation closed on 12 June, so will the Secretary of State now ensure that funding for school meals is sustained and that procurement supports healthy, fresh and local food?

Bridget Phillipson: That is exactly our intention. The plans on which we are consulting represent the first time in over a decade that this has been properly looked at, to ensure that when our children are at school, the food is of the highest quality and it is healthy and nutritious. I am grateful to all those who shared their thoughts through that consultation. I am also delighted that from September this Labour Government will be delivering a huge expansion in free school meals, ensuring that all families in receipt of universal credit will now benefit.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): A new Best Start family hub is opening in Cotmanhay, bringing together support for families in one of the most deprived communities in my constituency and across Derbyshire. As the Government roll out the hubs nationwide, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that they improve school readiness and help close attainment gaps before children even reach the classroom?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Olivia Bailey): I thank my hon. Friend for all that he has done to secure that new hub in Cotmanhay. All the evidence shows that children who start school on the backfoot find it much harder to catch up. The Conservatives gutted Sure Start and let school readiness flatline, but this Government want the best start for every child. That is why we are setting a stretching target for record proportions of children to be ready for school, and why we are transforming early education and family support services with record investment and a strategic focus that has long been lacking.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Laura Trott (Sevenoaks) (Con): The resignation of the Prime Minister this morning was a damning indictment of the record of this Government over the last two years. Part of the Prime Minister's legacy will be teacher morale at an all-time low. New data from the National Education Union today shows that 72% of teachers believe that the Government have performed badly on education. Why does the Secretary of State think the country and so many teachers have lost faith in this Government?

Bridget Phillipson: It is a funny old world in which the right hon. Lady prays in aid the National Education Union, but there we are.

I am proud of the action that this Labour Government are taking on pay and workload and in addressing all the many challenges that our teachers and leaders face, which were left behind by the Conservatives. Under them, we saw a shocking rise in child poverty and major social failure. The only policy that the right hon. Lady has is to cut state school budgets to give private schools their tax breaks back.

Laura Trott: Well, that is a load of rubbish.

The Secretary of State says that she is proud of the action that the Government are taking on pay. May I suggest that one of the reasons teachers are angry is that they still do not know their pay? When the Conservatives had to delay the teacher pay awards to this point in the year, the Education Secretary described it as a "complete dereliction of duty". Why does she think it is one rule for the Labour party and one rule for everyone else?

Bridget Phillipson: The right hon. Lady left behind a pay award and zero funding to pay for it. One of the first things that I did as Secretary of State was to deliver that award in full and fully funded; when she was a Treasury Minister, she was totally derelict in her responsibilities. This Labour Government will drive up school standards and make change happen for teachers and leaders.

The right hon. Lady says it is nonsense that she has only one policy, which is to cut state school budgets to invest in tax breaks for private schools, but it is true. That is all the Conservatives have. They have nothing to say on education and nothing to say on how they would tackle the major challenges we are dealing with, especially on special educational needs and disabilities.

T5. [900548] **Sarah Coombes** (West Bromwich) (Lab): Forced adoptions are a shameful stain on the history of our country, so I was very pleased to see the Secretary of State announce that the Government will apologise for the scandal. Does she agree that the campaigners who have worked so hard for so long to secure that decision deserve our thanks for bringing to light something that, for too long, was shrouded in misplaced shame?

Bridget Phillipson: I agree with my hon. Friend. Campaigners have shown remarkable courage, bravery and persistence in bringing this shameful period in our country's history out of the shadows. Their voices have been central in ensuring that that history is recognised. It is for that reason, and because of their tireless work, that this Government will soon make a full apology on behalf of the state to all those affected. I pay tribute to the campaigners; it is impossible to listen to them and hear their testimonies and not recognise that a wrong was done to them and that we have a responsibility to address that.

T2. [900545] **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): On a recent visit to Stanford in the Vale pre-school, I saw the great service that it provides to children and parents. However, it faces rising demand without adequate funding and resources. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to support early years education providers in meeting demand for the free-hours childcare scheme?

Olivia Bailey: That is a critical question. This Government are determined to give every child the best start in life, and we are backing that commitment with record investment of £9.5 billion in early years. We have a huge ambition for the whole early years infrastructure, including Best Start family hubs and our early education and childcare review.

T6. [900549] **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): In Kent, the county council has adopted a community of schools model for the allocation of high-needs funding, but schools in Dartford are concerned that that has led to a situation in which access to funding is unfair, inconsistent and unpredictable. It has left them unable to plan for the future, because they cannot be confident about how much funding they will receive. Will the Minister look at the model that Kent county council has adopted to ensure that it conforms with the high-needs funding operational guidance and the dedicated schools grant condition?

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): Officials are meeting with Kent county council to understand the model. We are in favour of schools pooling resources to support children with special educational needs and disabilities, but there have to be safeguards. I would welcome the opportunity to speak further to understand my hon. Friend's concerns.

T4. [900547] **Anna Sabine** (Frome and East Somerset) (LD): We have a shortage of music teachers in this country. A system of bursaries was in place for those taking music postgraduate certificates in education, but after the number of students increased slightly, that bursary system was pulled, yet we still do not have enough music teachers. Would the Minister please consider reinstating that bursaries scheme, which would allow us

to have enough teachers coming through into the system to give all the children in this country the music education that they deserve?

Georgia Gould: Every year we review the bursaries across the system—there is a limited pot, so we look at where the need is highest—and we will review bursaries this year. We are also setting up a national centre for the arts, which will support teacher training for music as well as wider arts, because that is so critical to our agenda.

T8. [900551] **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Earlier this month, I met Devon Andrews, whose daughter Cherish tragically passed away from suspected carbon monoxide poisoning while on holiday with her partner. In the wake of their passing, Devon is working tirelessly to raise awareness of the dangers of carbon monoxide, and is partnering with local organisations to educate children and others. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Devon on campaigning to save lives and ensuring that the memory of her daughter is not forgotten?

Georgia Gould: I thank my hon. Friend for that important question, and pay tribute to the amazing work she has set out. I thank Devon for her leadership and extend my heartfelt condolences to the family. It is so critical that we keep young people safe, and I hope we can continue to work together to do so.

T7. [900550] **Ian Sollom** (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): In April, the High Court found that the Office for Students had predetermined its decision against the University of Sussex, approaching the investigation with a "closed mind", and had acted beyond its legal powers. What is the Secretary of State's response to that finding, and what steps is she taking to restore confidence in the regulator?

Bridget Phillipson: Since coming into government, we have reformed the regulator to make sure there is a sharper focus on financial sustainability, and there is a new chair who is taking that work forward. The case that the hon. Member refers to covered many years. He will appreciate that there are limitations on what I can say about it, but he should be assured that we want strong regulation of our universities that is most effective in ensuring they can uphold their responsibilities while remaining financially viable.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I recently visited the Chances family hub—*[Interruption.]* It is indeed a very fine hub, one of several set up by Cumberland council to fill a need left by the Conservatives' short-sighted decision to abolish Sure Start. Will the Minister please assure Carlisle families that this Government will ensure that all family hubs receive the support they need to give children the best start?

Olivia Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for all of her hard work on behalf of her constituents, and join her in congratulating her council on its work. She is right to condemn the outrageous cuts to Sure Start under the Conservative party, and she is also right that councils and voluntary organisations have stepped up to fill the gap. This Government will have their back, not just through our £900 million investment—£3 million of which will go to Cumberland—but by driving the reforms needed to link up services and reconnect our communities.

T9. [900552] **Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): This week, temperatures in Somerset are forecast to exceed 35°C, and some classrooms are set to breach safe working thresholds by as much as 10°C, risking serious disruption to learning. What immediate steps is the Secretary of State taking to protect pupils and staff from this extreme heat, and what dedicated funding will be made available to schools to retrofit for heat resilience, to prevent repeated disruption to education in future heatwaves?

Bridget Phillipson: We recognise the need to make sure that, as we refurbish and rebuild schools across our country, they are well placed to cope with some of the fluctuations in temperature we are seeing, including the hot weather we are experiencing at the moment. Of course, how to manage that best is a matter for headteachers and school leaders. For example, schools can consider relaxing uniform rules during hot weather to make sure that pupils are comfortable, and the Department of Health and Social Care recommends that pupils should not take part in vigorous physical activity when the weather is exceptionally hot, but I trust school leaders to do the right thing to maintain the wellbeing of both staff and students.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): I recently joined a class of year 5 pupils from St Peter's school in my constituency on a visit to the National Holocaust Museum in Laxton. I saw at first hand that places such as that are vital to ensuring that young people absorb lessons about the Holocaust. Will the Minister therefore commit to visiting that museum with me and a local school?

Georgia Gould: I thank my hon. Friend for his advocacy of the National Holocaust Museum, which plays a critical role in ensuring that children are educated about the Holocaust. That is a key priority for the Government, and I can of course commit to visiting that museum with him—I really welcome his work.

T10. [900553] **Alison Griffiths** (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): My constituent, Joanna, has worked tirelessly to highlight the lack of a dedicated selective mutism pathway in West Sussex. Children are being left without the support they need, so will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that this gap in provision is finally addressed?

Georgia Gould: We are working with experts nationally to develop new national inclusion standards and specialist provision packages and to set out how we want to see children supported in mainstream schools and specialist schools. I would be happy to discuss that further with the hon. Member.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): Some 40,000 children each year acquire a brain injury, which are recorded, if at all, under a broad range of categories. Will the Minister meet me and the United Kingdom Acquired Brain Injury Forum to look at how we can better record acquired brain injuries in a special category to deal with their specific neurological needs?

Georgia Gould: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss that issue. We have been talking to families of children with neurological issues, and it is an important area.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): Schools in North Shropshire received an average of £6,460 a head last year, compared with a national average of around £7,910. Outcomes at GCSE and key stage 4 are consistently lower than the national average. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss what resources can be put in place to improve outcomes for children in North Shropshire?

Georgia Gould: We are increasing investment in schools, and I would be happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss their concerns.

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

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I know that Members across this House will have been sickened and devastated to hear reports of the abuse suffered by baby Preston Davey prior to his murder at the hands of his adoptive parents, in whose home he should have been safe. It is of concern that Preston was seen by several different professionals in the weeks and months before his murder. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 legislates for stronger safeguarding arrangements, including the introduction of multi-agency child protection teams in every local authority area. In the light of the serious safeguarding failings in Preston's case and in other recent cases of children who should have been safe in the care of the state, will the Secretary of State set out the expected timetable for implementing these reforms? How quickly can we expect to see stronger safeguarding practice consistently nationwide?

Bridget Phillipson: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for raising this shocking case. Our thoughts must be with all those who loved and knew Preston, and it is right that the evil abusers who committed those sickening and shocking crimes are now behind bars. The House can be assured that we take this extremely seriously. I have asked for independent experts to look at Oldham council, Blackpool Teaching Hospitals NHS trust and the regional adoption agency to consider carefully all the issues and concerns that have been raised through this process. The child safeguarding practice review is commencing, led by the local safeguarding partnership with the national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel working closely alongside to make sure it is of the highest quality. In response to the question that the Chair of the Select Committee asked, it is our intention to roll that out by March. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act represents the biggest upgrade to child protection legislation in a generation, and it is through those changes that we will make sure we keep all our children safe from harm.

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Reform): The horrific sexual abuse and murder of baby Preston Davey has shocked the nation. It has been reported that Adoption Now, the agency that placed baby Preston with his murderer, and Oldham council, the agency responsible for his safety, missed several safeguarding reports and potentially neglected to stop what was a preventable death. My question for the Secretary of State is simple: among the army of health visitors, social workers and medics who saw baby Preston, why did nobody raise the alarm? What action is being taken now to safeguard the welfare of those children under the care of Oldham council?

Bridget Phillipson: I have just described the action that we are taking. This is extremely serious, and it was an urgent priority for the incoming Government to update legislation to ensure that we do everything in our power to keep children safe. I have described the action that will follow, and I am glad that justice has been served. We cannot bring Preston back, but we can ensure that we do everything within our power to stop this happening to other children in future.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): The St Ralph Sherwin Catholic Multi Academy Trust, which runs a number of schools in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, is facing extreme financial difficulties despite the considerable extra support that it has received from the Department for Education. We east midlands MPs have written to the Department, but perhaps Ministers could find out whether there is anything else that we can do, and also look at the academy funding model more generally, because the built-in financial risk undermines the education of our children at times.

Bridget Phillipson: Many colleagues in the region with local schools served by the trust have raised similar concerns, and I would be more than happy to ensure that my hon. Friend and any other interested Members of Parliament can meet to discuss the issue further. It is clear that, across the system, there have been a number of failings in respect of financial oversight and accountability, which is why we are taking action on MAT-level inspection and will take further action to ensure that public money that is intended to benefit children in their schools and in their education is not wasted in some of the shocking ways in which we have sadly seen it wasted by the Conservative party.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): Members of a mini-Parliament from Town Farm primary school in Stanwell, in my constituency, visited me here this morning and asked me some very good questions. I was, for instance, asked for my view of the new right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), but we will leave that one where it is. The school's head, Mr Bhatti, has just been given the OBE in the King's birthday honours. These things do not come up with the rations. Will the Secretary of State please put on record her thanks to Mr Bhatti and all the team at Town Farm primary school for the outstanding job that they do?

Bridget Phillipson: I am happy to extend my congratulations to Mr Bhatti and the brilliant team at Town Farm primary school, and I hope that all the pupils had a wonderful visit to Parliament. This is an opportunity that we, as Members of Parliament, can encourage our schools to take up, because funding is available to make it happen, and I hope that more children will be able to benefit from the investment that has gone into Parliament and the Parliamentary Education Centre.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State is aware of the challenges caused by the drop in population in my constituency, which is resulting in the closure of some schools. What work is being done to ensure that if there is a need to create housing on those sites for future pupils, the Department can move more quickly to change the designation of education sites for other uses?

Bridget Phillipson: My hon. Friend is right to identify this issue. She has long argued in the House that we need both to manage declines in pupil numbers and to create more social and affordable housing for people including her constituents. There are a number of ways in which we are supporting schools at the moment, opening up space by expanding nursery provision in schools, inclusion bases and SEND support. However, I assure my hon. Friend that we are considering very carefully how we can ensure that sites are used well, for educational purposes and, possibly, for other purposes that they may be able to serve in the future.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): Primary school headteachers in my constituency tell me that, according to their budget calculations, the cut in funding for physical education will have a real impact on opportunities for young people, especially in rural areas. What assurance can the Government give me that young people, especially those in rural areas such as Waveney Valley, will not lose out on vital sporting opportunities?

Georgia Gould: We are investing £1 billion over three years to build new sports networks. That money will be used by many different partners to support schools, bring resources together, and put funding directly into school budgets. We will be setting out more plans to reassure primary school heads of our commitment to increasing activity for children and young people.

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): Like many other Members on both sides of the House, I have heard from countless families who have been let down by the existing SEND system. In one particularly upsetting case, a bright young boy was expelled from infant school owing to the mishandling of his complex needs. Thankfully, he was later re-enrolled as a result of his mother's tireless work. Does the Minister agree that the reforms outlined in the Government's SEND White Paper will support productive early intervention and create a fairer, more fulfilling school experience for every child?

Georgia Gould: I have spoken to families around the country who set out exactly that experience: watching their children fall further behind, and having to battle for the support that they desperately need. Our SEND reforms are about putting early intervention in place, supporting children at the earliest possible point, and transforming the system so that parents no longer have to battle to get their children the support they need.

G7 Summit

3.50 pm

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr David Lammy): I am making this statement on behalf of the Prime Minister. I spoke earlier today on the Prime Minister's record across the country—stabilising the economy, driving down waiting lists in the national health service, and lifting half a million children out of poverty—but I want to start this statement by paying tribute to his record on foreign policy, which is second to none.

As Foreign Secretary when we entered government, I saw at first hand the Prime Minister rebuild our relationships across the world. The EU reset that we led put Britain at the heart of Europe once again. Embracing President Zelensky on the steps of Downing Street, on one of Ukraine's darkest days, was symptomatic of the leadership that the Prime Minister has shown across Europe and in relation to the threats from Vladimir Putin—principled, courageous and on the right side of history. He drove investment for working people, with five trade deals in two years.

When it came to the most sober decision that a Prime Minister has to make—on a matter of life, death and war—and others were pushing for the UK to jump head first into another war in the middle east, Keir Starmer stood strong, stood firm and said, "No, this is not our war," putting British soldiers and the national interest first. He made Britain safer, rebuilt Britain's reputation around the world, and drove investment and growth that will support working families in Britain for decades to come. Regardless of their politics, everyone in this House owes a debt of gratitude to the Prime Minister on foreign affairs.

I turn now to the specifics of the G7 summit, and let me start with Ukraine. Once again, Russia chose to launch a huge attack on Ukraine on the eve of an international summit. In a show of its disdain for diplomacy, Russia killed innocent civilians in Kyiv and Kharkiv, and hit the 11th-century Pechersk Lavra, a sacred site at the very heart of Ukrainian culture. The G7 has a shared sense of outrage at Russia's conduct, but we also have a shared sense that the situation is changing. Ukraine has a new-found momentum. It is increasingly able to push Russia back on the battlefield, and the mood in Moscow is turning against the war. Almost half a million Russians have now lost their lives. Each month Russia mobilises around 30,000 people, and each month it loses the same number on the battlefield, with no progress to show for it.

At the same time, the Russian economy is struggling and may already be in recession, so we will seize this moment by continuing our military support. We are providing more air defence missiles and our biggest package of drones to date, financed with the profits of seized Russian assets. We are providing vital export finance to help rebuild Ukraine's energy system, and we are going further to increase the pressure on Russia's economy, because we know the impact that this is having.

At the summit my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister announced 70 new sanctions, bringing the UK up to around 500 sanctions on Russia this year alone, aimed at breaking up its military procurement supply chains and the illicit finance networks it uses to circumvent sanctions and, of course, targeting the Russian shadow fleet. I am sure the whole House will pay tribute to the Royal Marines who interdicted a shadow fleet vessel in the channel last weekend alongside officers from the National Crime Agency.

This is the moment to ramp up the pressure, and President Zelensky is clear that he is ready to talk, but this must recognise the reality on the ground and Ukraine's new-found momentum. Any negotiations would need to be on the basis of the current line of control, not on Putin's unrealistic demand for territory that he has failed to win on the battlefield. Russia should note the level of unity shown on this point and the G7's pledge of unwavering support for Ukraine that will continue until we reach a just and lasting peace.

Let me turn to the middle east. Getting to the deal between the United States and Iran has been bumpy, but it creates a moment of opportunity to bring down the cost of living for the British people and put the middle east on a better path, which is vital for global stability. We are now working to help implement this deal to ensure that the region does not go back to war and that the 60-day negotiation period ends in a longer-term settlement.

Negotiations are the best way to secure our aims: first, that Iran is never allowed to have a nuclear weapon; secondly, that it stops its attacks across the region; and, thirdly, that the strait of Hormuz is reopened to shipping, with no restrictions and no tolls. That is why, with President Macron, we have brought together an international coalition ready to help reassure shipping. We are in talks now about how to deploy this multilateral military mission in support of the deal and to explore immediate support for de-mining in the strait.

We should also place this in the broadest possible context, recognising the need to make progress across the region. The extremely fragile ceasefire between Israel and Lebanon must be implemented in full, and I call on the Israeli Government to show restraint to that end, including in their use of inflammatory language. The G7 agreed to work together in support of their process and to strengthen the Lebanese Government, so that they can regain the monopoly on the use of force in the country.

On Palestine, I want to speak very frankly. Israel must stop blocking aid into Gaza, stop settlement expansion in the E1 area of East Jerusalem, which threatens the viability of the two-state solution, and stop settler violence across the west bank. We have a precious opportunity now to move on from the violence of the last three years in the interests of innocent people across the region. This should be our aim, bringing all our partners together in that effort.

Significant progress was also made last week on migration, with a strong G7 statement outlining practical common steps on returns and sanctioning the criminal gangs. With President Macron, my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister took a big step in our bilateral co-operation by agreeing to extend the groundbreaking Sandhurst agreement, which has already prevented more than 40,000 migrant crossings into the UK. Under this deal, new police units and riot squads will be deployed to French beaches to stop migrant boats before they take to the water. This is vital and important work. It is because of steps like that and the approach of this

Government that we have removed 67,000 people with no right to be in our country. We have removed 9,000 foreign national offenders, and we are closing asylum hotels. We are turning the tide on these issues after years of failure. Under the last Government, net migration reached almost 1 million. We have reduced it by 82% in two years. UK immigration figures are the lowest today since 2012. Where the last Government failed, we are delivering.

The same is true on growth and investment. On the eve of the summit, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister welcomed the Prime Minister of Japan to Downing Street, to deepen our strategic partnership after they met in Tokyo in January. They agreed more than £18 billion-worth of investment in this country, creating tens of thousands of new jobs in infrastructure, offshore wind and financial services. That shows the value of building such bonds. This was followed, at the summit, with deals for a further £1.3 billion of investment from France and India in clean energy and artificial intelligence, creating more than 1,300 new jobs in Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agreed with India's Prime Minister Modi the entry into force of the UK-India free trade agreement. This is the UK's quickest ever turnaround from signing to entry into force, and it is one of the biggest deals either country has ever done. It will boost British GDP by £4.8 billion and boost real wages for British workers by £2.2 billion.

Finally, the House will note that tomorrow marks the 10th anniversary of the Brexit referendum. We know the world has changed fundamentally since 2016. We know that Brexit has damaged the economy, so there is no doubt in our mind where the national interest lies today—in closer co-operation with Europe. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister agreed to intensify work to deepen our economic ties. We look forward to a forthcoming second UK-EU summit at the earliest opportunity.

Unity on Ukraine to protect our collective security; unity on the middle east to bring down the cost of living and bring back stability; progress on tackling illegal migration, driving down the numbers day after day; and huge new investments in the UK, creating new opportunities and changing people's lives—real results for the British people. At the same time, the Government have brought down mortgage rates and inflation to help with the cost of living, and have held them flat to fight what is happening globally.

We are supporting families with the summer savings package, so that they can spend time together this August. We are banning social media for children to keep them safe, lifting half a million people out of poverty, boosting workers' rights and renters' rights, and bringing down NHS waiting lists at the highest rate for 17 years. This Government are focused on what really matters: serving the national interest and delivering for the British people. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: Extra time was given because I thought we would have a lot more on the G7; I did not know the statement would be all policy. Not to worry. I call the Leader of the Opposition.

4.3 pm

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for advance sight of his statement. He is right when he says that everyone in this House owes a debt to the Prime Minister, but it is most certainly not a debt of gratitude; it is the other type of debt that we owe.

The right hon. Gentleman has come to the House to update us on a meeting that he did not attend. He stood in for the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's questions during the G7; now he is standing in again to tell us what happened at the G7. Where is the Prime Minister? He says he needs to stay in post for three months, but then does not come to Parliament to do his job. He wants to go on a farewell tour, while the new right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) is asking for a summer holiday to work out what he thinks. In the meantime, no one is in charge, and Britain is not being governed.

The Prime Minister gave assurances at the G7 about military support to Ukraine. He gave those assurances after the Defence Secretary resigned because he was being forced to make decisions that would increase the risk to our armed forces. The Prime Minister gave assurances about sanctions on Russian oil and gas while, in this House, the Government were lifting those sanctions. The Prime Minister is saying one thing abroad but doing the opposite at home. Those are just some of the many reasons that he had to resign this morning, but apparently, for some mysterious reason, he must stick around until September. Given that he has resigned, why is he hanging around? The Deputy Prime Minister had to change his statement so that we all knew that the EU reset summit had been postponed. The summit is not happening any more, so what is the Prime Minister hanging around for? Why are we sending a non-Prime Minister to the most important NATO summit in a generation? It is because this psychodrama is about the Labour party, not the country.

Labour is still trying to tell us that everything is fine. That is what the Deputy Prime Minister was saying: "Everything is fine." He has given us a statement about a G7 summit that he did not go to. The few Labour MPs who bothered to turn up to the Chamber were nodding along, pretending to be listening intently, but in a few minutes, they will all scurry back to their offices and focus on their real priority: lobbying for a job in the next Government. I take the opportunity to congratulate the right hon. Member for Makerfield on his election, but I point out that my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Douglas Lumsden) is here; the right hon. Gentleman is not, because he is more interested in his leadership bid than Britain's national security.

Two weeks ago, the Defence Secretary and the Armed Forces Minister quit the Government because Labour's failure to fund defence is putting our national security at risk. That issue will not disappear from the right hon. Member for Makerfield's in-tray just because he won a by-election. If he becomes Prime Minister, he will be briefed by the heads of our military about Britain's reducing ability to defend herself, let alone Ukraine, which the Deputy Prime Minister mentioned. In order to fund defence, we need more money, not more speeches at summits. The right hon. Member for Makerfield will find that Britain is not able to borrow any more money, and that it has all been spent on welfare. He will realise that this Government are providing export finance to rebuild

[Mrs Kemi Badenoch]

Ukraine's energy system, while crippling our own, and are reducing sanctions on Russian oil, while sanctioning oil from Aberdeen.

Only one thing matters at the G7 and NATO summits, and that is our collective national security. *[Interruption.]* A Minister is chuntering. Can he say anything about why the Defence Secretary resigned? If Ministers are all living in la-la land, I am going to wake them up. They need to stop pretending that everything is fine, because it is not. Let me remind the Deputy Prime Minister that the Prime Minister is resigning because he failed on national security. He appointed a known security risk as our ambassador to Washington. He is destroying our energy security, which is national security, and he is refusing to fund the defence investment plan needed to keep our country safe.

The G7 summit reminds us that we are living in serious times, yet the Government are paralysed and our country is in limbo. It is time for Labour to start putting country before party, and to put Britain's national interest first.

The Deputy Prime Minister: This is the first occasion that I have been opposite the Leader of the Opposition. We are actually friends, behind all of this. I thank her for her generosity and for her constructive suggestions on this occasion; it is always good to know that I can count on her support.

I remind the House that this is the same Leader of the Opposition who suggested that we should empty-chair the G20 and not bother turning up to the NATO summit. She wanted to jump into war with Iran without thinking through the consequences. I am proud to serve a Prime Minister whose hard work has made this country stronger and much fairer than the Britain we inherited from the Conservatives.

The Leader of the Opposition knows that the Prime Minister has rebuilt Britain's international alliances. She cannot deny the five major trade deals struck under our watch—something that she failed to do. She knows that we have led the coalition of the willing in backing Ukraine, have renewed our partnership with Europe, and are delivering the biggest boost to defence spending since the cold war. I am proud of all that. She asks about defence. The work continues to finalise the defence investment plan. We are already investing £270 billion in defence over this Parliament, and the defence investment plan will deliver another unprecedented increase in defence spending. When it is published shortly, we will set out how every Department is contributing to defence.

The Leader of the Opposition talks about oil and gas; they will be part of our energy mix for many years to come. We are delivering enough clean energy products to power 23 million homes, led by Great British Energy—headquartered, of course, in Aberdeen. The PM secured £9 billion-worth of Japanese investment in offshore wind last weekend; of course, the Leader of the Opposition would rip all that up. She talks about Russian oil, but the Conservatives are wrong there: all sanctions on Russian oil remain in place, and we are imposing new sanctions that were resisted under the Conservatives.

I look forward to another opportunity to sit across from the Leader of the Opposition in the months ahead.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): I echo the Deputy Prime Minister's praise for the Prime Minister's success in restoring the UK's standing in the world, including with the EU.

My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has welcomed the G7 commitment to accelerating humanitarian efforts for Gaza and ending violence on the west bank, and Putney residents and I will support his and the G7's efforts on that. Will he agree that Israel must stop the E1 Jerusalem and west bank illegal expansion, and that the G7 must rebuild serious momentum behind the two-state solution?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Yes, yes and yes. My hon. Friend will be pleased that this issue was discussed at the G7 leaders' summit. I encourage her to look at the statement that was put out, particularly as regards peace in the middle east.

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

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I start by recognising the courage it took for the Prime Minister to make his statement today. Politics can be brutal, but although we rightly debate issues robustly in this Chamber, we can recognise that we are all human beings here, and can take account of that. However, after years of this chaos—we had multiple psychodramas and short-lived Prime Ministers under the Conservatives, and then under Labour—the country is impatient for real change. This moment shows once again how broken our political system is. It is only by fixing that that we can finally end this chaos and instability. There will be another moment to reflect properly, but for now, I simply thank the Prime Minister for his service.

Turning to the statement, progress on providing more support for our brave Ukrainian allies is indeed welcome, and the Deputy Prime Minister knows that he has cross-party support on that. At the G7, did the Government raise the proposal of using frozen Russian assets around the world to support Ukraine, and if not, why not?

Meanwhile, Donald Trump is boasting about his ceasefire with Iran, but "The Art of the Deal" it is not. His and Netanyahu's idiotic war, backed by the Conservatives and Reform, has achieved absolutely nothing; instead, it is wreaking havoc on the global economy and on our economy, as the Deputy Prime Minister said. The Prime Minister was right to keep us out of it. Given how determined Netanyahu seems to undermine any ceasefire, what discussions did the Prime Minister have with allies at the G7 to put real pressure on both Netanyahu and Hezbollah to end the fighting?

All this shows how important it is for Britain to strengthen our defences and deepen our partnership with dependable allies, especially our neighbours in Europe. Will the Prime Minister therefore confirm whether the defence investment plan will be published before the NATO summit? The Liberal Democrats think that is vital if we are to start to repair the damage done by Conservative defence cuts, and are to have real leverage and influence at the NATO summit. Will the defence investment plan go to the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) for his urgent sign-off?

Finally, the Prime Minister promised a crucial summit with the EU next month to start repairing the damage done by the Conservatives, but reports say that this summit

has been postponed because of his resignation. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that this is a disaster? Fixing our relationship with Europe is far too urgent for these discussions to be postponed yet again. I ask the Deputy Prime Minister to urge the right hon. Member for Makerfield to reject the Government's current timid reset, and instead push for our growth and defence partnership, which would include single market membership, free from the out-of-date red lines that the Prime Minister imposed five years ago.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for the manner in which he put his remarks and for his tribute to the Prime Minister for his public service. I will relay that to the Prime Minister when I see him later.

On Ukraine, I am pleased to confirm that I hope to go to the Ukraine recovery conference later this week to continue to discuss these issues. The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise the issue of frozen Russian assets, which remain a long-standing item of discussion across G7 nations. He recognises that some European countries are more exposed than others, and I hope that we can break the deadlock soon.

The right hon. Gentleman also raises the deal in the strait of Hormuz. It is a fragile deal, and the continued bombardment of Lebanon, which is affecting the fragile ceasefire in relation to Lebanon that is holding as of this morning, particularly pertains to that. We call for restraint from Israel particularly. It is important that we maintain peace across the region at this time.

I can confirm that the defence investment plan will be published before the NATO summit. I think it is important that the Prime Minister is in post for that NATO summit. The right hon. Gentleman will recall that I was the first Foreign Secretary to return to the top table of Foreign Secretaries in Europe, and I hope that the EU summit takes place as soon as possible.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his update on a range of issues from the G7 summit. Could he set out how the Government's work to de-escalate things in the middle east will help families in Britain and my constituency, specifically when it comes to protecting shipping routes, reducing energy pressures and keeping prices down?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I pay tribute to the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister and our National Security Adviser for their determination to keep the strait of Hormuz open and their work with partners to bring together a coalition to achieve that. We stand ready to help, particularly with de-mining. We all want to reassure industry and get back to freedom of travel down the strait of Hormuz. All of that will affect the cost of living in this country and stabilise our economy and the global economy.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Does the Deputy Prime Minister share my concern, and that of many of my constituents, about elements of the Iran deal, in particular that the early sanctions relief, access to frozen Iranian assets and $300 billion of economic reconstruction development aid could find its way back to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, further strengthening an organisation that has done so much damage to regional stability and global stability, both directly and through its proxies?

While I am at it, will the Deputy Prime Minister sit down with the police and find some way of stopping the ridiculous heckling and disruption of Prime Ministers on the steps of Downing Street when they are trying to make statements, which further adds to our considerable international embarrassment right now?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question. We have sanctioned the entirety of the IRGC. Since coming into office, we have imposed 240 sanctions on Iran, and we will bring forward legislation to implement full and further sanctions and sectorial measures, including targeting finance, energy, software and other industries that are advancing Iranian nuclear escalation.

The right hon. Gentleman has stood in my shoes on the steps of Downing Street. There are moments where the country is watching, and people want to be able to hear Prime Ministers of the day speak, so I recognise his point.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I am glad that the Deputy Prime Minister reiterated support for Ukraine, but for that we need the defence investment plan. Could he explain what conversations the Prime Minister had at the G7 about defence investment, particularly through the Defence, Security and Resilience Bank and the multilateral defence mechanism? Both could be important to Britain. Can the Deputy Prime Minister tell us what is happening?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend will be reassured that defence, and increased defence spending across the G7, was a topic of discussion. We support attempts by the European Union and by our Canadian friends to ensure that the funds and different mechanisms are available to increase that defence spending. As I have said, we will set out how we will do that before the NATO summit.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Deputy Prime Minister mentioned the meeting between the Prime Minister and Sanae Takaichi, the Prime Minister of Japan, with reference to £18 billion of investment coming into the country. Some of that will no doubt be for the global combat air programme, for which a funding deal needs to be in place by the end of this month—next week. Last week, the Minister for Defence Readiness and Procurement mentioned that that funding deal has been agreed. Can the Deputy Prime Minister confirm how much that deal is worth and whether it is a multi-year deal, or whether it is a three-month interim deal that runs out at the end of September?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I recall being in Japan as Foreign Secretary and discussing that deal, and I was pleased to see the signing of the £18 billion deal, which incidentally will create 11,000 jobs. I will ask the Defence Secretary to update the hon. Gentleman in the usual way.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): After decades of Conservative Governments who preached isolation on the international stage, the Prime Minister

[Ms Stella Creasy]

and Deputy Prime Minister have shown through their work the value of being in the room to get agreements that make positive changes for our national interests. He will therefore understand the concern of many of us that the EU-UK summit planned for 22 July, to make progress on repairing the damage done by Brexit to our economy and agreeing sanitary and phytosanitary and youth mobility deals, has been delayed. Every month of delay in the summit is a month of delay in implementing any deal, so will he assure those of us who recognise the need for a salvage operation to address the damage that Brexit has done to our economy, that this is a pause, not a stop, in that process?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her leadership on these issues. I assure her that the summit will take place as soon as possible. We are having ongoing discussions with the European Union on SPS, youth mobility, steel and a range of issues on a day-to-day basis.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): A week ago, the Prime Minister said that the UK would support the deal between the United States and Iran by standing up a "defensive, independent, multilateral mission". At the planning stage, that was designed to restore freedom of navigation to the strait of Hormuz. In May, the UK was supposed to deploy drones, Typhoon fighter jets and HMS Dragon to such a future mission, whereas today the Deputy Prime Minister spoke of "immediate support for de-mining." What will the deployment involve, and what might trigger it, please?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Of course, HMS Dragon should be ready for any mission to secure the strait of Hormuz, with the advanced British military mine clearance specialists I referred to, Typhoons ready to conduct air patrols over the strait, and the Royal Navy's modular Beehive system, which can deliver high-speed autonomous Kraken drone boats to track and identify potential threats and defeat them.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Stepney) (Lab): May I also associate myself with my right hon. Friend's remarks about the Prime Minister and his service to our country? Despite the agreement with Iran, as he highlighted, the attacks on Lebanon have continued. Can he say more about what will be done to ensure that the truce agreed is sustainable, and what action will be taken to support the more than 1 million people who have been displaced and for the reconstruction of that country?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We strongly welcome the ceasefire but recognise that it is fragile. It must be fully implemented, including withdrawal by the Israel Defence Forces from Lebanon and the deployment of the Lebanese armed forces from the south, and Hezbollah must end its indiscriminate rocket fire. We have announced an additional £20 million-worth of humanitarian funding, taking UK support up to £30 million, and Baroness Chapman, the Minister of State for International Development and Africa, was in Lebanon last week discussing these issues with our French counterparts and the Lebanese Government.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I really am quite impressed that the Deputy Prime Minister knows more about defence spending than the former Secretary of State for Defence. He was able to stand in for the Prime Minister at questions and also know what was going on in the G7. And apparently the Prime Minister did such an amazing job that the way forward is to sack him.

May I ask the Deputy Prime Minister this question? If the demands to go into closer trading relationships with Europe by those who are pushing that in his party—including the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), according to what he has said recently—are to be met, do those five trade deals that the Deputy Prime Minister has boasted about stand up?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We have been very clear about the red lines in our manifesto and about delivering on our promise to reset our relationship and put Britain at the heart of Europe. We absolutely stand by the ability to implement, enact and see our economy grow as a result of those five trade deals, all of which I have been involved in.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I, too, want to echo the tribute that my right hon. Friend has paid to the Prime Minister. There is much of which he can be proud, particularly on the international stage. I welcome the Deputy Prime Minister's strong words about what is happening in Gaza and the west bank, but my constituents frequently write to me in despair that Israel seems to be able to act with impunity when it comes to illegal settlements, the blocking of aid and many other examples. What reassurance can he give them that there is some hope that Israel will be held to account, and that the people of Gaza and the west bank will be helped in the face of such oppression?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am proud that we took historic steps to recognise the Palestinian state. We oppose settlements that undermine a two-state solution. Settlements are illegal under international law. We urge Israel—as I have continued to do—to take greater action to hold violent settlers to account and strongly condemn the massive increase that we are seeing in settler violence against Palestinian civilians. That is why we have announced further sanctions—the fourth package in recent times—against those who are sustaining that violence.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Reform): The Deputy Prime Minister has just said that we are all in the Prime Minister's debt. Well, that would be the £300 billion of debt that he has racked up. Of all the G7 countries, we now pay the highest borrowing costs. Given that Labour was elected on an express pledge not to raise taxes and not to borrow beyond our means, does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that if the right hon. Member for Makerfield wants to hike taxes even more and max out our national credit card, he should call a general election?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Reform is in no position to ask questions or make demands when its leader is refusing to own up about his £5 million donation and whether he lobbied the Bank of England about cryptocurrencies.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I also echo the Deputy Prime Minister's remarks about the Prime Minister and his service to our country. Does my right hon. Friend agree that Israel must allow aid into Gaza, stop settlement expansion in the E1 area of East Jerusalem and tackle settlement violence, and that the G7 must use this moment to ensure that Palestinian people have the resources they need to rebuild their country?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We all want to see peace maintained in the middle east, and we look with horror at the settler violence in the west bank. I condemn the inflammatory language that we hear once again from members of the Israeli Government.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The Deputy Prime Minister was right to say that Iran must never be allowed to get a nuclear weapon, but history teaches us that the Iranian regime ignored the deal that was in place—the joint comprehensive plan of action. Can he be clear with the House about what the Government are doing to make any future deal meaningful and prevent the Iranian regime from acquiring the level of enriched uranium that would make a nuclear weapon?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have stood at this Dispatch Box and discussed these issues over several years. I remember negotiating with the Iranians in Geneva and hearing some of their mendacity regarding their nuclear ambitions. I was pleased to see the G7 statement on Iran, to which I would refer the hon. Gentleman if he has not already read it. As he would expect, the United Kingdom stands ready to support that deal and hold Iran to the obligations it must necessarily have in relation to its nuclear ambitions and uranium enrichment.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I join the Deputy Prime Minister in paying tribute to the exceptional work of the National Crime Agency and the Royal Marines—who have a special bond with Exeter, being housed just down the River Exe at Lympstone—in their action on the Russian shadow fleet. Will he commit to the Government and this country taking further action against the Russian shadow fleet and continuing to be at the forefront of enforcing the sanctions we put in place?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Let me thank again the Royal Marines and National Crime Agency officers for their bravery and professionalism. The vessel is now held off the south coast at a UK anchorage. A live criminal investigation is ongoing, so I cannot comment further, but my hon. Friend has heard us talk again and again about the Russian shadow fleet and seen us corral much of the international community into action.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): About the only thing of note and real consequence in the statement was the Deputy Prime Minister's reminding us that tomorrow it will be 10 years since the disastrous decision to leave the EU—a Brexit that Scotland overwhelmingly rejected but that has left us as the most impacted nation in the UK, with a bill of £30 billion. Does he agree that is it not just us, but the whole UK that has suffered from Brexit? It has made the UK virtually ungovernable, as we see now, as we are about to get our seventh Prime Minister in the 10-year Brexit era.

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman is right: the Leader of the Opposition and her party delivered a botched Brexit, and we must hold them to account for that. That is why we have sought, day after day, to reconnect with our European friends and partner with them where we can. We held the first summit, and I look forward to the next summit. We have made progress in repairing the damage that was done together with our European friends.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): Last week at Prime Minister's questions, I raised the serious topic of the impact of steel tariffs on companies and jobs across the country. The Deputy Prime Minister gave me a rather evasive answer—I suspect because he did not expect to be addressing the House of Commons today. He did say that the Prime Minister would be raising the issue at the G7, so can he update the House on what was discussed with regard to steel tariffs? Will he take the opportunity once again to try to answer the question as to what steps the Government are taking to avoid this economic disaster, which will occur in less than two weeks?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Protecting primary steel production, which is critical to UK national infrastructure, is the No. 1 priority. From 1 July, overall quota levels for steel imports will be reduced by 60% compared with current arrangements, with steel coming into the UK above those levels subject to a 50% tariff. Measures are targeted at steel that could be made in the United Kingdom. We continue to engage with the industry and trading partners on our steel measures, and we will confirm final quotas shortly ahead of 1 July. We will monitor the impact closely, including through a review after 12 months.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Madam Dirprwy Lefarydd. Ten years on, Brexit has cost the Welsh economy £4 billion, raised the cost of living and narrowed the life chances of young people. If the next Labour Government are serious about change for the better, rebuilding relationships with European members of the G7 and with the EU must be front and centre. Given that the Brexit reset summit due to be held a month from now has been postponed, with no date, surely the definition of stability would be for the next Government to campaign to rejoin the single market and the customs union and to be up-front and forthright with the British people on the advantages of doing so.

The Deputy Prime Minister: The right hon. Lady and I have discussed these issues—indeed, we did so before we came into Government. There is no change to our manifesto red lines, and I will not pre-empt what our next manifesto might say, but I look forward to the next EU summit and am quite sure that it will take place as soon as is possible.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Can I say to the Deputy Prime Minister that he is looking even more prime ministerial than he did on Wednesday? I wonder what has changed since then. This is the end of an era, because the love-in between the Deputy Prime Minister and myself could be coming to an end, as he may not be at the Dispatch Box much longer—I hope that is not the case.

[Mark Pritchard]

Is it not clear that Paris is not a place for British Prime Ministers? When Margaret Thatcher went to Paris for a security conference in 1990, she was gone as Prime Minister within four days. The right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) has gone as Prime Minister within five days of visiting Paris for a security conference. In the communiqué from the G7, there is a reference to Ukraine and energy. When will the UK end its temporary licences for the import of Russian diesel and jet fuel through third countries? It is scheduled to end in 2027. Could the Deputy Prime Minister bring that date forward?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question—I expect to be here for a few days yet. We did publish a statement on that issue, and it will be 1 July.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): 1 January.

The Deputy Prime Minister: 1 January.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): We have been waiting for the UK-EU reset for two years, and today we have just more warm words after the UK-EU reset summit was postponed because the Labour party has decided to change its leader. On the anniversary of the Brexit referendum, when we are all poorer and our economy has taken a 6% to 8% hit because of it, what assurance can the Deputy Prime Minister give this House that the next Prime Minister will be bolder than this one and will actually positively reset the relationship with Europe, supporting our calls to join the customs union and the single market?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am proud of the work we have done to reconnect with the European Union. Alongside the Minister for the Cabinet Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), and the Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, my dear hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) who is on the Front Bench, we have put a lot of work into the run-up to that EU summit. I was pleased to sit around the table with Foreign Secretaries across Europe for the first time, and that momentum will continue not just for the next year, but right up to the general election many years ahead.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): The Deputy Prime Minister mentioned in his statement an £18 billion investment from Japan. What he did not mention was that earlier this year, the Government turned down a £17.5 billion investment from oil and gas companies when they decided not to end the energy profits levy. He also mentioned Russian sanctions, but did not mention that they have not sanctioned Russian-derived oil products nor Russian liquefied natural gas. Can he not see that this Government's policies on the North sea oil and gas sector are bad for national security and that whoever is leading the Government next must end the ban on new licences, end the EPL and get Jackdaw and Rosebank permitted?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I just remind the hon. Lady that in the past decade, 70,000 jobs were lost in the North sea because of her party. We have headquartered Great British Energy in Aberdeen, we have established the Office for Clean Energy Jobs to help create jobs, and there are already 105,000 jobs in renewables in Scotland. We are committed to jobs and that is why we have provided an extra £1.2 billion in support of upskilling the workforce.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): The G7 summit took place in a country in the grip of an extreme heatwave—a heatwave that is now hitting the UK this week—yet climate change was not on the agenda, despite the fact that the climate crisis has huge impacts on human health and economic security. Why are the G7 asleep at the wheel with their heads buried in the sand? Could it possibly be that they were appeasing one Donald J. Trump, and have we not already learned that appeasing Trump never works? Will the Deputy Prime Minister assure me that, whoever the next Prime Minister is, the UK will show the leadership needed here in the UK and on the global stage to tackle the climate crisis?

The Deputy Prime Minister: It is great to hear the Greens talking about climate again, frankly—more, more, more! I am very proud of our record on climate, on renewables and on nature. I was very pleased to deliver my Kew lecture on this subject, and the great work continues not just in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, but at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, to ensure that Britain once again is at the leadership table on climate and nature.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): This is a joke, right, Madam Deputy Speaker? We have got the Deputy Prime Minister here giving a statement on a G7 summit that he was not at. I am embarrassed to point that out in front of the Public Gallery and the world. Can the Deputy Prime Minister name a single Prime Minister who has gone to a G7, a G8 or a G20 and not come back personally to make a statement to this House?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Despite the repartee, the hon. Gentleman is well aware that in our constitutional system, just as I deputised for the Prime Minister at Prime Minister's questions last week and answered questions on a range of issues on behalf of the Government, I deputise today to update the House on the G7.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Jess Brown-Fuller.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

"For every tear of an Israeli mother, a thousand Lebanese mothers must weep. All of Lebanon must burn!"

Those are the appalling words of Israeli Minister of National Security Ben-Gvir, posted three days ago. I know that the Deputy Prime Minister will stand up and condemn this genocidal and, frankly, psychopathic language. Considering the very fragile ceasefire with Lebanon, does the Deputy Prime Minister see any version of lasting peace in the middle east with Ben-Gvir continuing to serve in Netanyahu's Cabinet, and are further sanctions on him possible?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Ben-Gvir's words are reprehensible and of course I condemn them. I was very proud to sanction him for all that he continues to do to destabilise the middle east and undermine the prospect of a two-state solution.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): The Government lauded the EU-UK reset deal as potentially delivering a modest yet none the less material 0.2% uplift to GDP per annum. That equates to about £6 billion per year, or £500 million per month. Given that the EU has announced a delay to that summit, does the Deputy Prime Minister consider £500 million to be a price too high, a price too low, or about right for the latest palace coup within the Labour party?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that I expect that the EU summit will happen as quickly as possible. He knows our constitutional arrangements. My right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) won a massive victory in Makerfield, and I look forward to working with him over the coming weeks and months.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): There are massive death tolls in the wars in Ukraine, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lebanon, Palestine and Iran. Last year, global arms expenditure reached $2.7 trillion, a third of which came from the United States of America, and this year it will be well over $3 trillion. What consideration did the G7 give to the direction in which the world is going, with greater global poverty, greater inequality, greater climate injustice and greater danger for the whole world? Did the G7 have any thoughts about greater diplomacy, ending the wars and bringing about peace around the world, or was it all solely about spending more and more money on weapons?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The G7 was a great act of diplomacy and I commend President Macron for a successful G7 summit. In relation to the terrible geopolitical environment that the right hon. Gentleman describes, the summit was successful in part because President Macron chose to invite India, Kenya, partners in the Gulf and others to talk about the very same issues that I know have dominated much of the right hon. Gentleman's career.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): Some 10 years on from the Brexit referendum, the Government want to align more closely with the European Union, but does the Deputy Prime Minister recognise as a statement of fact that in the sectors from which the growth of the future is coming—life sciences, agritech, defence tech and, most of all, artificial intelligence—the UK far outstrips the EU, and it would not do so if we had spent the past five years in the EU's regulation regime. Whenever the EU summit happens, does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that we need to maintain absolute sovereignty and regulatory divergence in those vital areas?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We must always do what is right for the country. I do not recognise the either/or that the hon. Gentleman is positing. Of course we are global leaders in areas such as AI, digital and tech, but with the EU as our biggest trading partner, it is vital that we continue to work in partnership with it, and I am proud of the Government's record in that regard.

East Midlands Railway Collision

4.47 pm

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the tragic collision between two passenger trains on Friday 19 June.

I realise that hon. Members will be aware of some of the details, but today I would like to set out the facts as we know them so far. At approximately 5.15 pm on Friday evening, two East Midlands Railway passenger trains collided at Elstow, near Bedford. The 16.40 service from Corby to London St Pancras struck the stationary 15.50 service from Nottingham to St Pancras. Within minutes, emergency services were on the scene. A joint response then followed, including fire and rescue services, the ambulance service, the national police air service, British Transport police, Bedfordshire police and railway staff. They evacuated passengers safely, provided medical assistance, secured the railway and began recovery operations. By 11 pm, all passengers were clear of the scene.

It deeply saddens me to confirm to the House that the driver of the Corby to London St Pancras train died in the collision. His family have asked for privacy at this horrendously difficult time, but I am sure I speak for the whole House when I offer them our deepest condolences.

According to the latest information I have from the BTP, at least 33 people were taken to hospital, with a third of those in a serious condition, and at least 56 other people were treated for injuries. A number of the injured remain in a critical condition today. We are thinking of all of them and their families.

All responders, to a person, acted quickly, professionally and bravely in the most challenging circumstances, which many of us will never experience or quite understand. Chief Constable Lucy D'Orsi of the British Transport police told me over the weekend that the teamwork between emergency services, railway staff and the rail accident investigation branch was the best she had ever seen. Let me take this opportunity to thank every single one of them. I also thank the NHS staff, who are still providing care to the injured as we speak.

Often, in the hours and days after events such as these, small acts of compassion and selflessness start to emerge, whether it was members of the local community, who lived near the stranded trains, providing bottles of water to stranded passengers; the Salvation Army's food truck, which has been on the scene since the incident; or station staff along the route, who supported passengers amid the disruption. I was particularly moved to hear of a ticket inspector on the Corby train who, despite being injured, radioed in to close the rail line while checking that everyone else was okay. As I have said before, I truly believe the best of us show up in the worst of times, and that was the case here.[1]

This is news that no Transport Secretary ever wants to deliver. Although I completely understand the strength of feeling out there and hear the clamour for answers and the need to understand the cause of this tragedy, I must ask everyone for some patience, as hard as I know that will be. I am determined that we get all the answers we are looking for and that lessons are learned. The rail accident investigation branch, whose inspectors were on the scene within hours, has already launched an independent investigation and confirmed that there will be an update in the coming days. It and it alone will identify the cause and will make recommendations, which I will consider with the utmost care and diligence. Meanwhile, I urge everyone to await its findings and to hold off on speculation.

Those most affected by this tragic incident will continue to receive the support they need. In addition to direct care provided by the emergency services, East Midlands Railway has a customer care and welfare support team to provide assistance to passengers. It has also set up a dedicated care line that anyone affected can contact. Throughout, my Department will remain in close contact with the British Transport police and local emergency services, Network Rail, East Midlands Railway, the rail accident investigation branch and the Office of Rail and Road.

The Rail Minister has already spoken to the general secretaries of the RMT and ASLEF, as well as to hon. Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin) and for Milton Keynes North (Chris Curtis), the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson), and my hon. Friends the Members for Corby and East Northamptonshire (Lee Barron), for Wellingborough and Rushden (Gen Kitchen) and for Kettering (Rosie Wrighting).

Now that investigators have gathered evidence from the scene, Network Rail will recover the trains and restore the infrastructure. This will be a complex operation, involving lifting and removing damaged trains, repairing the rails and removing and replacing overhead lines. That is why the railway is expected to remain closed between Bedford and Luton for the rest of the week. However, services will be running between Luton and London St Pancras.

Rail replacement services were already in place along the midland main line, due to planned engineering works over the weekend. Those works were cancelled, but the replacement services continue to offer passengers alternative routes to travel. I have also instructed train operators to accept tickets from customers using alternative routes. However, my message to passengers who would normally use this route is that if their travel is not essential, they should please make alternative arrangements.

I realise that the following words may ring hollow to those affected by Friday's events, but they remain important none the less. Britain has one of the safest railways in the world. Thankfully, incidents such as this are extremely rare and, when they do occur, they are taken very seriously. Safety remains the absolute priority across our rail network—of that, there should be no doubt. In addition to the railway's own safety experts and the Rail Accident Investigation Branch, we have an expert independent safety regulator. I expect all of them to be studying the investigation's findings, and I will ensure that the right steps are then taken.

I would like to close by reassuring the House that we will provide updates as more information becomes available, and by offering my sympathies again to everyone affected and expressing my heartfelt thanks to those who responded so heroically in the aftermath. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the shadow Secretary of State.

1.[*Official Report*, 14 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 11WC.] (Correction).

4.55 pm

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): First and foremost, I offer my condolences to the family of Shaun Burton. In addition, our thoughts are with all those injured, some of whom are still in hospital with very serious injuries. I and all my colleagues on the Conservative Benches wish them all well. I agree with the Secretary of State, and wish to put on record the grateful thanks of Conservative Members to those first responders—the emergency crews, including those from the British Transport Police—who attended the scene. I also thank the Rail Minister in the House of Lords for his call with hon. Members, including Conservative Members, over the weekend, and I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement and for coming to the House at this turbulent time. Given the seriousness of this accident near Bedford, it is welcome that, despite all that is going on, we have this statement.

From the accounts and video footage released in the aftermath of the incident, we can clearly see that this was a serious collision. The images from within the train and the reports from passengers depict the scale of the incident. At this time, it appears that there are few confirmed details about the reasons for the crash. There has obviously been considerable online commentary trying to explain what may have happened, with remarks about various different systems that are in place. However, given our lack of knowledge, it would be deeply irresponsible to speculate about the causes of the incident. Historically, as the Secretary of State has said, our railways have a very strong safety record. However, that safety is predicated on learning from incidents and ensuring that they do not happen in future, so I would be grateful if the Secretary of State could give some further clarity about the investigation to date, if at all possible.

Although initial investigations by the rail accident investigation branch take place within a few days, full reports can often take about a year to complete. Given the substantial questions raised by this incident, will the Transport Secretary work to ensure that the investigation delivers answers swiftly and clarifies whether any more fundamental issues are at stake? Furthermore, are the Government ready to ensure that any findings can be acted upon quickly by Network Rail or the rail operators, so that any issues can be very quickly addressed?

The Secretary of State is obviously absolutely right that the rail accident investigation branch needs time and space to establish what happened. Confidence in our railways depends on both avoiding incidents and, where they do occur, learning from them as quickly as possible. What has occurred in this case is clearly a tragedy, but the best way to pay tribute to those injured and to Shaun's tragic death is to ensure that the lessons are learned.

Heidi Alexander: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks and for the tone in which he has expressed himself. I share in the condolences he has expressed to the driver of the Corby train, Shaun Burton—as I said in my opening remarks, the thoughts of the whole House are with his family at this awful time.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that the RAIB needs to be given space to complete its investigations. It was on the scene within about an hour of the collision, and it has indicated to me that it will issue an update on its investigation in the coming days. He is right that the full investigation will take longer, but as facts emerge the RAIB will be sharing them with the public in the next few days. I agree with him that it would be wrong—and potentially unfair to all those involved—to speculate on the causes of this collision before all the evidence has been properly examined, and I am confident that the RAIB will establish what has happened and why. I also assure the right hon. Gentleman that we will act quickly on its recommendations. It is important that the RAIB independently assesses the facts of the matter and makes recommendations to me as the Secretary of State for Transport.

I reassure the right hon. Gentleman that our immediate priority is all those who have been affected. We are supporting those who have been injured and their families, and providing all the assistance that is needed to all those who have been caught up in this terrible incident.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Transport Committee.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I endorse, as I know does everyone in this House, the comments by the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Holden). He asked all the questions that I had lined up to ask. In particular, I thank those who responded so quickly after this terrible incident in support of those who were injured. Our thoughts are with all those who are so severely impacted. In addition to those other questions, will support be put in place for those who drive trains and work in other roles on that route when it reopens, because that could be fairly traumatic?

Heidi Alexander: I spoke yesterday to the managing director of East Midlands Railway, Will Rogers, and the Chair of the Transport Committee is completely right to say that support must also be provided to the staff who were caught up in this incident. One of the things that Will Rogers explained to me is that he is receiving support from other train operating companies. The whole of the railway family has come together to ensure that support is put in place for individuals who could have experienced significant trauma. That will obviously apply to passengers who were caught up in this terrible incident, but it will apply to the staff of EMR, too.

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

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): May I start by thanking the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement? I wholly associate myself with her remarks. Our thoughts have to be with the driver who lost his life and the many passengers who were injured, particularly those still in hospital, and all their families. From my past railway management experience, I know that the railway family as a whole will be in a state of shock. I pay tribute to the on-train staff, signalling centre staff and control centre staff in Network Rail and East Midlands Railway for their excellent initial response. That led to emergency services being on the scene within 10 minutes. I also pay tribute to the emergency services for their work and to investigatory staff, station staff, customer service personnel along the line of route, the community organisations and the Salvation Army, as the Secretary of State referenced.

[Olly Glover]

I do not have a question for the Secretary of State; I think her statement was spot on, and I just want to reiterate what she said. It is so important that we do not succumb to the temptation to speculate, however well-intentioned that may be. We must give the investigatory teams and the site recovery teams the time and space that they need. I never had to deal with anything as horrible as this in in my railway career, but I know from that time that speculation is the most unhelpful thing that can be done.

Heidi Alexander: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his responsible remarks, and I thank him for raising the response of the emergency services, as well as the response of the railway staff who ensured that swift action could be taken once the collision had happened. It is worth saying once again how quickly, bravely and professionally our emergency services responded in these most challenging of circumstances.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab): I express my deepest condolences to the family, friends and colleagues of Shaun Burton. As a train driver, he carried enormous responsibility and we should remember his dedication and service. I also wish a full recovery to those who are injured. This was a tragic incident, but it was genuinely moving to witness the extraordinary response from our community. I saw at first hand the professionalism and compassion of rail staff, emergency services and NHS staff, alongside the many local businesses, community groups and individuals who stepped forward to help. From distributing water and food to transporting stranded passengers and supporting these superb emergency operations, Bedford and Kempston came together as one community, and I am immensely proud of everyone involved.

Given that thousands of commuters rely on these services, can the Secretary of State confirm that replacement services are operating effectively, and can she tell me what support is being provided for rail staff who are working in challenging conditions during the rare red heat warning period, while also coping with the impact of this tragedy?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the impressive and selfless response from so many people, including some in his own constituency, as well as the railway staff. He mentioned Shaun Burton, and it strikes me that it would be appropriate to read the comments of Will Rogers, the managing director of East Midlands Railway, who said:

"Shaun was known for his quick-wit, kind, generous, and intelligent nature, and for always having a smile on his face. He was a well respected colleague both in his role as a Driver, and in his previous role as a Train Manager, often acting as a trusted advisor and available to share his wisdom, support and guidance to others. He will be greatly missed by all who knew him."

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and I thank Ministers for briefing me over the weekend on this tragic event. I also thank all the emergency services, railway staff and volunteers in Bedfordshire who worked so tirelessly and professionally in response to the collision in my constituency. I send my condolences to the family of Shaun Burton, the train driver who tragically lost his life, and wish those who were injured a full and speedy recovery.

Some of my constituents still need to travel, particularly to London. What guarantees can the Secretary of State give my constituents who rely on Flitwick and Harlington stations—which, as she knows, are closed at the moment—that the contingency timetables and rail replacement capacity will be sufficient in the days ahead? Has any consideration been given to the possibility that trains on the east coast main line could make additional stops at Arlesey in Bedfordshire to increase capacity during this recovery period?

Heidi Alexander: I will ask the Rail Minister to respond in writing to the hon. Gentleman's suggestion about diverting stopping services from the east coast main line. We are working closely with all train operators to ensure that adequate service is provided. While no services are operating between Luton and Bedford, there are currently rail replacement buses. GTR is still operating between London and Luton and also north of Bedford, and EMR is still operating a limited service into Bedford. However, I will respond in writing on the hon. Gentleman's specific point.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): This was a hugely tragic incident, and my thoughts are with all those affected. The Secretary of State was right to say that we should wait for the investigation and not jump to any conclusions. Will she join me in thanking the local residents who heeded the calls not to visit A&E at Bedford and Luton and Dunstable hospitals unless there was a real emergency, and in praising the independent coach operators—the ones of which I am aware are Johnsons, Tates, Britannia and Angie's Tours—which, as ever, have jumped in and quietly put all hands to the pump?

Heidi Alexander: I do, of course, join my hon. Friend in thanking those independent coach operators. She is also right not only to draw attention to the incredible work of NHS staff at the three hospitals where people were sent, but to recognise the patience and forbearance of the local community in ensuring that the hospital staff can focus on those who have been most seriously injured. Through her, I thank her community for their co-operation in that regard over the weekend.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State and her ministerial team for the support they have given Members of Parliament in affected constituencies since the collision, and add my voice to the many who have praised the response of Bedfordshire emergency services immediately following the collision, the brilliant work of the Thameslink staff at the stations, who redirected passengers who were not on those trains but had journeys to make, and the tremendous work being undertaken right now by Network Rail to move the carriages off the track. My condolences go to the family of the deceased driver, and my thoughts are with those in hospital.

I spoke to one of my constituents, who is in hospital, at the weekend. He faces two very serious operations, and I ask this question on his behalf. We want the RAIB to complete its investigation thoroughly and without speculation. When it is complete, will the Secretary of State give her assurance that she will work tirelessly and

fully to implement the RAIB's recommendations as speedily and effectively as possible, so that this rare incident becomes ever rarer still?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Gentleman and I were in direct contact on Friday evening, and I thank him for his recognition of the railway staff, including those from Thameslink, who provided assistance on the evening. I can give him a guarantee that as soon as the RAIB makes recommendations to the Government, we will act swiftly if there are matters on which we need to act. We will consider the recommendations with the diligence that a tragedy of this nature deserves.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and wholeheartedly agree that all our thoughts should be with the loved ones of Shaun Burton, his colleagues and those who have been seriously injured. Will my right hon. Friend join me in thanking the emergency services, including the NHS staff at the Luton and Dunstable hospital in my constituency, who will no doubt have gone above and beyond for all those affected? What support is being offered to the emergency services personnel who have attended the scene in the days that have followed? Many will take this in their stride, but many will have been impacted by what they have seen and experienced, and they also deserve our support.

Heidi Alexander: I join my hon. Friend in thanking all those who have responded to this horrific incident. I know that the Samaritans and the International Red Cross are involved in providing support to individuals, and that East Midlands Railway has set up a contact line for anyone affected by this incident. She is absolutely right to highlight the outstanding bravery of the many people involved in responding to this incident. Many people will have sustained horrific injuries, so it is important that we support those who dealt with the horrific moment in the immediacy of the incident. I will leave no stone unturned in making sure that those individuals are supported.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I extend my thanks to the emergency services, railway staff, the NHS and community volunteers, who showed enormous bravery and humanity. My thoughts are with the family of Shaun Burton and all those who are injured.

My constituents are shocked and shaken that such a tragic accident could happen so close to home. The Secretary of State will be aware that the Thameslink line south of Bedford is likely to breach capacity within five years. On a separate occasion, I will press her on the question of investment in capacity. My constituents are very concerned that our lines are getting busier and busier. What assurances can she provide that, as our train lines get busier, safety will always remain paramount?

Heidi Alexander: I said earlier today that we are fortunate to have some of the safest railways in the world, but as I said in my statement, I know that that will not provide any consolation to anyone who was impacted by this incident. As we set up Great British Railways, safety will remain absolutely central to everything that the railway does. When I worked at Transport for London, we often talked about the fact that everyone should be able to get home safely at the end of every day, regardless of whether they are working or travelling on the railway, and that is completely the culture that we will take forward into Great British Railways. We will make the right investments to ensure that the right maintenance is done, because everyone needs to be assured that they are travelling on a safe railway whenever they get on a train.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Train drivers keep our country running and help contribute billions to our economy; they get people to work, to their holidays and to see their friends and family; and they deliver the food for our supermarkets and the materials to build our houses and infrastructure. No one should go to work and worry they will not come home. This incident has been shocking, and as chair of the ASLEF parliamentary group, I would like to share my solidarity and thoughts with Shaun's family, friends and colleagues, with ASLEF the trade union and with all the rail and emergency workers who dealt with the situation with such professionalism. What is the Secretary of State doing to support drivers and to maintain and improve safety for everyone who uses and works on our railways?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is completely right to highlight the vital role that train drivers play. I would like to put on record my thanks to Dave Calfe, the ASLEF general secretary, for his statement over the weekend. The Rail Minister has spoken with the general secretary, and we will continue to work to ensure that drivers are safe. This has been a horrific incident, but such incidents are thankfully very rare on our railways. I will make sure that we continue that close collaboration to ensure that everyone—staff and passengers—is safe when they are on our trains.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and her Department for their constant communication over the weekend, and the emergency services, which responded so quickly. My hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough and Rushden (Gen Kitchen) is no longer on the Front Bench, but we have been in constant communication about how we can support our constituencies over the last few days. My thoughts are with everyone affected and the loved ones of the driver who so tragically lost his life.

This crash has been felt acutely in Kettering. Both trains stopped in Kettering before the collision, and it feels as though everyone knows someone who has been impacted. To add the real human element of this tragedy's impact, I want to mention the story of one of my constituents, who was injured with a broken nose and extensive injuries to her back and neck. Following the crash, she and her friends had to walk through a hedge and over fields and then arrange private transport to Kettering general hospital. Understandably, it was a traumatic experience, and she has shown great strength since. Can the Secretary of State reassure those involved, such as my constituents, that the Government will work with the Department of Health to offer them support following this tragic event?

Heidi Alexander: I can reassure my hon. Friend of that, and she is right to highlight the very human impact of what happened. The trains were busy trains coming into London on a Friday evening. It concerns me to hear that her constituents had to organise private transport.

[Heidi Alexander]

Would she write to me in more detail about those circumstances, because I would like to look into that? I know that wraparound support was provided at the scene, and if anyone did not experience that, I would like to know so that we can be in contact with them and learn any lessons.

Lee Barron (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): As the Member of Parliament for Corby and East Northamptonshire, I agree with everybody about the emergency services, the NHS, the community who came together, the guards, the staff and the passengers as well, who did not go through the panic that can sometimes happen in situations like this. The 16.40 London train from Corby to was involved in this fatal collision. No worker should ever go to work never to return home, and I am sure all our thoughts are with the dedicated Shaun Burton, who lost his life, as well as with his family and his friends, and the family and friends of all those impacted and affected—a lot from my constituency—including those with injuries. I spoke to Ministers over the weekend, and I thank them for that. I have also spoken to the ASLEF and RMT unions, and I know that they are offering support.

Does the Secretary of State agree with me that train drivers, who connect our communities and deliver the goods we need, work in a safety-critical environment and deserve to feel safe? Does she also agree that the passengers and staff affected by the trauma of such an accident really do need our support and that of the rail operators?

Heidi Alexander: I do agree with my hon. Friend. My thoughts are also with the driver of the other train and their family, as well as the on board train crew, some of whom were injured. It is absolutely vital that we in the Government do everything we can to make sure our railways are as safe as they possibly can be. We will be looking closely at the RAIB report when it comes, and I can assure him and his constituents that we will learn any necessary lessons and make any necessary changes.

Chris Curtis (Milton Keynes North) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in offering my deepest condolences to the family and friends of the driver, Shaun Burton. I thank her, the Rail Minister and staff at East Midlands Railway for keeping us updated in what I am sure were very difficult circumstances on Friday evening. As someone who represents the railway town of Wolverton, I know how such incidents have an impact on people right across the rail community. Will the Secretary of State join me in paying tribute to the emergency services, including brave firefighters from Milton Keynes, who acted quickly and professionally in the aftermath of this tragic incident?

Heidi Alexander: I will, of course, join my hon. Friend in thanking the firefighters from Milton Keynes, who were very fast on to the scene. I would also like to thank all those from Network Rail who are involved in recovering the trains. Some Members may have seen the images of a road being built through a field, as we speak, to erect a crane to be able to lift the carriages off the tracks. This was a very serious incident, and I thank all those involved in responding to it and seeing the recovery through.

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): Recently, I was proud to join EMR driver Ross and driver manager Peter in travelling from Derby to St Pancras. From the cab, I saw at first hand the skill, dedication and immense responsibility that every single journey requires of our dedicated train drivers. Friday's crash has tragically demonstrated the scale of that responsibility. My thoughts are with the family, friends and colleagues of driver Shaun Burton, alongside everybody injured and affected. Will the Secretary of State join me in commending the brilliant work that our train drivers do day in, day out up and down the country?

Heidi Alexander: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend's remarks. Anyone who, like him, has been in a cab with a driver will understand the skills, attention to detail and alertness that drivers require. He is right to say that they often go unthanked, hidden away in the driver's cab, but billions of journeys each year on our railway network depend on the service they provide, so he is completely right to highlight that.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): On behalf of my constituents in Rushcliffe in Nottinghamshire, I express my condolences to the family of the deceased driver and to all those involved, and give my thanks to the emergency services. This was particularly poignant, as my officer manager's 12-year-old nephew, Arthur, was in one of the middle carriages. He sustained injuries, but thankfully he has come out relatively unscathed. May I press the Secretary of State to confirm that those investigating the crash will be resourced appropriately, so they can ensure the investigations are concluded as quickly as possible?

Heidi Alexander: I give Arthur my best wishes, and I am pleased to hear that, while he sustained injuries, he is hopefully on the road to recovery. Let me reassure my hon. Friend that the RAIB and the British Transport police, who are involved in investigations, will be appropriately resourced and equipped to do their work thoroughly. As I said in my statement, we are anticipating an update from the RAIB in the coming days, and I will ensure that he is kept informed.

Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and for keeping us up to date this weekend. I would like to take this opportunity to offer my condolences to the family and friends of the driver, Shaun Burton, who sadly lost his life following this truly heartbreaking incident, and to send my very best wishes to all those injured on Friday. I would also like to pay tribute to the emergency services, railway staff and local responders for their swift response, ensuring passenger safety and providing urgent emergency care on the scene. Will the Secretary of State provide an update on the work required before services can be safely resumed and how passengers will be kept informed of progress?

Heidi Alexander: As I alluded to in my earlier remarks, it is a complicated process to finalise the investigations on site and remove the trains from the track. Some will have to be hoisted off the track by a crane, and we will need to move overhead-line equipment to do that, which will then need to be repaired. The track will also need to be repaired before services can resume. That is why we anticipate the line between Bedford and Luton being closed for the rest of this week. As soon as I have more

information on service resumption, I will ensure that Members along the line of route get that information to share with their constituents.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I join the Secretary of State in sending condolences to the family of Shaun Burton, who died in the accident, in wishing those who are injured a speedy and full recovery, and in thanking the emergency services for their prompt action on Friday. It is important that we have heard from the Secretary of State that a full investigation is ongoing and that all lessons will be learned in order to avoid a repeat. Can the Secretary of State reassure my constituents that the disruption to Thameslink services south of the Thames, arising from the partial line closure, including temporary interruption of services from Rainham through Dartford to Luton, will last no longer than is necessary for the full investigation to take place?

Heidi Alexander: We are obviously keen to ensure that normal service patterns can be resumed as soon as possible, but there is extensive work still to be done at the site. We need to ensure that everything is in perfect working order before we resume services. I will keep my hon. Friend updated, as I will do other hon. Members, as soon as we have more information.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and associate myself with her comments on the sad loss of the train driver Shaun Burton and her thanks to the emergency services, staff and volunteers who helped at the scene. Many of my constituents in Amber Valley travel on that line regularly. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give them that everything is being done to ensure their safety once that specific line is back open? Can she reassure those worried constituents who are contacting me that the line will not be reopened until it is absolutely safe to do so?

Heidi Alexander: I give my hon. Friend the reassurance that the line will not be reopened until it is absolutely safe to do so. There are detailed procedures to be gone through in order to ensure that the railway is safe to resume services. We need to remove the trains from the track, as I set out, and repair the damage that will have been done to overhead-line equipment and the tracks. I assure her that Network Rail, the train operating company, and my Department will ensure that everything is done so that the line is safe when it reopens.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): The thoughts and prayers of the people of Stockport are with Shaun Burton's family and friends. East Midlands Railway serves Stockport and connects us to Sheffield, Nottingham and beyond, so I thank all EMR staff and the railway workers who support those services. Can the Secretary of State reassure the House that British Transport police, the rail accident investigation branch, and EMR will have the support of her Department and the wider Government with the investigation?

Heidi Alexander: I can assure my hon. Friend of that. This weekend, I spoke to Chief Constable Lucy D'Orsi of the BTP, and to the managing director of EMR. This morning, I was briefed by the safety director of Network Rail. We will ensure that the investigation that RAIB and BTP do independently is appropriately resourced. I will look carefully at any recommendations that are forthcoming on how we can improve safety on the railways.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): Long Eaton is a railway town. On Saturday, a train driver who lives in my constituency stopped me to say that he had known Shaun Burton, the driver who was killed in the incident, and that he himself had been driving one of the two trains involved earlier that day. Like many colleagues in the House and many of my constituents, my team and I are regular passengers on the line. While we should never speculate on causes, can the Secretary of State please elaborate on the steps that she is taking to investigate what happened and to communicate the findings of that investigation?

Heidi Alexander: As someone who also represents a railway town—Swindon—I understand my hon. Friend's experiences in Long Eaton of being stopped in the street by members of the railway family. This will be a particularly challenging time for them, and I do understand that. I assure him that the RAIB, which was on the scene quickly, will be doing its work independently; as I say, an update will be forthcoming in the coming days. The BTP will continue its investigations as well. I will ensure that all MPs along the line of route are kept informed as we get more information about the incident and any recommendations that flow from the investigations.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for her statement. I associate myself with her condolences to the driver's family and her remarks on those who were injured, and offer my thanks to those who responded from the emergency services, those in the NHS who continue to provide care and treatment and the railway staff. I welcome my right hon. Friend's saying that she will heed the RAIB's recommendations and consider them carefully.

Many of my constituents use that stretch of railway. I note that there is a recommendation not to travel unless it is essential, but some, including key workers, may have to use the railway and travel on alternative lines. I am conscious that there may be extra pressure on those lines and that, particularly in this hot weather, tempers sometimes fray on the railway. I would be grateful if the Secretary of State could keep the situation on the neighbouring lines under review to ensure that there is capacity and that there is support for the staff working on those other operators, if they need it.

Heidi Alexander: I can assure my hon. Friend that the railway will act as one in these challenging weeks. We have made tickets available to be used on other operators, and we will, as always, keep in close contact with the train operating companies to ensure that there is collaborative working and that we keep the disruption and inconvenience caused by this incident to a minimum.

Pathways Study: Puberty Suppression

5.33 pm

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (James Murray): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I shall make a statement on the Pathways trial.

I know what a sensitive, emotive and difficult issue this is. I myself have wrestled with, and at times struggled with, the profound challenges that this subject raises. In all of my consideration and deliberation over this matter, my bottom line has been to protect the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. The way to do that is to follow expert clinical advice and take an evidence-led approach, which is what this Government are doing. As adults, we all owe a duty of care to every child and young person in the country. It is a responsibility that I—both as a citizen and as Health Secretary—bear with the utmost seriousness and sincerity.

I do not believe that children's safety and wellbeing was being adequately protected just a few years ago. I think it would be helpful to remind Members how we arrived at that point. For several years before the turn of the decade, the number of children and young people being referred for NHS support around their gender identity increased rapidly. Stories subsequently emerged of young people struggling after undergoing radical and permanent transition surgery at a young age, children being rushed into taking medication without adequate therapy beforehand, and clinicians disregarding conditions such as neurodiversity and mental health conditions. As such, there was rightly deep concern about the vulnerability of these children and young people, the care and treatment they were receiving and the surge in referrals.

In 2020, NHS England commissioned leading paediatrician Dr Hilary Cass to carry out a review of NHS gender identity services for under-18s. What Dr Cass uncovered was shocking and scandalous, and she made a series of recommendations for how children could be better protected and supported. I remind the House that those recommendations were accepted in full by both the Conservative Government of the time and my party in opposition.

It was, in my mind, clearly wrong for children and young people to be routinely prescribed puberty blockers for gender dysphoria without any clear evidence on their benefits or risks. The situation was out of control, and I fully supported the indefinite ban introduced by my predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), which followed the temporary ban brought in by the previous Government.

I do not think there is anyone with more respect as a clinician in this space than Dr Cass, and my predecessors in this role recognised that too. Dr Cass identified treatment for gender incongruence as

"an area of remarkably weak evidence".

She found that even clinicians working in the field were divided on the best way to support, treat and care for young people suffering gender dysphoria. Where there is strong divergence of medical opinion on treatment, the two possible responses are to continue with the uncertainty—and, with that, conflicting opinions and advice—or to undertake a trial, not just to resolve a dispute but to make sure that children with gender-related distress get the same standards of care as everyone else in the NHS.

As Dr Cass has said, the vast majority of children and young people who question their gender will resolve it without needing any support other than that of their friends and family. For many young people, questioning their identity on many different fronts is a normal part of growing up, and we should simply let them be. For a small number of young people, though, greater support is needed because of the level and longevity of the discomfort that they feel. That can often involve counselling or therapy. For a very, very small number of young people, it is possible—I emphasise the word "possible"—that medical treatment would help to improve their quality of life and mental health, and reduce their gender-related distress.

That is why Dr Cass, whose approach until recently commanded cross-party consensus, recommended a trial to establish how best to support children and young people suffering gender incongruence. That is the Pathways study. It has four main parts, one of which is the clinical trial to study the effects of puberty-suppressing hormones on young people's physical, social and emotional wellbeing. The Pathways trial, which is being led by King's College London and the South London and Maudsley NHS foundation trust, was initially approved last November. The trial seeks to gain evidence on whether those potential benefits are real, alongside evidence on whether such treatment comes with the risk of harm.

It is right that this Government are guided by expert clinical advice and a clinical, evidence-led approach, but as this study involves children, and therefore comes with a particular responsibility, as Health Secretary I have sought the most detailed assurances possible from my clinical advisers about how children taking part in the trial will be protected. There are a number of important safeguards. Children can participate only with the consent of a parent or guardian, and the children themselves must consent or assent. They can participate only if they have had a diagnosis of gender incongruence for at least two years. They can participate only if they have received psychosocial support through the NHS. They can participate only if they are of stable physical and mental health. They can participate only if they are not subject to any safeguarding concerns. They can participate only if they and their parents demonstrate sufficient understanding of the nature of the treatment, including its potential advantages and disadvantages. They can participate only if they have been deemed clinically appropriate by both the NHS care team and the national multidisciplinary team, and they can participate only if they are already accessing NHS gender services. So, when it comes to eligibility, we are talking about a very small subset of a very small group. The number of young people who would expect to quality for the trial will be low, and the safeguards to ensure their safety and wellbeing are rigorous. I have sought and had reassurance that once participants are on the trial, they may be withdrawn at any point.

As hon. Members will know, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency raised new concerns at the beginning of this year, and the start of the trial was delayed so that they could be fully scrutinised. On Thursday last week, the regulators approved an updated protocol that significantly strengthened the objective criteria for withdrawing children from the trial. I welcome that change. Signs of greater risk to participants will now trigger increased monitoring, clinical

review or automatic withdrawal from the trial. All participants will be monitored before, at the start of, every three months during and after the trial. Before and during the trial, information will be collected about mental health, quality of life, self-harm and suicidality, body image, cognition, puberty stage, physical health and side effects.

On bone health, puberty is normally a time of rapid bone gain, so if changes in bone density are identified, that will lead to a reassessment of whether the participant should continue in the trial, with set criteria for automatic withdrawal. On fertility, there is no published scientific evidence of irreversible changes, but that will be proactively addressed, with every participant offered repeated counselling and a range of options to preserve their fertility. On cognition, while there are no established scientific reports proving a cognitive effect, the new protocol sets out strict definitions for investigation and automatic withdrawal of young people from the trial.

The new criteria for increased monitoring or withdrawing children from the trial will mean that, at the first sign of negative impacts, action will be taken. These criteria will stop short-term harm, and the view of the National Institute for Health and Care Research is that that means any long-term harm should not occur or go unnoticed. Those reassurances about preventing harm to the children who take part in the trial, and taking clear action if any risks appear to increase, are critical. After considering the matter closely over the past few days, I have requested monthly updates on the progress of the trial, including on any emerging risks.

Pathways is rightly one of the most scrutinised UK clinical trials of recent times—we should expect nothing less when we are talking about the health and wellbeing of some of the most vulnerable children in our country. Yet, as Dr Cass has made clear, we have to build the evidence base to show whether the treatments are safe and whether they produce the positive outcomes that young people and their clinicians want from them. My view is that proceeding with the trial is, on balance, the most appropriate way forward.

This has not been easy—I am sure many hon. Members are also wrestling with this dilemma—and, as we debate this issue today, I hope that we will keep in mind Dr Cass's ask to consider the issues sensitively and cautiously. As she said:

> "Polarisation and stifling of debate do nothing to help the young people caught in the middle of a stormy social discourse, and in the long run will also hamper the research that is essential to finding the best way of supporting them to thrive."

I will not pretend that I do not continue to feel discomfort and unease, but I believe that the only way for us all to come to a fair and settled conclusion on this matter—to move forward as a country on this difficult and sensitive issue—is on the basis of clinical evidence in which we trust. Thanks to the strengthened criteria now in place for monitoring children's wellbeing and withdrawing them from the trial, there is now intense scrutiny, and there are robust mechanisms to prevent harm from coming to the young people who take part. It is on that basis that I believe we should follow the advice of clinical experts and seek the clinical evidence that will give us the confidence to know that where we settle on this matter in the future is right. I commend this statement to the House.

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

5.44 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I declare an interest as an NHS consultant paediatrician and a member of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. What does this trial do? Put simply, it takes physically healthy children with normal pubertal development and subjects them to powerful drugs that may weaken their bones, affect their ability to think, damage sexual function and make them unable to have children of their own. Serious stuff—and for what? To treat a diagnosis of gender incongruence that will probably resolve without treatment.

Let us look at this carefully. Gender incongruence is a subjective condition; it is how someone says they feel. There are no lab markers and no scans. That, of course, is not necessarily unusual. In fact, it is common in mental health conditions. Gender incongruence is often self-resolving; it gets better on its own. Again, this is not unusual in paediatrics. It is really common for children to be admitted to hospital for supported care for things like gastroenteritis and respiratory viruses. Puberty blockers are powerful drugs. This is a powerful treatment with significant long-term consequences. Again, this is not new to paediatrics. Some chemotherapy, for example, has substantial short and long-term consequences. But what is unusual and, I think, toxic is the combination of all three. Medicine is about balancing risk. Where else would we give powerful drugs with potentially serious long-term consequences for a subjective condition that is likely to get better on its own?

I understand that this trial has been approved, but time and again we have seen and heard how fear and hostility can distort priorities. We have seen tragedy occur when fears of accusations of racism limited mental health treatment. We have seen profound suffering when fear of accusations of Islamophobia limited inquiries into the grooming gangs. The healthcare of children distressed about their gender is another topic where there have been attempts to shut down debate with threats and accusations of transphobia.

Such attempts were reported in relation to the Tavistock.

When considering treatments for life, with lifelong implications, we have a duty to be careful and sensible, so I ask the Secretary of State: why are this Government funding a trial that will cause harm to physically healthy children? These children may be 11 years old, at Tanner stage 2. Some of them are primary school children with only minimal signs of puberty. This is far too young. The MHRA warned in February that the youngest patients are at greatest risk; they may end up on puberty blockers for a much longer period, and face a higher risk to fertility, because sperm and eggs have not yet fully developed at Tanner stage 2.

I am reminded of this point in the judgment in Bell *v.* Tavistock:

> "There is no age appropriate way to explain to many of these children what losing their fertility or full sexual function may mean to them in later years."

Yet as the Secretary of State confirmed, the children must consent or assent to being in the trial. Why did the Government not heed the MHRA's recommendation of

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

a minimum age of 14 years? This Labour Government think that 14 is too young to watch social media. Why do they think 11 is old enough for this trial?

What is the goal of the treatment? In the trial, the outcome is a short to medium-term effect on quality of life and body satisfaction. Does the Secretary of State believe this is proportionate to the risks of these medications? Is there any evidence suggesting that puberty blockers are safer than they were thought to be in 2024, when the Government banned them, following the expert advice from the Commission on Human Medicines? Some have suggested that the drugs help adults to pass as the opposite sex. Is the long-term damage really worth it for the cosmetic benefit of a few? And it is just a few, because we know that the vast majority will be better without any treatment.

The Secretary of State said that "when it comes to eligibility, we are talking about a very small subset of a very small group." Even if we were to accept the premise that a very small number might benefit from treatment, how could the clinicians identify which those children might be? A study of clinical outcomes from kids treated at the Tavistock is due to be completed next year. That could help, so why is the Secretary of State not waiting until that report is completed before conducting an experiment on an unnecessarily broad group of children? Has evidence come to light since the Cass review that helps clinicians confidently work out which 11-year-olds will become adults with gender dysphoria and which will not?

The Secretary of State has said that the criteria will stop short-term harm, and that should mean that long-term harm will not occur or go unnoticed, but history is littered with examples of things that do not cause short-term harm but do cause long-term damage. He also suggested that the trial will resolve the dispute, but sadly, I do not think that will be the case, because, first, a single trial rarely resolves a dispute; and, secondly, the comparison group, who are not getting the puberty blockers, are not randomised and are an intrinsically different population. This is bound to be highlighted once the result is published. In medicine, we have a founding principle: primum non nocere—first, do no harm. I ask the Health Secretary to please cancel this trial before vulnerable children suffer unnecessary, irreversible harm on his watch.

James Murray: I agree with the shadow Minister that most children and young people who are questioning their identity and gender are likely to resolve those questions on their own, and I think Dr Cass would agree with that. As I said in my opening remarks, for the majority of children who question their gender, we should let them be; they will resolve the matter through their friends and family and their own development. We are talking here about a small subset within a small group of children who need further support. I also agree with the shadow Minister that the situation before Dr Cass did her review—the situation that had developed in the last few years before the turn of the decade—was totally unacceptable, and we should be clear that that was wrong.

The shadow Minister asked about protecting the young people involved in the trial from harm. As I set out, there is intense scrutiny, and there are robust mechanisms to prevent the children involved from being harmed. She mentioned the MHRA recommendation for the lower age limit. Initially, there was no lower age limit, but a scientific dialogue between the MHRA and the trial sponsor led to publication last week of the updated protocol, which recommended the minimum ages of 11 and 12.

The gateways to younger people and children becoming involved in the trial are significant. There must be not just consent or assent from the children, and consent from their parents or guardians, but approval from the NHS care team, the national multidisciplinary team and others before anyone can be involved. As I set out, I feel uncomfortable and uneasy when considering this matter, but I think that the right way for us to move forward is to have the clinical evidence on which to base decisions. I have received reassurances about there being the highest possible level of scrutiny and protection from harm for young people involved in the trial, and that is the basis on which, on balance, I think it is right for it to proceed.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. The Conservative party committed to and commissioned the Cass review, and today's statement takes forward Dr Cass's recommendations in full—guided not by ideology, but by evidence. Some Members who are critical of that approach have said in this place that these young people just need love. I agree that we should show trans people and trans young people more care and compassion—far too often, those things have not been demonstrated in public discourse in recent months and years—but trans people and trans young people also need and deserve high-quality, evidence-based and timely healthcare. I therefore welcome today's statement and the Secretary of State's commitment. Will he say that this Government are still committed to rolling out gender clinics in every region?

James Murray: As my hon. Friend will know, the recommendations in Dr Hilary Cass's review set out how to establish better services for young people in the future. The focus of today's statement, the clinical trial, is just one part of the wider work on how best to support young people who need extra support in this situation. It was welcome that there had been, at least until recently, a cross-party consensus that Dr Cass was finding the right way through this difficult matter.

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

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. The Liberal Democrats have long highlighted the need for better access to specialist healthcare for children and young people struggling with gender identity. The closure of the Tavistock clinic and its inadequate rating by the Care Quality Commission demonstrated that urgent change was needed. Young people struggling with gender identity face serious challenges. They have been badly let down for years by low care standards and extremely long waiting lists. On top of that, they have to contend with a toxic public debate, which comes at a huge cost to their wellbeing at a particularly vulnerable stage in their life. The average three-year wait for a young person to see a specialist can be extremely harmful at such a vulnerable age.

We agree that treatment should first be based on talking therapies, so that patients are given the space and support that they need, but it is crucial that young people can start those therapies as a matter of urgency, not after years of delay. Decisions about these young patients' futures should be made in an informed way, with expert clinicians and based on the best possible evidence, which the NHS must build up safely and effectively. We support prioritising clinical evidence, so that patients' interests are put at the heart of decision making in all areas of healthcare. Guidance and decisions around puberty blockers must be led by experts and clinical evidence, and not influenced by ideological opinion. That is why we supported the decision of the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), to pause the Pathways clinical trial while concerns raised by the MHRA were thoroughly addressed. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether the MHRA has confirmed that the concerns that led to the withdrawal of the trial have been substantially addressed, and how many children are expected to take part in the trial now that its parameters have been altered?

James Murray: I welcome the fact that the hon. Lady agrees with the Government that we should base our decisions about whether and how to provide support for children, particularly in the case of the treatment that is at the centre of this clinical trial, on clinical evidence and the expert advice of clinicians. There can be no one in this field more widely respected than Dr Hilary Cass, whose recommendations form the basis of the decision that we have taken as a Government.

The hon. Lady asked about the work of the MHRA since early this year to strengthen the safeguards for young people involved in the trial. As I said earlier, I welcome the changes that it has brought forward to strengthen the criteria, which will lead to greater monitoring and clinical reassessment, and to setting objective criteria for withdrawing children and young people from the trial entirely. The MHRA has been engaged in a scientific dialogue with the trial sponsors, and it was the outcome of that process that led the MHRA, as an independent body, to publish the updated protocol towards the end of last week. Now that that is in place, we have greater reassurance about the safeguards.

The trial is expected to involve around 226 children and young people over five and a half years, with each participant potentially being offered puberty blockers for up to 24 months. As I said, a decision to withdraw is triggered by the participant meeting set objective criteria related to the risk of harm.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I welcome the statement and the Health Secretary's calm approach, which contrasts sharply with some of the language that is used around this very important issue. When it comes to the Pathways trial, does he agree that we must follow the science and avoid vilification, polarising language and politicisation for the good of young people and our communities?

James Murray: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend about the importance of following clinical evidence and taking a clinically led and evidence-based approach to this decision. As I said, I have felt uncomfortable and uneasy about some of the challenges raised by this matter, but for me, the right way to move forward is to follow the clinical advice, and to base future decisions on clinical evidence, given that I have received the most robust assurances about the safeguards that are in place to protect young people involved in this trial from harm.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee.

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I welcome the statement and this approach. I thank the MHRA for engaging with the Committee when we asked it specific questions about this. It told us that the role of the regulator is to ensure that participants in any clinical trial are kept safe and are exposed to medicine only if there is a reasonable expectation of a positive effect, and that is what was foremost in its mind. It also reassured us that if it had not felt 100% assured, it would have not allowed the trial to go forward.

There was a lot of disquiet about the iterative process that the trial has gone through—that it was stopped, paused and then started again. Could the Secretary of State outline for the House how usual or unusual that is? What support can the NHS offer those families who might have hoped to be part of the trail but now find themselves excluded from it?

James Murray: I am sure that the hon. Lady will agree that this is now one of the most heavily scrutinised clinical trials in this country in recent history, and rightly so—it is right that it is so heavily scrutinised and that we all seek assurances about the safeguards in place. It is right that, as Health Secretary, I made sure that I got those detailed safeguards before coming to the House to set out the Government's position today.

The hon. Lady asked how usual it is for the MHRA to work with the sponsors of trials. My understanding is that the MHRA routinely works with trial sponsors to iterate the protocols in relation to those trials. Because this trial involves children and young people, for me, the bar should be exceptionally high, to ensure that those safeguards are in place. That is why, although my starting principle is that clinical evidence is the right way to approach such a matter, I wanted that extra reassurance. That is why I asked for the most detailed possible assurances from my clinical advisers, to ensure that those robust safeguards are in place in the way the trial is now designed.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): Before my election, I was a scientist—albeit not in the health sciences. Using that background, however, can I agree with the Secretary of State that healthcare practices and medical trials, like all scientific trials, must be led by expertise and evidence, not politics? Therefore, what precedent is there for politicians, including Members of this House, intervening in a medical trial?

James Murray: My hon. Friend raises an important point about the relationship between politics and clinical evidence and clinically led decisions. Being led by clinical advice and clinical evidence is a decision that I and this Government stand behind. In this case, it is a matter where in considering some of the issues raised, I have felt uncomfortable and uneasy, but that commitment to clinical evidence, particularly recommended by someone as widely respected as Dr Cass, is the basis on which we can move forward. As I mentioned in response to the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, because this involves children and young people, I wanted to

[James Murray]

receive extra assurances that the clinical advice was robust and that the safeguards would be as robust as possible. That is the assurance I have received, it is what I very much wanted to receive before coming here today.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. No child put on puberty blockers at the earliest stage of puberty and whose natural puberty is permanently blocked will ever have an orgasm or be fertile. No child can consent to that. Around 2,000 children have already been given puberty blockers for gender distress, so there is ample information available on impact and outcomes held by gender clinics. It makes no sense to experiment on even more children while this exercise remains incomplete. Why is the Health Secretary not prioritising the completion of this important data linkage study before experimenting on more children?

James Murray: The hon. Lady refers, apparently with some certainty, to what she considers to be the clinical outcomes of these puberty blockers on young people. I have to say, with all due respect, that I would trust Dr Cass's conclusion more than the hon. Lady's, which is that there is not evidence about the risks or benefits of these medications. That is exactly why Dr Cass was so clear in recommending a trial to find that clinical evidence, because that is the basis on which we can take those decisions.

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his detailed and nuanced statement. Notwithstanding the risks of using puberty blockers on children, which he has outlined, and the inability to guarantee that they will not be harmed by participation in the trial, how can the trial determine long-term impacts of the use of puberty blockers when it lasts for only two years? Does that not show the inefficacy of the trial itself? If we really are committed to evidence, which I agree we should be, why are we not—as we just heard from the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul)—using the long-term data that already exists, which came from clinics such as the Tavistock and was gathered over many years?

James Murray: As a result of the work that the MHRA has been doing with these trial sponsors in recent months, there are now objective set criteria against which children and young people involved in the trial would be automatically withdrawn. Those criteria, as I set out earlier, will stop the short-term harm, and the view of the National Institute for Health and Care Research is that this means any long-term harm should not occur or go unnoticed. It is important that we ensure that the appropriate safeguards are in place for this trial. That is why I welcome what the MHRA has done in recent months, because it strengthens those safeguards, which are important in any clinical trial but, in this trial, could not be more important.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): The Secretary of State has said that no child subject to safeguarding concerns will be considered for participation in the trial. Can he confirm, therefore, that no already vulnerable children currently in the care system will be accepted on to the trial?

James Murray: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to some of the gateways that children and young people will have to go through before being accepted on to the trial. That will involve not just the child assenting and the parents giving consent, but the NHS care team and a national multidisciplinary team, which will take into consideration all the different aspects of a child's life that I set out in my earlier remarks about their health, but also the wider context that the children are coming from. The importance here is to ensure that there is an exceptionally high bar for children and young people taking part in this trial, and that is the process that has now been established.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the considered way in which he has delivered his statement. In December 2025, *The BMJ* reported that

"the Pathways trial should wait for findings from former patients treated by GIDS between 2009 and 2020"

and that

"A data linkage study of 9000 patients, now adults, has full HRA approval, and NHS England has encouraged gender clinicians to cooperate, describing it as an opportunity to gather 'high quality evidence.'"

But *The BMJ* reported that the clinicians

"refused to share their data".

Hilary Cass said that was "extraordinary". Can he tell us whether all the data that is out there is available and whether it is being shared appropriately?

James Murray: My hon. Friend asks about the data linkage study, and I apologise to my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith), who a few seconds ago also asked about that—I did not respond then but can now address both questions together.

It is important to understand that the information in the linkage study is much more limited than the detailed information that the research team will be able to collect about the relative benefits and risks of puberty blockers. NHS England is, however, committed to delivering the data linkage study. NHS England, since assuming responsibility for that study, has taken time to ensure that the data is shared by relevant organisations. Let me be absolutely clear, for the avoidance of all doubt, that the Government's clear expectation is that all relevant organisations will provide the data required to complete the study.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I first raised the horrors of the Tavistock clinic in this House in 2019, having been provoked to do so by staff who said that they were often under pressure to refer for life-altering treatment children and young people who had experienced mental health difficulties, abuse and family trauma. Indeed, the Secretary of State will know that the Cass review found that childhood trauma, neglect and abuse featured heavily in the cohort of patients seeking gender changes. As many as two thirds of those referred had suffered neglect or abuse, with high levels of parental mental illness, substance abuse and exposure to domestic violence. So will the Secretary of State, even at this late juncture, abandon this trial? I have no reason to believe that he is anything other than a good man who wants to do the right thing. He has made it clear that he knows that this matter often

sorts itself out through puberty and adulthood. I implore him to do so, for I fear that because he is a good man, he will regret this cruel experiment on harmless children.

James Murray: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments, and although he and I come to a different conclusion on this, I do not doubt for a second the sincerity of his motivation in wanting to protect children and young people. I actually agree with him, as I said in my earlier comments, that most young children who are questioning their gender will resolve it on their own—let them be to resolve it. But there is a small subset of children who will need extra support, and within that there is a question about whether for a very small subset of them there might be a benefit to having treatment, and that is what this trial seeks to conclude.

I would add that the right hon. Gentleman refers to what happened in the Tavistock clinic and the stories that led to Dr Hilary Cass being commissioned. I think the right hon. Gentleman and I agree on how unacceptable that situation was, and I put on record my thanks to Sir Sajid Javid for commissioning the work by Dr Cass, because it has been such an important piece of work not only to expose what was happening before, but to provide a way forward.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): Puberty suppressors have been used for many years for precocious puberty, but the evidence base for their use in gender dysphoria lacked rigour, so I welcome the news that the trial will go ahead, as recommended by the Cass review. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the medications are only one part of the research, and can he outline some of the other measures being looked at? Given the small numbers expected to take part in this trial, will research also be undertaken into the impact on young people who are showing gender distress but are unable to access a trial or, of course, be prescribed puberty blockers, in order to get a full clinical picture? Will he furthermore ensure that all young children showing gender distress will have some care and support?

James Murray: My hon. Friend rightly points out that the clinical trial—the Pathways study, which is the subject of this statement—is just one part of the wider work being done to make sure that the support is there for children and young people who are questioning their gender and who might, or might not, need support in order to feel well about themselves. The Pathways horizon is an observational study of all children and young people attending NHS children and young people's specialist gender services. Pathways connect is a brain-imaging study. Pathways voices will interview young people. Horizon intensive is about making sure that there is a comparison group of 300 participants who are expressing gender incongruence but not receiving puberty-suppressing hormones, as my hon. Friend suggested.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the statement and the Secretary of State's tone, because it is important that we all acknowledge that we are dealing with young children and their safety is paramount. While many children will resolve the issues themselves, there is an important group of children for whom that will not be the case; they face enormous challenges and we must do everything we can. I also welcome the Secretary of State's stress on the importance of talking therapies, but given the long waiting lists and the difficulty in getting access to those talking therapies, how will he ensure that children get the support they need and that there are adequate staff who are properly qualified to support them?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Lady for her remarks, and for her tone and approach to this sensitive matter. Sadly, we have waiting lists across many different parts of the NHS. This Government are determined to deal with that so that everyone can receive the appropriate treatment. There are wider questions, which we could debate at another time, about the support that children who are questioning their identity might need. The focus of today's statement is specifically on the clinical trial, and it is right that we let that happen. The trial will last five and a half years and it is right that we do that thoroughly, because I do not want this country to be taking decisions in future that are not based on the most solid evidence.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I welcome confirmation that the Pathways clinical trial will continue with the modified protocols in place; it was an important manifesto commitment for the trans community. Does the Secretary of State agree that it might help to reduce the risk in the long term of vulnerable young people seeking to access drugs online, which is currently happening in my constituency?

James Murray: Dr Cass has raised that point a number of times, particularly when she has spoken in public and been interviewed on her concerns about young people accessing equivalent drugs through an unregulated source—through online sources that are not carefully controlled and where there is no monitoring of the effects on young people. That is part of her motivation for recommending the approach that she proposes. As I said earlier, I and the Government want the decisions about what role, if any, such treatments play in the future to be based on the clinical evidence, with the highest possible safeguards in place for children involved in the trials.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I want to press the Secretary of State a little further on looked-after children in particular. At the beginning of his statement, he said that his bottom line is to protect the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. Given that parental or guardian permission has to be granted for the trial to take place, I am wondering who will give that permission for a child in care. Will it be himself, the Secretary of State? Will it be the foster parent? Will it be a social worker from a local council? We already know that looked-after children are overrepresented within the cohort of children with gender dysphoria. Ultimately, if we are going to protect them and make sure that their safety and wellbeing are at the forefront, we need some clear direction on what that is going to look like.

James Murray: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, which highlights the importance we all place on making sure that vulnerable children are protected in the way that the trial proceeds. Perhaps I can offer her some detail which might reassure her by explaining who is on the national multidisciplinary team. As I mentioned earlier, the national multidisciplinary team will have to give permission for young people to be involved in the trial,

[James Murray]

as will the NHS care team. That national multidisciplinary team has an independent chair and its membership comprises senior clinicians from a range of clinical backgrounds: paediatric endocrinology, general paediatrics, child and adolescent mental health, clinical nursing, safeguarding, adolescent medicine, allied health and service leadership. Those are the specialisms represented in the national multidisciplinary team, which means that those aspects of the child's wellbeing are all being considered in that process.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): On a quiet day in Westminster, I have had a chance to dive into the Conservative party's 2024 manifesto, which promised:

"We will complete the implementation of the Cass Review".

A similar commitment appeared in our own manifesto, which we are now cracking on with and delivering. Does my right hon. Friend share my concerns that the Conservatives seem to have abandoned their commitment?

James Murray: I share my hon. Friend's disappointment that the cross-party consensus that was in place about the way to approach the issue does not currently seem to be holding. I urge Opposition Members who are not aligned with that cross-party consensus to reconsider their position, because that is the best way forward for our country.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind): The Secretary of State mentioned following the advice of clinical experts, but has he sought any meetings with whistleblowers, former clinicians at the now closed Tavistock clinic, detransitioners and psychologists such as James Esses and Marcus and Sue Evans, who are all campaigning to stop this trial and the testing of children as young as 11 years old, who are too young to access social media and certainly too young to give meaningful consent to taking banned drugs?

James Murray: I reassure the hon. Lady, as I set out in my responses to earlier questions, that while my starting point is that clinical evidence should be the basis for our way forward, I have taken the responsibility to interrogate that with the highest level of scrutiny in order to ensure that the conclusions are as robust as possible. That has involved my ensuring that my clinical advisers at the Department for Health and Social Care and the other bodies associated with the Department have provided me with the highest level of detail and reassurance about the safeguards in place. Although I stand behind the principle of following clinical advice and basing conclusions on clinical evidence, I feel that it is important for me, as Health Secretary, to have an extremely high bar for a decision of this magnitude.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): The Secretary of State has repeatedly told us that he feels uncomfortable and uneasy. If I am totally honest, I do not think that he believes that this is right at all. I think that in his heart, he knows that this is wrong. Of course it is wrong: stopping an 11-year-old—a primary school child—from going through the natural process that we must all go through to become adults by injecting them with drugs is wrong. We must think about the title of the statement: puberty suppression. People do not need a medical or a science degree to know that the suppression of puberty is wrong. This is a moral question and I am afraid that as it stands the Secretary of State is on the wrong side of it. He says "let them be"—if only they had let Keira Bell be. When she had the treatment, Keira Bell was much older than these children will be when they are given it. She regrets it all and now campaigns to stop this. There is huge public opposition to this—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I assume the hon. Gentleman is getting to a question.

Jonathan Hinder: There is huge opposition to this among people who vote Labour, including many of my constituents, so I implore—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman's question is far too long. I call the Secretary of State.

James Murray: Despite our different conclusions on this matter, I respect my hon. Friend. Part of taking decisions as Health Secretary involves sometimes approaching issues where one might feel uncomfortable on a personal level, but none the less being guided by the right principles in order to take decisions for other groups of people in the country and for the country as a whole. I am not in any way disputing how difficult a matter this is; it is one where I, as Health Secretary—and my predecessors—have had to carefully consider how we ensure that the clinical basis for any future decisions is robust and that we can point to it as a foundation for where this matter settles.

Before Dr Cass did her review, the situation at the Tavistock clinic was totally unacceptable, as the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) recognised, and we must never go back to a position where the situation is out of control in the way that it was then. In working out how to move forward, I believe that, as uncomfortable as it may make myself and others on an individual basis, focusing on the principle of following clinical evidence, demanding the highest possible safeguards and protections for the children involved, and setting objective criteria for them to be withdrawn or for action to be taken if the risk of harm increases, is the balanced and correct way to proceed.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Despite all the safeguards and precautions that the Secretary of State has listed, we must be clear about what this trial actually does: it proposes to give puberty blockers to children as young as 11 that may well make them sterile for life, all to treat something that the Secretary of State also says is likely to get better by itself. I accept that this trial may well create clinical evidence, but at what price? How can this damage to children ever be justified?

James Murray: Although the hon. Gentleman comes to a different conclusion from the one that I and the Government have come to, he poses the right question when he asks what harm do we need to protect against while getting clinical evidence. If we are to be led by clinical evidence, it is important to have that evidence in a way that we can rely on, but particularly because it involves children and young people, it is incumbent on us to ensure that the level of protection against the risk

of harm is exceptionally high. That is why the strengthening of the protocol announced by the MHRA last week provides that higher level of assurance that I have sought to interrogate and to ensure is there in as robust a way as possible. That gives us the confidence that those safeguards are in place as the trial proceeds.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I agree with the Secretary of State that we should come to this subject matter with care and compassion given the age profile of the children affected. He majored on the small number of people who would take part in the trial. In fact, he said that

"we are talking about a very small subset of a very small pool."

If that amounts to a couple of hundred people as he said, it is unlikely that there would be universality of outcome, either positive or negative, because in that size of pool there are obviously going to be mixed views. If it is a small number of people who benefit, as he believes, but a much larger number who do not, what then?

James Murray: The number of expected participants in the trial is 226. That is not a firm target—it does not have to be exactly that number—but that is the number at which statistically significant conclusions can be drawn. The 226 will fall into two camps: one will access the medical treatment immediately and the other will access it after one year. In that way, we will have clinical evidence from which we can draw conclusions and on which we can base future decisions. The number has been chosen so that the evidence can be relied on in the future to take decisions about whether, and if so how, to continue the use of these treatments.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): A parent cannot consent to their child engaging in sexual activity and soon they will not be able to consent to their child having a social media account, so why does the Secretary of State think that a parent should consent to drugs being administered to their child to supress their puberty and alter their sexual development?

James Murray: We are following clinical advice. We are ensuring that there is a triple lock on the consent for children and young people to be involved in this trial, involving the consent or assent of the young person themselves, parents or guardians, and the NHS care team—the national multidisciplinary team that I mentioned earlier. That is how this trial ensures that there is a high bar for being involved in it and that all aspects of a young person's life are considered before they are approved.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for the manner of his responses.

Four years, three-and-a-half years, four years, six-and-a-half years, four years, three-and-a-half years, four-and-a-half years, five-and-a-half years, three years and nine months—those are the waits faced by young people in Dorset supported by Space Youth Project between their referral to the gender identity service and their very first appointment. None of them will qualify for this trial, and many will have gone into adulthood still waiting, despite commitments of more treatment and clinics. While I support the criteria for the trial as detailed in the statement, there is an inadequate capacity in the system, which is leading to even more distress for these children and their families. Will the Secretary of State update us on this issue? Most teenagers will be excluded from the trial, so they need to hear how they will be supported.

James Murray: There is a fundamental difference of approach between me and the hon. Lady. The reason for the trial is not to ensure that young people on the waiting list can get access to treatment; the trial is to find an evidence base on which to take future decisions about whether young people should be offered treatment and, if so, in what way. Talking about waiting lists and the trial combines two things that, in my view of the world, really do not have a relationship in this context.

Suella Braverman (Fareham and Waterlooville) (Reform): No child is born in the wrong body. The scandal of thousands of children being put through irreversible medical intervention such as puberty blockers causing infertility, among other harms, has gone on for more than a decade, and it will go down as one of the worst examples of state failure in our history. Officials advise and Ministers decide. Why does the Secretary of State not use the considerable executive power vested in him personally to overrule his official advice, pause the puberty blockers trial and put child safety first?

James Murray: This trial has been paused since earlier this year while the MHRA worked to strengthen the safeguards. Those stronger safeguards are now in place, which gives greater protection to young people who are involved in this trial. As I mentioned in my remarks earlier, one of my responsibilities as Health Secretary is to interrogate the detail to ensure that safeguards are adequate. I take that responsibility particularly seriously when it involves children and young people, and that is to ensure that we have the highest possible safeguards against harm of anyone involved in this trial.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The Health Secretary told us that his bottom line was to protect children, but he also conceded that puberty blockers can affect adversely bone density and brain development, so why is he taking the risk? Our 11-year-olds are not guinea pigs; they are children entitled to grow up without state-sponsored harm. Surely that should be the starting point.

James Murray: The reason for having this trial is to establish whether there are in fact benefits to this treatment for some children and young people as well as what the risks of harm are. I believe it is right, on balance, to proceed with this clinical trial to get clinical evidence on the basis of having the highest possible protections against a greater risk of harm to children and young people involved in this trial.

Point of Order

6.33 pm

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to make a point of order in relation to my answer to the urgent question on 15 June in this House. In my answer, I said that the Defence Secretary was

"currently with His Majesty the King",

as that was my understanding from the Defence Secretary —[*Official Report*, 15 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 571.]

Although the Defence Secretary was indeed summoned by His Majesty on Monday 15 June, he arrived back in London from Windsor earlier that day, prior to the UQ. I was unaware of this fact when I spoke in the Chamber; I believed him to be with the King and therefore unable to take the question himself. However, at the time of my answering the urgent question, the Defence Secretary was no longer with His Majesty. I wish to correct the record on that point.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Gentleman for prior notice of his point of order. He has now corrected the record and put his remarks on the record.

BILLS PRESENTED

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): As the House can see, we have many Bills to be presented today. To save time and get on with today's main business, for Members presenting more than one Bill consecutively I will accept private notice of the Second Reading dates. The dates will be recorded and published accordingly in *Hansard* and in *Votes and Proceedings*. Members presenting individual Bills will name the date for Second Reading as usual.

Mobile Homes Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to amend the law relating to mobile homes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 33).

In-Person Banking Services Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Alan Mak presented a Bill to make provision about the delivery of in-person banking services; to require the Financial Conduct Authority to set standards for the provision of in-person banking services; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 September, and to be printed (Bill 34).

Dementia (Specialist Support) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Rachel Gilmour presented a Bill to make provision about a minimum standard of support for persons with a diagnosis of dementia; to require that minimum standard to include access to dementia specialist nursing and end-of-life care; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 35).

Gaza (Independent Public Inquiry) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Jeremy Corbyn presented a Bill to make provision for establishing an independent public inquiry into UK involvement in Israeli military operations in Gaza; to require the inquiry to consider any UK military, economic or political cooperation with Israel since October 2023, including the sale, supply or use of weapons, surveillance aircraft and Royal Air Force bases; to provide the inquiry with the power to question Ministers and officials about decisions taken in relation to UK involvement; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 September, and to be printed (Bill 36).

Gambling Act 2005 (Mandatory Conditions of Lottery Operating Licences) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Wendy Chamberlain presented a Bill to remove monetary limits on proceeds from the mandatory conditions of lottery operating licences; to make further provision about the mandatory conditions of lottery operating licences; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 November, and to be printed (Bill 37).

Battery Energy Storage (Planning and Regulation) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mike Wood presented a Bill to make provision about the construction, use and decommissioning of battery energy storage systems; to provide that fire and rescue authorities must be consulted in relation to planning applications relating to battery energy storage systems; to require the Secretary of State to undertake a review of the safety and risks of battery energy storage systems and to lay the report of that review before Parliament; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 38).

Multi-Storey Car Parks (Safety) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Maria Eagle presented a Bill to increase the minimum required height of guarding in multi-storey car parks; to make provision about the height of guarding in existing multi-storey car parks; to require 24-hour staffing of multi-storey car parks; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 September, and to be printed (Bill 39).

Telecommunications (Fixed-term Contracts) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Dr Luke Evans presented a Bill to prohibit the increasing of charges payable under certain fixed-term telecommunications contracts within the duration of those contracts; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 40).

Electricity Works (Small Business Compensation Proposals) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Gregory Stafford presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish proposals for a scheme to compensate small businesses affected by road closures resulting from electricity works; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 February 2027, and to be printed (Bill 41).

Public Sector Equality Duty (Repeal) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Joy Morrissey presented a Bill to repeal section 149 and schedule 18 of the Equality Act 2010; to make provision consequential on that repeal; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 42).

Environmental Impact Assessment (Downstream Emissions) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Harriet Cross presented a Bill to make provision about the assessment of environmental impact of developments involving the extraction of fossil fuels; to provide that downstream greenhouse gas emissions from the combustion or other end use of extracted hydrocarbons are not required to be assessed as part of the environmental impact assessment of such developments; to make provision relating to decisions in respect of the grant of consent and planning permission for certain such developments; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 September, and to be printed (Bill 43).

Pets (Microchips) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Rebecca Harris presented a Bill to make provision regarding pets with microchips; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 44).

UK Food Labelling (Country of Origin) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Aphra Brandreth presented a Bill to make provision about the use of UK country of origin indicators in the labelling and marketing of food products; to prohibit the use of such indicators unless products meet specified criteria; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February 2027, and to be printed (Bill 45).

Chalk Streams (UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Pippa Heylings presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to take the necessary steps to nominate the UK's chalk streams as a serial UNESCO Natural World Heritage Site.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 46).

Scotland (Independence Referendum) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Graham Leadbitter, supported by Dave Doogan, Kirsty Blackman, Pete Wishart, Chris Law, Brendan O'Hara, Seamus Logan and Lara Bird, presented a Bill to amend the Scotland Act 1998 to transfer the power to legislate for a Scottish independence referendum to the Scottish Parliament; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 September, and to be printed (Bill 47).

Heritage Trees Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir John Hayes presented a Bill to make provision about the protection and stewardship of heritage trees in England; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 December, and to be printed (Bill 48).

Hospitality (Value Added Tax) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Seamus Logan, supported by Dave Doogan, Kirsty Blackman, Pete Wishart, Chris Law, Brendan O'Hara, Graham Leadbitter and Lara Bird, presented a Bill to reduce the rate of value added tax for certain supplies relating to hospitality; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 49).

Domestic Building Works (Consumer Protection) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mark Garnier presented a Bill to make provision about consumer protection in relation to domestic building works; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 February 2027, and to be printed (Bill 50).

Ponds (Permitted Development) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Rebecca Smith presented a Bill to extend permitted development rights to include wildlife ponds under 0.2 hectares; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 September, and to be printed (Bill 51).

Debt Relief (Developing Countries) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Bambos Charalambous presented a Bill to make provision for or in connection with the relief of debts of certain developing countries.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 November, and to be printed (Bill 52).

Welfare Reform Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

David Simmonds presented a Bill to make provision to restrict eligibility for the Personal Independence Payment for those with certain mental health conditions; to require that assessments for certain welfare benefits are conducted face to face; to make provision to restrict the eligibility of persons who are not British citizens to claim welfare benefits; to make provision about fit notes

in connection with welfare benefits; to provide for a two child limit on the child element of universal credit; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 53).

Non-Domestic Rating (Retail, Hospitality and Leisure) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mr Gagan Mohindra presented a Bill to make provision about non-domestic rating in respect of retail, hospitality and leisure businesses; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 54).

National Police Chiefs' Council (Guidance) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by presented a Bill to require parliamentary approval for the issuing of advice or guidance by the National Police Chiefs' Council; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 December, and to be printed (Bill 55).

Vaccine Damage Payment Scheme (UK Covid-19 Inquiry) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to publish proposals for the implementation of Recommendation 5 of Module 4 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry, relating to the Vaccine Damage Payment Scheme; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 56).

Climate Change Act 2008 (Repeal) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to repeal the Climate Change Act 2008; to make provision consequential on that repeal; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 57).

Hospitality Services (Value Added Tax Exemption) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to exempt providers of catering and accommodation services from VAT for fees and charges made in respect of the provision of those services; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 September, and to be printed (Bill 58).

Sporting and Physical Education Services (Value Added Tax Exemption) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope, supported by Gregory Stafford and Greg Smith, presented a Bill to exempt providers of sporting and physical education services from VAT for fees and charges made in respect of the provision of sporting and physical education services, in cases where no existing exemption applies; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 September, and to be printed (Bill 59).

Employment Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to make provision about the employment of foreign nationals; to make provision about the national minimum wage; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 December, and to be printed (Bill 60).

Tax Reliefs Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to make provision about the relief of taxation in respect of private education, private healthcare, mortgage interest payments for primary residences, certain transport costs relating to employment and private pension contributions; to make further provision relating to the relief of taxation; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 November, and to be printed (Bill 61).

Consumer Insurance (Disclosure and Representations) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to carry out a review of the effectiveness of the Consumer Insurance (Disclosure and Representations) Act 2012, with reference to the application of that Act in individual cases; to make provision about the recording and retention of information relating to voided motor insurance policies on the Motor Insurance Database; to make provision for a review in cases involving inadvertent or voluntarily disclosed misrepresentation; to provide for the correction or removal of such records in appropriate circumstances; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 February 2027, and to be printed (Bill 62).

Vehicles (Registration) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to provide that a registration document issued in respect of a road vehicle must contain the permanent address of its keeper; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 63).

Meat (Information About Method of Killing) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to require producers, suppliers and retailers of meat to indicate clearly whether the animal has been killed in accordance with religious rites without prior stunning; to require the Secretary of State to collect and publish specified information relating to meat slaughtered in accordance with such practice; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 September, and to be printed (Bill 64).

Public Sector Exit Payments (Limitation) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to limit exit payments made by some public sector organisations to employees; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 65).

Statutory Instruments Act 1946 (Amendment) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to provide that a draft statutory instrument which is subject to the affirmative resolution procedure may be amended by either House of Parliament before it is approved; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 November, and to be printed (Bill 66).

Anonymity of Suspects Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to create an offence of disclosing the identity of a person who is the subject of an investigation in respect of the alleged commission of an offence; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February 2027, and to be printed (Bill 67).

Arm's-Length Bodies (Review) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to require the Government to conduct a review of every Arm's-Length Body in existence on 22 June 2026 and to publish the results of those reviews within four years; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February 2027, and to be printed (Bill 68).

Arm's-Length Bodies (Accountability to Parliament) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to make provision for Arm's-Length Bodies to be directly accountable to Parliament.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 November, and to be printed (Bill 69).

Bailiffs (Warrants of Possession) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to set maximum time limits within which a bailiff's warrant of possession appointment date must be granted; to make provision for alternative methods of executing warrants of possession; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 November, and to be printed (Bill 70).

Bank of England (Inflation Targets) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to make provision for penalties against the Court of Directors of the Bank of England for failure to meet inflation targets.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 13 November, and to be printed (Bill 71).

BBC Licence Fee Non-Payment (Decriminalisation for Over-75s) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to de-criminalise the non-payment of the BBC licence fee by persons aged over seventy-five; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 72).

British Broadcasting Corporation (Privatisation) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to make provision for the privatisation of the British Broadcasting Corporation; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 73).

Caravan Site Licensing (Exemption of Motor Homes) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to exempt motor homes from caravan site licensing requirements; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 74).

Children's Clothing (Value Added Tax) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope by presented a Bill to extend the definition of children's clothing for the purposes of exemption from VAT; to extend the VAT exemption to further categories of school uniform; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 75).

Covid-19 Vaccine Damage Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to establish an independent review of disablement caused by Covid-19 vaccinations and the adequacy of the compensation offered to persons so disabled; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 76).

Covid-19 Vaccine Damage Payments Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to place a duty on the Secretary of State to make provision about financial assistance to persons who have suffered disablement following vaccination against Covid-19 and to the next of kin of persons who have died shortly after vaccination against Covid-19; to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the merits of a no-fault compensation scheme to provide such financial assistance, on whether there should be any upper limit on the financial assistance available, on the criteria for eligibility and on whether payment should be made in

all cases where there is no other reasonable cause for the death or disablement suffered; to provide for a special time limit under the Limitation Act 1980 for actions in respect of personal injury or death following a Covid-19 vaccination; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 September, and to be printed (Bill 77).

Dangerous Dogs Act 1991 (Amendment) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to provide that, before making any order to designate a type of dog for the purposes of section 1 or 2 of the Dangerous Dogs Act 1991, the Secretary of State must carry out a public consultation and publish a comparative review of data showing the incidences of fatalities resulting from bites of dogs of that type in the last three years.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 78).

Domestic Energy (Value Added Tax) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to exempt from Value Added Tax supplies of electricity, oil and gas for domestic purposes; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 December, and to be printed (Bill 79).

Exemption from Value Added Tax (Listed Places of Worship) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to exempt from Value Added Tax repairs to listed places of worship; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 December, and to be printed (Bill 80).

Exemption from Value Added Tax (Public Electric Vehicle Charging Points) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to exempt from Value Added Tax the supply of electricity at public electric vehicle charging points; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 81).

Green Belt (Protection) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to establish a national register of Green Belt land in England; to restrict the ability of local authorities to de-designate Green Belt land; to make provision about future development of de-designated Green Belt land; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 82).

Health Insurance (Exemption from Insurance Premium Tax) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to provide for exemptions from insurance premium tax in respect of health insurance; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 February 2027, and to be printed (Bill 83).

Highways Act 1980 (Amendment) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to amend section 58 of the Highways Act 1980 to restrict the defences available to highway authorities; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 February 2027, and to be printed (Bill 84).

Illegal Immigration (Offences) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to create offences in respect of persons who have entered the UK illegally or who have remained in the UK without legal authority; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 85).

National Health Service Co-Funding and Co-Payment Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to make provision for co-funding and co-payment in the National Health Service; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 26 February 2027, and to be printed (Bill 86).

NHS England (Alternative Treatment) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to make provision about arranging alternative non-NHS England treatment for patients who have waited for more than one year for hospital treatment; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 87).

Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 (Amendment) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to amend the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 to make provision about Parliamentary scrutiny of regulations made under that Act; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 88).

Regulatory Impact Assessments Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to require a Regulatory Impact Assessment to be published for all primary and secondary legislation introduced by the Government; to make provision for associated sanctions; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 89).

Rule of Law (Enforcement by Public Authorities) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to require public authorities to exercise their statutory powers to investigate and take enforcement action for breaches of the law; to make provision for sanctions for failing to take such action; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 90).

Vaccine Damage Payments Act 1979 (Review) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sir Christopher Chope presented a Bill to place a duty on the Secretary of State to review, and publish a report on, the merits of increasing the relevant statutory sum under the Vaccine Damage Payments Act 1979 for all claims since 1 January 2020 by an amount representing the amount of inflation since 2007.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 91).

European Convention on Human Rights (Notification of Withdrawal) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Mike Wood, supported by Sir Christopher Chope, presented a Bill to confer power on the Prime Minister to notify, under Article 58 of the European Convention on Human Rights, the United Kingdom's intention to withdraw from the Convention.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 September, and to be printed (Bill 92).

Planning Application Consultations (Mobile Network Operators) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Gregory Stafford presented a Bill to make provision for the consultation of mobile network operators in relation to certain planning applications; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 93).

Leisure and Fitness Facilities (Value Added Tax) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Gregory Stafford presented a Bill to exempt from VAT the supply of certain services by independent leisure centres, gyms, health clubs and fitness facilities; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 94).

Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office Act 1996 (Repeal) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Gregory Stafford presented a Bill to repeal the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office Act 1996; and to make any necessary provision consequential on that repeal.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 5 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 95).

Lobular Breast Cancer Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Milne presented a Bill to make provision about research into lobular breast cancer; to place duties on the Secretary of State in relation to such research; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 11 September, and to be printed (Bill 96).

Civil Aviation Authority (Ombudsman) Bill

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

John Milne presented a Bill to make provision for the appointment and functions of an ombudsman to investigate regulatory decisions made by the Civil Aviation Authority; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 27 November, and to be printed (Bill 97).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Mr Andrew Snowden is unable to present his Bill today, so we will move on to the next item of business.

Armed Forces Bill

Consideration of Bill, as amended in the Committee

New Clause 1

VISITING FORCES: ICC ARREST WARRANTS AND WAR CRIMES

"(1) The Secretary of State must not issue an authorisation permitting members of a visiting force to enter or remain in the United Kingdom for the purposes of the Visiting Forces Act 1952 where—

(a) the sending country is subject to a binding ICC arrest warrant or a decision of the Pre-Trial Chamber of the International Criminal Court specifying individual commanders or units of its armed forces, or

(b) the Secretary of State has reasonable grounds to believe that members of the visiting force have participated in, ordered, or failed to prevent conduct that constitutes a war crime within the meaning of Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court.

(2) Where a visiting force is already present in the United Kingdom and subsection (1)(a) or (1)(b) is subsequently satisfied, the Secretary of State must—

(a) within 14 days, notify Parliament by way of a written ministerial statement, and

(b) within 28 days, revoke any subsisting authorisation for the continuation of that visiting force in the United Kingdom, unless the Secretary of State lays before Parliament a statement of exceptional circumstances justifying continuation.

(3) Any revocation under subsection (2)(b) does not affect the liability under the law of England and Wales, Scotland, or Northern Ireland of a member of that visiting force for acts committed prior to their departure.

(4) The Secretary of State must lay before Parliament an annual report on the application of this section, including—

(a) the number of authorisations refused under subsection (1);

(b) the number of authorisations revoked under subsection (2)(b); and

(c) any representations received from sending countries in relation to decisions under this section."—*(Jeremy Corbyn.)*

Brought up, and read the First time.

6.46 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

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

New clause 2—*Dual nationals serving in foreign armed forces: war crimes risk—*

"(1) This section applies to a person ('the individual') who is—

(a) a British national or a person ordinarily resident in the United Kingdom, and

(b) a member of the armed forces of a foreign state.

(2) Where the Secretary of State has reasonable grounds to believe that the individual has participated in, ordered, or failed to prevent conduct that constitutes a war crime within the meaning of Article 8 of the Rome Statute, the Secretary of State may—

(a) refer the matter to the Attorney General for consideration of proceedings under the International Criminal Court Act 2001,

(b) direct that the individual's British travel document be suspended pending investigation, subject to section 41C, and

(c) notify the International Criminal Court of the individual's British nationality and last known address in the United Kingdom.

(3) A suspension of a travel document under section 41B(2)(b) must not exceed 90 days without renewal.

(4) The individual to whom section 41B applies must be—

(a) informed as soon as reasonably practicable of the grounds for any action taken under section 41B(2), and

(b) afforded a right of appeal to the Special Immigration Appeals Commission.

(5) The Secretary of State must issue statutory guidance to the armed forces, relevant intelligence agencies, and border authorities on—

(a) identification of British nationals serving in foreign armed forces,

(b) information-sharing arrangements with the International Criminal Court and relevant foreign jurisdictions, and

(c) the circumstances in which action under subsection (2) is appropriate.

(6) For the purposes of this section—

"British national" has the meaning given by section 50(1) of the British Nationality Act 1981;

"Rome Statute" means the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, opened for signature 17 July 1998 (2187 UNTS 90).

(7) Nothing in section 41B or this section limits the protections afforded to an individual under the Human Rights Act 1998."

NC1 and NC2 ensure that the United Kingdom does not extend the immunities and privileges afforded to visiting forces under the Visiting Forces Act 1952 to forces from states whose commanders are subject to ICC proceedings, and creates a framework for referring dual nationals suspected of war crimes to prosecutorial authorities.

New clause 3—*Veterans: housing and employment data duty—*

"(1) The Secretary of State must, in each calendar year, collect and compile data on the following matters in respect of persons who have served as members of the regular forces ('veterans')—

(a) the number of veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness within the meaning of Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 and Part 2 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014;

(b) the number of veterans who are unemployed and claiming Universal Credit or Jobseeker's Allowance, disaggregated by—

(i) length of unemployment;

(ii) age and gender; and

(iii) service branch and rank on discharge;

(c) the number of veterans in contact with local authority housing or homelessness services;

(d) the number of veterans placed in temporary accommodation by a local authority;

(e) the number of veterans who have presented themselves as having suicidal ideation and those who have committed suicide;

(f) trends in the matters mentioned in paragraphs (a) to (e) over the preceding five years.

(2) For the purposes of collecting data under subsection (1), the Secretary of State—

(a) must request and receive data from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, local authorities, and such other persons or bodies as the Secretary of State considers appropriate,

(b) may require local authorities in England to provide data as to veterans within their area who have approached them for housing assistance, and

(c) must consult Veterans UK and any other bodies the Secretary of State considers appropriate in designing the data collection methodology.

(3) The Secretary of State must, not later than 31 March in each year, lay before Parliament a report setting out—

(a) the data compiled under subsection (1) for the preceding calendar year;

(b) a comparison with data from the two preceding calendar years;

(c) the steps taken or proposed to be taken by the Secretary of State, or by public authorities subject to the duty in section 343AZA of the Armed Forces Act 2006 (as amended by section 2 of this Act), to reduce rates of homelessness and unemployment among veterans; and

(d) an assessment of whether those steps have been effective.

(4) The report under subsection (3) must include, in respect of veterans who have left the regular forces within the preceding three years—

(a) the proportion who entered employment within three months of discharge;

(b) the proportion who were provided resettlement support under a scheme administered by the Ministry of Defence; and

(c) the proportion who were provided with suitable accommodation within one month of discharge.

(5) The Secretary of State must make arrangements for a person independent of the Ministry of Defence to review, and report to Parliament on, the methodology and reliability of data collected under this section at least once every three years.

(6) In this section—

"homeless or at risk of homelessness" is to be construed in accordance with sections 175 to 177 of the Housing Act 1996;

"regular forces" has the same meaning as in the Armed Forces Act 2006 (see section 374 of that Act);

"veteran" means a person who has served as a member of the regular forces for a period of not less than one day and who is no longer serving as such a member."

This new clause imposes a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to collect, compile, and annually report to Parliament data on rates of veteran homelessness, suicide and unemployment, including trends, actions taken and their effectiveness.

New clause 4—*Waived fees for indefinite leave to remain for spouses or children of serving or discharged members of the armed forces who have served for four or more years*—

"(1) The Immigration and Nationality (Fees) Regulations 2018 is amended as follows.

(2) In Table 9 (fees for applications for limited leave to remain in the United Kingdom and connected applications) in 9.18 after "Forces" in paragraph (b) insert—

"(c) in a case where the application is made by a person who is a spouse or child of a member or previously serving member of the armed forces who have served for four or more years.

(3) In Table 9 (fees for applications for limited leave to remain in the United Kingdom and connected applications) in 9.18 in paragraph (b) leave out "(a) and (b)" and insert "(a), (b), and (c)"."

This new clause would amend the Immigration and Nationality (Fees) Regulations 2018 to waive the fee for indefinite leave to remain applications for the spouses or children of any current or previously serving members of the armed forces who have served for four or more years.

New clause 5—*Review of mental health support for veterans*—

"(1) The Secretary of State must, within 12 months of the passage of this Act, conduct a review of the adequacy, accessibility and effectiveness of mental health support available to veterans of the armed forces.

(2) A review under subsection (1) must assess the extent to which mental health support available to veterans meets their needs, including specific information about availability of such support based on—

(a) age,

(b) sex,

(c) service branch,

(d) rank,

(e) length of service,

(f) time elapsed since leaving service,

(g) operational deployment history,

(h) conflict or operation in which the veteran served,

(i) geographical location within the United Kingdom,

(j) whether the veteran resides in a rural or urban area, and

(k) any other characteristic the Secretary of State considers relevant.

(3) A review under subsection (1) must examine—

(a) levels of provision of specialist and non-specialist mental health services for veterans;

(b) waiting times for assessment and treatment;

(c) access to NHS and charity-provided mental health services;

(d) barriers to accessing support, including those arising from geographical isolation, transport availability, digital exclusion and workforce shortages;

(e) rates of referral, treatment completion and clinical outcomes;

(f) rates of suicide, self-harm, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety and other mental health conditions among veterans;

(g) differences in outcomes between veterans who served in different conflicts or operations;

(h) the effectiveness of arrangements for identifying and supporting veterans most at risk of mental ill health;

(i) reliance on charity support.

(4) In conducting a review under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must consult—

(a) veterans' organisations,

(b) service charities,

(c) NHS bodies,

(d) devolved administrations,

(e) local authorities, and

(f) such other persons as the Secretary of State considers appropriate.

(5) Upon completion of a review under subsection (1) the Secretary of State must lay a report before both Houses of Parliament indicating the findings of the review.

(6) A report under subsection (6) must include recommendations for improving mental health support for veterans, particularly those groups identified as being at elevated risk of poor mental health outcomes based on the review on which it is based."

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to review the adequacy and effectiveness of mental health support available to veterans.

New clause 6—*Review into reservist facilities*—

"(1) Within six months of the passage of this Act the Secretary of State must conduct and publish a review into reservist facilities in rural areas.

(2) The review under subsection (1) must consider the quality, accessibility, and refurbishment of reservist facilities.

(3) The review under subsection (1) must be laid before both Houses of Parliament."

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to conduct and publish a review into reservist facilities in rural areas.

New clause 7—*Digital archive of Armed Forces Standing Orders*—

"(1) Within six months of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must put in place a plan for the digital archiving of all Standing Orders issued to Armed Forces personnel, to be completed within 12 months.

(2) Once the digital archives under subsection (1) are established, the Secretary of State must carry out a review every six months to ensure they are up to date.

(3) Under this section, "Standing Orders" means the body of permanent regulations, issued by units or formations, which govern the conduct, administration, and procedures of personnel."

This new clause would add a requirement for the Ministry of Defence to ensure the indefinite digital archiving of all standing orders issued to the Armed Forces.

New clause 8—*National Veterans' Commissioner (England)*—

"After section 366 of the Armed Forces Act 2006 insert—

"366A National Veterans' Commissioner (England): establishment

(1) Within 6 months of the passing of the Armed Forces Act 2026, the Secretary of State must appoint a National Veterans' Commissioner for England ("the Commissioner").

(2) The Commissioner shall act independently in carrying out the functions of the office.

(3) The Commissioner's functions shall include but are not limited to—

(a) promoting the interests of veterans in England;

(b) monitoring the operation and effectiveness of the Armed Forces Covenant in England;

(c) reviewing the effect of public policy and public services on veterans and their families;

(d) identifying barriers faced by veterans in accessing housing, healthcare, employment, education, and other public services;

(e) making recommendations to the Secretary of State and to public authorities on improving support for veterans.

(4) In exercising the functions under subsection (3) the Commissioner may—

(a) carry out reviews and investigations into matters affecting veterans;

(b) consult veterans, service charities, public authorities, and other relevant organisations;

(c) publish reports and recommendations.

(5) The Commissioner shall prepare an annual report on the exercise of the Commissioner's functions.

(6) The Commissioner may at any time prepare a report on any matter relating to the interests of veterans in England.

(7) The Secretary of State must lay any report prepared by the Commissioner under this section before both Houses of Parliament.

(8) The Secretary of State must make arrangements for—

(a) the provision of staff, accommodation, and other resources as they consider necessary for the Commissioner to carry out their functions, and

(b) the publication of the Commissioner's reports under this section.

(9) The Commissioner is to be appointed for a term of three years and may be reappointed for one further term.

(10) The Secretary of State may remove the Commissioner from office only on grounds of—

(a) incapacity,

(b) misbehaviour, or

(c) failure to discharge the functions of the office.

(11) In this section—

"public authority" has the same meaning as in section 6 of the Human Rights Act 1998;

"veteran" means a person who has served in His Majesty's armed forces.""

This new clause would require the Government to appoint a National Veterans' Commissioner for England and sets out its functions.

New clause 9—*Exemption from the European Convention on Human Rights for Deployed Members of the Reserve Forces*—

"A member of the regular or reserve forces who has been deployed for operations under this Act may not be subject to the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights for the duration of that deployment."

This new clause would make provision for the members of the regular or reserve forces who have been deployed under this Act to be exempt from the European Convention on Human Rights for that period of deployment.

New clause 10—*Laying of the Defence Investment Plan*—

"Within three months of the passage of this Act, the Secretary of State must lay a Defence Investment Plan before both Houses of Parliament, if they have not already done so."

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to lay a Defence Investment Plan before both Houses of Parliament within 3 months of the passage of this Act, if they have not already done so.

New clause 11—*Overseas operations and the European Convention on Human Rights*—

"After section 14 of the Human Rights Act 1998 insert—

"(1) Where the Secretary of State considers that any overseas operation is, or is likely to be, significant, the Secretary of State must authorise for the United Kingdom to make a derogation under Article 15(1) of the Convention.

(2) In this section —

"overseas operations" means operations of Her Majesty's forces outside the British Islands in the course of which members of those forces may come under attack or face the threat of attack or violent resistance;

"Her Majesty's forces" has the same meaning as in the Armed Forces Act 2006 (see section 374 of that Act).""

This new clause reinstates a duty, removed during passage of the Overseas Operations Act 2021, requiring the Secretary of State to derogate from the European Convention on Human Rights during significant overseas operations.

New clause 12—*Feasibility study on a Forces Housing Association*—

"(1) Within 6 months of the passing of this Act , the Secretary of State must publish report on the possibility of establishing a Forces Housing Association (FHA).

(2) The report must examine the proposals in Chapter 5 of the 2020 Report "Stick or Twist – A Report for The Prime Minister into Retention in HM Armed Forces – and how to improve it."

(3) The Secretary of State must lay a copy of the report before both Houses of Parliament."

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to publish a report on the merits of establishing a Forces Housing Association (FHA) as opposed to the proposed Defence Housing Service.

New clause 13—*An armed forces retention strategy*—

"(1) This section applies where the Secretary of State lays before Parliament the Ministry of Defence Votes A paper seeking Parliamentary authority for the maximum numbers of personnel

to be maintained for service with the armed forces in the following financial year.

(2) The Secretary of State must lay alongside the Votes A paper an armed forces retention strategy.

(3) The retention strategy must include—

(a) an assessment of the current rates of retention across the regular and reserve forces,

(b) an explanation of the steps the Ministry of Defence is taking to improve retention to meet the maximum numbers of personnel set out in the Votes A paper, and

(c) an assessment of the findings of the most recent Armed Forces Continuous Attitudes Survey and its findings regarding satisfaction with service life."

This new clause would require the Government to lay an armed forces retention strategy alongside the annual Votes A paper on the maximum number of personnel to be maintained in the Armed Forces.

New clause 14—*Independent review of Armed Forces recruitment and retention—*

"(1) The Secretary of State must commission an independent review of the processes for recruitment and retention across His Majesty's forces.

(2) The review under subsection (1) must, in particular, consider—

(a) the efficiency and consistency of recruitment processes across the Royal Navy, the regular army, the Royal Air Force and the reserve forces,

(b) the effectiveness of steps being taken to improve diversity and inclusion within His Majesty's forces,

(c) the impact of the quality of defence housing (including single living accommodation) on the retention of service personnel, and

(d) the impact of the medical discharge process on retention and transition to civilian life.

(3) A report of the review must be laid before each House of Parliament no later than 12 months after the day on which this Act is passed."

This new clause requires the Government to commission an independent review into recruitment and retention in the armed forces and lay the report of the review before Parliament.

New clause 15—*Duty to provide medical records on discharge—*

"(1) This section applies where a person ceases to be a member of the regular forces or the reserve forces.

(2) The Secretary of State must by regulations make provision for a complete copy of the person's service medical records to be provided to the person no later than one month after the day on which the person is discharged or otherwise ceases to be a member of those forces.

(3) Those regulations may specify the manner and form in which service medical records are to be provided under this section, including provision for records to be transferred directly to a civilian health body with the person's consent.

(4) In this section—

"health body" has the same meaning as in section 343AZB;

"service medical records" means any records relating to the person's physical or mental health care and treatment created or maintained by or on behalf of His Majesty's forces during the person's period of service."

This new clause places a statutory duty on the Secretary of State to ensure that all service personnel leaving the military receive a complete copy of their medical records within one month of their discharge date.

New clause 16—*Veterans' Mental Health Oversight Officer—*

"(1) The Armed Forces Act 2006 is amended as follows.

(2) After section 343C (Establishment and functions of veterans advisory and pensions committees) insert—

"343CA Establishment and functions of a Veterans' Mental Health Oversight Officer

(1) The Secretary of State must appoint a person to be the Veterans' Mental Health Oversight Officer.

(2) The general function of the Officer is to oversee the mental health care and treatment provided to veterans by the health bodies specified in section 343AZB.

(3) In exercising their function, the Officer must, in particular, monitor and assess the extent to which health bodies are complying with the duty imposed by section 343AZA (Duty to have due regard to the covenant) in relation to the mental health and well-being of veterans.

(4) The Officer may require a health body to provide such information as the Officer considers reasonably necessary to discharge their functions under this section.

(5) The Officer must prepare an annual report on the exercise of their functions and the general state of veterans' mental health care and treatment in the United Kingdom.

(6) The Secretary of State must lay a copy of the Officer's annual report before each House of Parliament.

(7) In this section, "veteran" means a person who has at any time been a service member.""

This new clause establishes the statutory role of a Veterans' Mental Health Oversight Officer.

New clause 17—*Personal independence payment reassessment exemption for amputees—*

"(1) Within six months of the passage of this Act, the Secretary of State must make regulations which make provision for persons who have experienced an amputation as a consequence of their membership in the armed forces to be exempt from personal independence payment reassessments except in instances in which such persons have requested a reassessment.

(2) For the purposes of this section, "personal independence payment" has the meaning given by Part 4 of the Welfare Reform Act 2012."

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to make regulations to ensure that persons who have experienced an amputation as a consequence of their membership in the armed forces are exempt from personal independence payment reassessments.

New clause 18—*Report on disregard of armed forces compensation in means-tested benefits—*

"(1) Within 12 months of the passage of this Act, the Secretary of State must prepare a report on the potential merits of disapplying consideration of compensation accrued from the War Pension Scheme and Armed Forces Compensation Scheme in calculating entitlements to other means-tested income benefits.

(2) The report under subsection (1) must be laid before both Houses of Parliament.

(3) The report under subsection (1) must consider compensation accrued from the War Pension Scheme and Armed Forces Compensation Scheme in calculating—

(a) Pension Credit entitlements, and

(b) any other means-tested benefit where compensation accrued from the War Pension Scheme and Armed Forces Compensation Scheme is not currently disapplied in entitlement calculations."

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to prepare a report on the potential merits of disapplying consideration of compensation accrued from the War Pension Scheme and Armed Forces Compensation Scheme in calculating entitlements to other means-tested income benefits.

New clause 19—*National Standards, Funding and Monitoring of the Armed Forces Covenant Duty—*

"(1) The Armed Forces Act 2006 is amended as follows.

(2) After Section 343AE (Sections 343AA to 343AD: guidance) insert—

"343AEA Armed Forces Covenant Duty National Standards

(1) The Secretary of State must issue statutory guidance establishing clear and consistent national standards for the discharge of the duties imposed under section 343AA to 343AD ("the Covenant Duty").

(2) The national standards must—

(a) set minimum requirements for compliance by relevant public bodies,

(b) promote consistency in the quality and accessibility of services provided to members of the armed forces community across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, and

(c) require relevant public bodies to demonstrate due regard in a manner capable of objective assessment.

(3) Relevant public bodies must have due regard to the standards issued under this section.

343AEB Funding and Support for Delivery

(1) The Secretary of State must ensure that sufficient funding is made available to support the effective implementation of the Covenant Duty.

(2) The Secretary of State must establish and maintain a dedicated Covenant Duty Training Programme, which shall—

(a) provide accessible training and guidance to relevant public bodies,

(b) promote awareness and understanding of the purpose and scope of the Covenant Duty among staff and decision-makers,

(c) support the sharing of best practice between relevant public bodies, and

(d) include provision for capacity-building where required.

(3) In determining the allocation of funding under this section, the Secretary of State must have regard to variations in local demand and the particular needs of the armed forces community.

343AEC Reporting and measuring framework

(1) The Secretary of State must establish a framework for the monitoring and evaluation of compliance with, and impact of, the Covenant Duty.

(2) The framework must include—

(a) defined performance indicators and outcome measures,

(b) requirements for relevant public bodies to collect and report data relating to the Armed Forces Community in a consistent manner,

(c) annual independent review of the effectiveness of the Covenant Duty, and

(d) mechanisms to identify and disseminate learning and best practice.""

This new clause would create a requirement for guidance that sets national standards of Covenant Duty delivery across the country, for funding and resources to support delivery and to require monitoring of compliance with the duty.

New clause 20—*Armed Forces Covenant report: required content*—

"(1) The Armed Forces Act 2006 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 343A (Armed forces covenant report), after subsection (5) insert—

"(5A) An armed forces covenant report must—

(a) include an assessment of compliance with armed forces covenant duty national standards under section 343AEA,

(b) include analysis of outcomes for the armed forces community, and

(c) include recommendations for improvement.""

This new clause, which is consequential on NC19, would require the Armed Forces Covenant report to include detail on compliance with national standards, outcomes for the armed forces community and recommendations for improvement.

New clause 21—*Reporting on the Defence Investment Plan*—

"(1) Every six months after the passage of this Act for the duration of this Parliament, and every year thereafter, the Secretary of State must publish a report on the implementation of the Defence Investment Plan.

(2) The Secretary of State must lay a copy of each report under subsection (1) before each House of Parliament."

This new clause would compel the Government to publish and lay before Parliament a regular report on the implementation of the Defence Investment Plan every six months during this Parliament, and annually thereafter.

New clause 22—*Report on the impact of Defence Investment Plan delays*—

"(1) Within six months of the passage of this Act, the Secretary of State must publish an impact assessment of the delays to the implementation of the Defence Investment Plan.

(2) The report under subsection (1) must include an assessment of the impact of such delays on—

(a) small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) within the UK defence supply chain,

(b) military procurement, equipment capability timelines, and operational readiness, and

(c) the financial sustainability of defence sector businesses.

(3) In preparing the report under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must consult—

(a) representatives of small and medium-sized enterprises in the defence sector, and

(b) the Defence Suppliers Forum.

(4) The Secretary of State must lay a copy of the report under subsection (1) before each House of Parliament."

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to publish and lay before Parliament a one-time report within six months of the Act's passage assessing the impact of Defence Investment Plan delays on military procurement and defence businesses, with particular focus on SMEs.

New clause 23—*Assessment of the reserve forces estate*—

"(1) Six months after the passage of this Act and every three years thereafter, the Secretary of State must publish an assessment of the conditions of the reserve forces estate.

(2) An assessment under subsection (1) is not limited to but must include an assessment of—

(a) catering provisions,

(b) personal hygiene provisions, and

(c) support for existing and new reserve forces.

(3) The Secretary of State must consult the RCFA in conducting an assessment under subsection (1).

(4) Under subsection (1) "reserve forces estate" refers to all properties managed by the RFCA.

(5) The Secretary of State must lay a copy of each assessment under subsection (1) before each House of Parliament."

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to publish and lay before Parliament an assessment of the reserve forces estate six months after the passage of this Act and every three years thereafter.

New clause 24—*Review of Schedules 1 and 2 of the Armed Forces Act 2006*—

"(1) Within 12 months of the passage of this Act, the Secretary of State must review offences included under Schedules 1 and 2 of the Armed Forces Act 2006.

(2) A review under subsection (1) must consider whether any offences pertaining to domestic abuse which have been classified under Schedule 1 of the Armed Forces Act 2006 may be instead classified as an offence under Schedule 2 of that Act.

(3) The Secretary of State must lay a copy of the review under subsection (1) before each House of Parliament."

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to review the classification of offences under Schedule 1 and 2 of the Armed Forces Act 2006; it would create a specific requirement for the classification of domestic abuse offences to be considered.

Amendment 1, in clause 2, page 4, line 15, at end insert—

"and to the district and borough councils of Northern Ireland."

This amendment would add the district and borough councils of Northern Ireland to the meaning of "local authority" in relation to the armed forces covenant.

Amendment 3, page 6, line 37, at end insert—

"343AZC Continuity of plans for special educational needs

(1) Within a year of the passage of the Armed Forces Act 2026, the Secretary of State must make regulations to make provision for a plan for special educational needs awarded to a person who—

(a) is a child of or dependent upon a person serving in the Armed Forces, and

(b) becomes ordinarily resident in another part of the United Kingdom when posted.

(2) The regulations made under subsection (1) must ensure that, if a person is required to move from one base to another as part of their service in the armed forces, any plan awarded to their child or dependent under subsection (1) must be automatically transferred to the relevant authority.

(3) A person to whom subsection (2) applies shall have reasonable time to negotiate a named school for their plan under subsection (1) with the relevant authorities.

(4) Under this section, "a plan" means—

(a) in England, an Education and Health Care Plan;

(b) in Wales, an Individual Development Plan;

(c) in Scotland, a Co-ordinated Support Plan;

(d) in Northern Ireland, a Statement of Special Educational Needs."

This amendment would allow serving families, with a child for whom they have been awarded an Education and Health Care Plan or equivalent Special Educational Needs support, to transfer that support without penalty if they are required to move bases, for operational or other reasons, from one area to another.

Amendment 4, page 6, line 37, at end insert—

"343AZC Continuity of adoption and fostering arrangements

(1) Within a year of the passage of the Armed Forces Act 2026, the Secretary of State must by regulations make provision for the continuity of adoption and fostering arrangements for a person who—

(a) is a serving member of the Armed Forces,

(b) has entered into negotiations about potentially adopting or fostering children, and

(c) is required to move base as part of their military service.

(2) Regulations under subsection (1) must ensure that if a service family is required to move from one base to another, for operational or other reasons, any adoption or fostering arrangements they have made with their existing local authority should be appropriately transferred to the appropriate new local authority.

(3) For the purposes of this section, "appropriately transferred" means any adoption or fostering arrangements shall not be disrupted as a result of the transfer from one local authority to another.

(4) Regulations under subsection (1) must make provision for minimum residency requirements for adoption or fostering in a local authority to be waived for any service family which is required to move from one local authority jurisdiction to another, for operational or other reasons.

(5) Service families to which this section applies shall have an opportunity to renegotiate potential adoption or fostering arrangements with the new local authority, including prior to transfer to their new posting."

This amendment would require adoption and/or fostering processes being undertaken by a service family to be automatically transferred to the appropriate local authority if that family is required to move bases as part of their service in the armed forces.

Amendment 5, page 6, line 37, at end insert—

"343AZC Continuity of NHS secondary care services

(1) Within a year of the passage of the Armed Forces Act 2026, the Secretary of State must by regulations make provision for the continuity of secondary care treatment for a person who—

(a) is a dependent of a member of the regular or reserve forces who is receiving secondary care services from a health body in one part of the United Kingdom, and

(b) becomes ordinarily resident in another part of the United Kingdom when the member of the armed forces to whom that person is dependent is posted.

(2) Regulations under subsection (1) must make provision for relevant health bodies to take reasonable steps to ensure that any course of secondary care treatment being provided to the dependent is transferred to an appropriate health body in the area to which the dependent relocates.

(a) the dependent's treatment or place on a treatment waiting list is maintained upon transfer of responsibility of care between health bodies, and

(b) the dependent will not require a new referral form from a general practitioner or other primary care professional as a condition for continuation of treatment upon transfer of responsibility of care between health bodies.

(3) Regulations under this section must include a requirement for a national authority to issue guidance on—

(a) the transfer of patient records,

(b) the continuation of treatment pathways upon transfer of responsibility of care between health bodies, and

(c) the preservation of waiting list placement upon transfer of responsibility of care between health bodies."

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to make provision for NHS secondary care services to be appropriately transferred where a person who is dependent on a member of the armed forces must become ordinarily resident in an area for which a different NHS body is responsible for care.

Amendment 14, page 6, line 43, at end insert—

"343AZC Communication regarding armed forces pensions

(1) The Secretary of State must undertake an assessment of the effectiveness of communication with former service personnel about their armed forces pension.

(2) An assessment under subsection (1) is not limited to but must include—

(a) a review of the number of armed forces pensions which have been unclaimed,

(b) the impact of the current armed forces pensions system on former service personnel, and

(c) an assessment of the effectiveness of introducing an annual letter distribution service to inform former personnel of their pension entitlements.

(3) For the purposes of this section—

"former service personnel" means a person who has completed their services in the armed forces.

(4) Within six months of the passage of the Armed Forces Act 2026, the Secretary of State must lay a copy of the assessment under subsection (1) before each House of Parliament."

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to review current practice for communicating with former service personnel about their armed forces pension entitlements.

Amendment 15, page 6, line 43, at end insert—

"343AZC Transfer of medical assessments

(1) The Secretary of State must review current practice for the transfer of medical records and services for armed forces personnel upon their transfer to the reserve forces.

(2) A review under subsection (1) is not limited to but must include an assessment of—

(a) the time and costs associated with current practice, and

(b) the costs and benefits of introducing a case-by-case approach for determining whether a reassessment of armed forces personnel's medical records and services is required upon their transfer to the reserve forces.

(3) Within one year of the passage of the Armed Forces Act 2026, the Secretary of State must lay a copy of the assessment under subsection (1) before each House of Parliament."

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to review current practice regarding the transfer of armed forces personnel's medical records and services upon their transfer to the reserve forces.

Amendment 11, in clause 3, page 7, line 15, at end insert—

"(4) The Defence Housing Service will operate within a multi-year budget, which must be set out in any Defence Investment Plan published by the Secretary of State.

(5) This must specify both capital (CDEL) and revenue spending (RDEL) on the Defence Housing Service, over the period of the Defence Investment Plan"

This amendment would ensure that Defence Housing Service's budget is set out in any Defence Investment Plan published by the Secretary of State.

Amendment 8, page 7, line 26, at end insert—

"(e) improving the satisfaction of service personnel and their families with the accommodation provided."

This amendment would make improving customer satisfaction a specific objective of the Defence Housing Service.

Amendment 9, page 7, line 26, at end insert—

"(e) providing earmarked accommodation, as far as practicable, to facilitate members of the armed forces spending time with their child where they have a child arrangements order.

(f) for the purposes of subsection (e), a "child arrangements order" has the meaning given by section 8 of the Children Act 1989.

(g) "contract visits" for children of service personnel, who do not live with them (in accordance with any relevant court order)."

This amendment would make the Defence Housing Service responsible for providing accommodation to facilitate members of the armed forces spending time with their child where they have a child arrangements order.

Amendment 13, page 8, line 24, at end insert "and single living accommodation".

This amendment would add single living accommodation to the definition of defence housing to ensure that defence housing standards apply to single living accommodation as well as service family accommodation.

Amendment 10, page 9, line 27, at end insert—

"(4) The Chief Executive of the Defence Housing Service, once appointed, must report directly to the Minister of State for the Armed Forces, regarding the performance of the Defence Housing Service."

This amendment requires the Chief Executive of the Defence Housing Service to report directly to the Minister of State for the Armed Forces regarding the performance of the Defence Housing Service.

Amendment 12, in clause 13, page 34, line 33, at end insert—

"115C Duty to refer sexual offences and domestic abuse to civilian police

(1) This section applies where a service police force or the tri-service serious crime unit is made aware of an allegation that a person subject to service law, or a civilian subject to service discipline, has committed a relevant offence in the United Kingdom.

(2) The Provost Marshal of the relevant service police force, or the Provost Marshal for serious crime, must immediately refer the allegation and transfer the investigation to the relevant civilian police force, and inform the complainant of their right to have the investigation referred back to the relevant service police force and military courts.

(3) If the complainant requests that the case be transferred back to the military courts, the jurisdiction over the investigation and subsequent trial must be transferred back to the relevant service police force and military courts.

(4) In this section—

"relevant civilian police force" means the civilian police force for the area in which the alleged offence took place;

"relevant offence" means—

(a) any offence under the Sexual Offences Act 2003,

(b) an offence involving domestic abuse within the meaning of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, or

(c) an offence of attempting or conspiring to commit an offence within sub-paragraph (a) or (b).

(5) The Secretary of State may by regulations specify further offences which are to be treated as a relevant offence for the purposes of this section."

This amendment requires the Service Police and the Defence Serious Crime Command to refer all allegations of sexual offences and domestic violence to the civilian police forces for investigation and subsequent trial in the civilian justice system, with the option for the complainant to transfer their case back to the military justice system if they prefer.

Amendment 6, in clause 20, page 34, line 27, at end insert—

"(iii) a retired holder of such a rank.

(iv) NCO's – down to the level of Corporal, or equivalent."

This amendment would add retired officers to those qualified for membership of the Court Martial. It would also allow soldiers down to the rank of Corporal (or equivalent) to sit on Court Martials.

Amendment 7, in clause 33, page 54, line 43, at end insert—

"69C Notice periods for recall

(1) Those reservists in Army Reserve Group A, or its equivalents, shall, following the passage of the Armed Forces Act 2026, have their standard notice reduced from readiness category R9 (180 days) to R7 (60 days).

(2) For the purposes of this section, 'Army Reserve Group A' has the meaning defined in the Reserve Land Forces Regulations 2026."

This amendment would increase the readiness requirement for reservists in Army Reserve Group A from 180 days to 60 days.

Government amendment 2.

Jeremy Corbyn: The amendments I have tabled concern the right of British nationals to engage in foreign wars. What brought them about is reports that British nationals have been involved in Israel Defence Forces activities in Gaza and other places. To prevent this from happening in future, my amendments would amend the Visiting Forces Act 1952 to give the Secretary of State power to undertake some form of legal action against those individuals. To me, it seems very obvious and very important that if, as a general principle, we say that British nationals should not be allowed to fight for a foreign force, or to engage in a war in another country under a different command, we should do something about it legally. My amendments are quite widely supported and very carefully drafted, and I hope that the Minister will understand why I tabled them and their importance.

I never thought that in my lifetime, we would be able to watch genocide taking place live on television, as is happening in Gaza. My amendments clearly state that if cases are taken to the International Court of Justice or the International Criminal Court, that would be enough to trigger action by the Secretary of State in this country. That is why I tabled them, and I hope that the House will take them seriously and support them.

Al Carns (Birmingham Selly Oak) (Lab): The Bill has four key themes. First, it creates the Defence Housing Service, which is a fantastic move forward; it will change for a generation how our people are looked after in service family accommodation. Secondly, it will make major improvements to our service justice system, which is another fantastic move forward. Thirdly and most importantly, it will look at how we renew our reservists. It looks at how we extend duty for our strategic reserves.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On reservists, I am sure that the hon. Member will be aware that the maximum age of recall is being increased from 60 to 65, and the threshold for mobilisation is being lowered. The problem in Northern Ireland is that our reservists are overwhelmingly employed in civilian jobs in our small and medium-sized enterprises, so the changes create real problems. Can he put forward a solution that would enable our small and medium-sized businesses to employ reservists and let them do their duty?

Al Carns: As we progress the Bill collectively, we could, in some areas, look at giving better support to employers, but it is worth being clear that the Bill looks to extend service from anything from four to 16 years. It allows for the return to service of ex-military personnel until they are 65. That is being standardised across officers, other ranks, the Navy, the Army and the Air Force. By doing that, we will increase our strategic reserve pool. If we get caught in a crisis in any way, shape or form, their skills can be harnessed to help the nation out. There is a further discussion to be had, at a later stage, about how we include civilians in that.

This Bill puts in place a whole range of important provisions—on improving the standard of living and housing for the armed forces, on reserves and on the service justice system—while, importantly, keeping us safe at home and abroad.

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

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), who I may refer to again in a few minutes. It is important to place on record the respect he has engendered across the House by resigning on an important issue of principle relating to the defence of the realm, which is, after all, the most important duty of Government, above all others. He and I have debated for five months on this Bill. We have not always agreed, but we have always dealt with each other respectfully. That respect has only been enhanced by his recent decision.

I rise to speak to new clause 11 and amendments 3, 4, 5 and 11 in my name and that of my hon. Friends. I will get into the detail of those amendments and the new clause in a moment, but before I do, I observe the courtesies of debate and congratulate the new Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Sandher-Jones), on her recent field promotion. We hope that she enjoys herself in her new post, but I caution her that there appear to have been further command changes back at the chateau as of today. We shall have to see how she fares in the re-brigading exercise that will inevitably follow, but for today, well done.

In the meantime, this Bill, which had its Second Reading back on 26 January, has been extensively debated—when the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill received both oral and written evidence; in the Select Committee's debate phase; in Committee of the whole House on 2 June; and now on Report and Third Reading. The Opposition's summing-up speech tonight will come from my hon. Friend the Member for Exmouth and Exeter East (David Reed).

Over nearly five months, we have spent more than 40 hours taking evidence, conducting visits and debating this important Bill. As today is the culmination of its consideration in the Commons before it moves on to further scrutiny in the other place, I should say that throughout, we Opposition Members have attempted to act as a critical friend to the Bill. We have been able to do that mostly in a relatively consensual manner, although there have been occasional points of disagreement, as I suspect there may yet be this evening.

New clause 11 relates to a derogation from the European convention on human rights in the event of overseas operations under the auspices of the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Act 2021. I am afraid that I cannot agree with the proposition of the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), despite the fact that I was born in his constituency, in Crouch End—or "Creuche Ende", as the estate agents call it today. When we debated this matter in Committee, we tabled a similar new clause, based on the wording of the 2021 Act. It said that Ministers should at least consider derogating from the ECHR, if not doing so might constrain the operation of our troops when deployed overseas and leave them potentially fighting a ruthless enemy with no moral scruples, who behaved as the Russians did in Bucha during the invasion of Ukraine. Because of the ECHR, our troops could effectively be fighting with one hand tied behind their back, and could fear lawfare being used against them, perhaps even decades later, potentially at Russia's behest. Unfortunately, the Government have been completely hopeless on this, and we have therefore firmed up the wording in our revised new clause; it says that Ministers "should" derogate in such circumstances. The principal argument, however, remains the same, and I hope that Ministers might yet be persuaded to accept the new clause.

Jeremy Corbyn: I remind the Opposition spokesperson that new clause 1, which I tabled, would prevent the Secretary of State authorising the entry of members of visiting forces from states whose commanders are subject to International Criminal Court arrest warrants or proceedings of the International Court of Justice. I do not see how that is a problem for anyone who respects and understands the importance of international law in bringing an end to conflict, or preventing conflict. Surely the Secretary of State should not allow people to come and operate here when they have an ICC arrest warrant against them.

Mr Francois: I am old school, and I was taught that in a debate, it is polite to refer to the Member who moved the lead amendment. That is what I was seeking to do. As I think the House would realise, I am making a very different point and a different argument from him. I will have to respectfully disagree, particularly given events earlier today.

New clause 4, in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty), has been signed by 64 MPs from across the House, including me. The law was changed many years ago to permit foreign, Commonwealth and Gurkha personnel who have served in our armed forces for four years or more to apply for UK citizenship in return for their willingness to risk their life in service of the Crown. That is now a well-established procedure. However, there is a long-running issue about their immediate family, who may also wish to apply for citizenship, being charged visa fees. Both the Conservative and Labour parties in their 2024 general election manifestos pledged to change that. Indeed, the Royal British Legion and Poppyscotland have been campaigning on it for some time. The case will no doubt be made eloquently by my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon, just as it was in Committee, if he is lucky enough to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker.

When we debated this issue in Committee some three weeks ago, the then Armed Forces Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak, sought to offer the House some comfort that progress might be made on this issue by the time we got to Report. That being the case, and given that the Royal British Legion and Poppyscotland have been doing their best to press the case—including at an event in the House earlier today—I hope that his replacement as the Armed Forces Minister will be able to give us a positive update tonight.

It is not really the money that is the impediment. We in the Conservative party have pledged that if we were in government, the Ministry of Defence would cover the additional cost of these visas, which would realistically run at most to a few million pounds a year. However, as everyone knows, the real blocker is not the MOD, but the Home Office. I very much hope that the Armed Forces Minister can tell us today that she has put some vim down the pipe, as it were, and that the Government will now accept new clause 4. If not, I feel sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon will be present to press his new clause at the conclusion of our debate.

Our amendments 3, 4 and 5 are on the subjects of special educational needs, the related matters of fostering and adoption, and care in the national health service. In essence, our argument is that if military personnel who have children with special educational needs are ordered to transfer from one military garrison or base to another, any support that they have for that child—including an education, health and care plan or its equivalent in the devolved Governments—should automatically be portable from one local education authority to the one that covers their new posting.

One of the two overriding principles of the armed forces covenant, which is an important aspect of the Bill, is that military personnel and their families should suffer no disadvantage as a result of their service relative to the civilian population. Given that they may sometimes be compelled to move by order from one part of the country to another, this is a perfect example of where that principle should now bite.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): In the context of the armed forces covenant and all the great work it does for military families, does my right hon. Friend agree that the Royal British Legion also does important work in this regard? Will he join me in saying thank you to the Royal British Legion in Hayes, in my constituency, which does so much work for military families as they go about their duties?

7 pm

Mr Francois: I thank my hon. Friend him for his intervention. As patron of the Rayleigh branch of the Royal British Legion, I too am very glad to pay tribute to the amazing work that it does in support of serving personnel, veterans and the wider armed forces family. It has also played an important part in lobbying for what is now new clause 4, on which I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon will elaborate.

Jim Shannon: I thank the shadow Minister again for all his endeavours on behalf of the defence forces. He is an example to us all.

I understand that the Government have extended the armed forces covenant to Northern Ireland, but there is a question mark over the responsibility of local borough and district councils in Northern Ireland that may have adverse feelings about the covenant. Does the right hon. Gentleman think it is important that the Government bring forward legislation tonight to ensure that every district and borough council in Northern Ireland must adhere to the same rules as those here on the mainland?

Mr Francois: Yes, the armed forces covenant should apply equally throughout the four nations of the United Kingdom. The hon. Gentleman and I know that some local authorities in Northern Ireland take a different view on this matter, but even in Sinn Féin-run councils the covenant should still apply. Northern Ireland has a very proud tradition of providing troops for the United Kingdom's armed forces, and those troops are as entitled to be recognised and supported by the civilian population as those drawn from any other part of the United Kingdom. So, again, my in-principle answer to the hon. Gentleman's question is yes.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: I suspect that this might be about the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, in which case I am very happy to give way.

Jayne Kirkham: It is not, actually, although I can always talk about the Royal Fleet Auxiliary in the context of clause 31, in which it is brilliantly included and which will give the RFA a commissioner at last, which is fantastic.

May I ask the Minister to confirm—because I have had some correspondence about this—that clause 2 covers unitary authorities, single foundation strategic authorities and borough councils outside outer London? Some members of the Local Government Association have raised that with me. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm, just for clarification, that those authorities are covered by the duties in the covenant?

Mr Francois: I thank the hon. Lady very much for referring to me as the Minister. I was the Minister once and—who knows?—I may be one day again. I must say, in fairness to the previous Minister, that I believe the Government tabled amendments in Committee to clarify the matter that the hon. Lady has raised, and I think that on their behalf, if it is not precocious, I can give her and the LGA an absolute reassurance in that regard.

We believe that as military personnel are often moving at the behest of the state, the state has a moral duty under the covenant to ensure that any EHCP—and, as we all know from our constituency work, obtaining EHCPs is often a tortuous process—is then fully transferable. When we debated that in Committee, we received considerable support from the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey), who has received a field promotion of his own in recent days, and will therefore hopefully be a friend to these measures within the Department. I would welcome him too, but I am saving him up for Defence questions in July.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): We in the all-party parliamentary group on the armed forces community—including my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey)—have been working on these issues with the Royal British Legion for the past year. The Minister for School Standards, my hon. Friend the Member for Queen's Park and Maida Vale (Georgia Gould), has come before us, has listened to the views of service personnel and their families, and has committed to ensuring that serving personnel are included in the SEND reforms process. I want to thank her for her work, alongside that of the Royal British Legion and the APPG.

Mr Francois: I thank the hon. Lady for a very helpful intervention. I will come to the NHS in a moment, but during the Bill's earlier stages we have suggested that if the Government do not feel that they can accept this amendment—amendment 3—in this primary legislation, which was our preferred route, now that we know there will be a new Bill on special educational needs, they should seek to address the problem in that Bill, and because it is a Department for Education Bill, hopefully local education authorities will then give it considerable weight. So we are in absolute agreement about that route, and, if I may say so, what the hon. Lady has said about education Ministers is heartening.

Amendment 4 makes, in a sense, the same argument as we have made on the EHCPs with regard to fostering or adoption by service personnel. Amendment 5 argues, in a similar vein, that military personnel who transfer from one military location to another should not lose their place on any NHS waiting list as a result. Again, there is forthcoming legislation on NHS reorganisation, and we hope that this issue can be tackled via that legislative route. I believe this is a relatively straightforward moral argument, in all three cases, and I hope that the Government may yet accept the logic of what we are putting forward this evening.

Let me now turn to the subject of funding for the proposed new Defence Housing Service. As I said during the Select Committee stage of the Bill, there is almost universal agreement that we want to improve the quality of accommodation for service personnel and their families. The remaining area of contention is how best to achieve that, given that there is almost complete unanimity on the desired end state.

Nevertheless, following media reports—especially in *The Sunday Times*—Opposition Members are increasingly concerned about the possibility that money for capital improvements, and even maintenance, may now be taken away from the Defence Housing Service before it is even born, and reallocated to other priorities in Labour's very long-awaited defence investment plan. We know from evidence sessions on the Bill that there is already a plan for the Defence Housing Service to reduce the spending on housing maintenance by 25%, compared to current practice. That sounds worrying, although officials, and indeed the previous Minister, were keen to stress that they believed the new Defence Housing Service would be able, by renegotiating certain contracts and the actual operation of maintenance, to do this more efficiently.

The proof of the pudding for all that will be very much in the eating. However, what we understand is now being proposed is that the capital allocations for the Defence Housing Service will be raided in order to fund other defence priorities elsewhere. That process will only be exacerbated if, as has been widely reported, the amount of money that will be available for the DIP—if and when it is finally published—will be the lowest of the three options widely canvassed in the press, namely an additional £10 billion of spending on defence over the next four years.

Given the challenges faced by defence—which were laid out starkly by both the former Defence Secretary and the former Armed Forces Minister in their powerful resignation letters—£10 billion over four years will not even touch the sides. Let me humbly remind Labour Members that all three authors of the strategic defence review, which was published over a year ago on 2 June 2025, were adamant that the price tag for delivering Labour's much-vaunted SDR would be defence spending of at least 3% of GDP. What is on offer is clearly nowhere near that. Indeed, in his scathing resignation letter, the former Defence Secretary said that all that was being offered to him was an increase in defence spending from 2.6% of GDP this year to 2.68% of GDP by 2030—in other words, a 0.08% increase over four years. Those numbers completely and utterly demolish Labour's constantly repeated mantra that they are now funding

"the biggest…increase in defence spending since the Cold War."

That is simply not true.

However, the situation is even worse than that. In addition to the headline "increases", which are now minuscule, as the resignation letter starkly reveals, last year, at the Treasury's behest, the Labour Government introduced a target of making efficiency savings—"cuts" in plain English—of some £2.6 billion from operational and revenue spending in the Ministry of Defence. What that means in practice is fewer ship days at sea, fewer hours for our pilots to fly, and fewer exercises on Salisbury plain. Incredibly, in this financial year—2026-27—the efficiency savings target has now been increased to £3.5 billion of cuts, which means even more operational and revenue spending reductions than last year.

For Labour to continue the mantra that it has provided the largest increase in defence spending since the cold war, in the face of these self-imposed, Treasury-driven in-year cuts, simply destroys any credibility that the Government had that they really are striving to keep this country safe. This is not the result of enemy action—unless one regards the Treasury as the enemy, which many in

[Mr Francois]

the military now do. This is a self-inflicted wound brought about by a Labour Government who are completely paralysed by inaction, and who now have no idea whatsoever of how to credibly fund the defence of this country.

In the light of today's events, it remains to be seen whether the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) will attempt to introduce any order into this chaos. If he does, he and his new Chancellor—whoever that turns out to be—will still have to say how the Labour Government are going to pay for it. Are they going to increase borrowing, which will frighten the bond markets, or are they going to cut welfare, which would probably provoke a Back-Bench revolt?

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): Which would you do?

Mr Francois: We would reduce welfare spending and spend it on the defence of the realm. That is our policy.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: In a moment.

I come back to the Defence Housing Service. Ministers have promised us ad nauseum that their plan will include £9.2 billion of investment in military accommodation over the next 10 years—that point has been repeated again and again over the five months that I have referred to. Given that the DIP has still not been published, I ask the Minister for the Armed Forces whether she can still repeat Labour's mantra on the Floor of the House this evening. Is that £9.2 billion still there? Has it been definitively signed off by the Chancellor of the Exchequer —yes or no?

Moreover, can the Minister advise us when the DIP will finally be published? I see that the Secretary of State has kindly joined us, so he can bob up and answer if he wants. Will it be published prior to the NATO summit in Ankara on 7 and 8 July, as we have been told multiple times? Will it be published prior to the House rising for the summer recess on 16 July? Will it ever be published, or will we have to go round the loop all over again with a new Government? Are they going to publish it, and if so, when? We have now transitioned from frustration to filibustering from Ministers, and from there to farce. Our adversaries can see this as clearly as our friends can.

We have already rightly spent five months on this very important Bill, and I hope that the Minister will be able to give the House at least some comfort on some of the points that we have raised. Otherwise, we will have to test the will of the House, almost certainly in the matter of the ECHR and potentially on the Defence Housing Service and the DIP as well. Finally, when—if ever—will Labour publish the defence investment plan?

Alex Baker: May I begin by congratulating my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Sandher-Jones) on being appointed the Minister for the Armed Forces? She did an outstanding job as the Minister for Veterans and People, and I pay particular tribute to her work with the Gurkha community. I saw at first hand how she engaged with a community that for too long felt ignored and unheard, and she helped many feel that their voices were finally being listened to. I am delighted to see her promoted, and I look forward to her making many visits to Aldershot and Farnborough in her new role.

This weekend, Aldershot and Farnborough will have the privilege of hosting the national Armed Forces Day celebrations. As the historic home of the British Army, it is a huge honour for our community. I thank everyone involved in making it happen, including Rushmoor borough council and our headline sponsors: QinetiQ, BAE Systems and KBR Aspire Defence. Armed Forces Day matters because it gives us an opportunity to say thank you, but it should also be an opportunity to listen.

On Saturday, I was privileged to attend the launch of the Commonwealth military hub in Aldershot, which has been delivered by Op Belonging under the leadership of Samuel T. Reddy, in partnership with Aldershot Town football club. It was an extraordinary event. Serving personnel, veterans, families and organisations from across the Commonwealth came together to celebrate service and support each other. In some regiments based in Aldershot, more than 15 different nationalities are represented, and what struck me most was the theme of belonging. These are people who have served our country, and their families have sacrificed alongside them. They deserve to feel that they belong.

7.15 pm

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the compassion and dedication of community volunteers in supporting our veterans is second to none? I certainly extend my gratitude to Lauren Fox and Luther Blissett, who support people in my constituency of Watford with an invaluable level of help.

Alex Baker: Like me, my hon. Friend will have many fantastic volunteers supporting veterans right across his community, and we are so indebted to them. We are able to deliver so much veteran support because people voluntarily give their time to make it happen.

I was really proud to stand on a Labour manifesto that committed to removing visa fees for non-UK veterans who have served in our armed forces for four years or more, and for their dependants. This Government are working through such commitments. Having worked closely with the new Minister for Veterans and People, my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey), on these issues before he entered government, I know how passionate he is about delivering meaningful change in this space, but it is for the Government to make these changes. For that reason, although I fully support the principle of removing visa fees, I will not support new clause 4 today. I want to give the Minister the time and space to be able to deliver on the Government's commitments.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I appreciate the hon. Member's position and have previously spoken to her about new clause 4, which I tabled. The Government have been in power for two years, and nothing has yet been done on delivering their pledge. Why should Labour Members not vote for new clause 4, given that it will deliver their manifesto pledge?

Alex Baker: Ultimately, a manifesto is delivered over the period that a Government serve—they do not deliver everything at once. It takes time to deliver these things over the course of a Parliament. These things look hard because they are hard. The previous Government made many things look hard when it came to defence, and I want to give this Government the chance to deliver, throughout this Parliament, on the things that we are committed to delivering.

I really welcome the extension of the armed forces covenant duty in the Bill. The covenant is obviously one of the most important promises that we make to a nation, and it says that no member of our armed forces community should face disadvantage because of their service. I have worked closely with outstanding organisations, including the Royal British Legion, SSAFA and our service family federations. When it comes to this Bill, their message is clear: accountability matters. Families need to know where to go when support falls short, public bodies need to understand their responsibilities, and the Government need to be able to demonstrate that the covenant is being applied consistently and effectively. Judicial review cannot be the only realistic route available when the covenant is not being properly applied.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The hon. Member is making a very important point. Judicial review is not an answer for the many people who are damaged or suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and so on, because they do not have the capacity to do it, which is why authorities should be held accountable for the actions they take.

Alex Baker: That is precisely what I am asking the Government to do. They should look at that, because judicial review cannot be the only option. We must have other options available to make sure that, when the covenant is not being delivered, we can hold those bodies to account.

We need clearer guidance for how services can put the covenant into practice. Earlier this year, I presented my recommendations to the Minister responsible for early years—the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West and Mid Berkshire (Olivia Bailey)—setting out how the new Best Start family hubs can properly support military families. The first recommendation we made was simple: services should ask everyone at the first point of contact, "Are you from a military family? Are you from our armed forces community?" If public services do not know whether someone serves or has served, or is part of a military family, how can we connect them to the support they need? Service life often means deployments, frequent moves and dealing with different local authorities and providers. With a clearer record of our forces community, we can ensure that support follows people as they relocate, rather than forcing them to start again each time.

Ultimately, this is not about processes, but about people. At the Commonwealth hub on Saturday, I met a female Royal Navy veteran, and she spoke honestly about the challenges she has faced after leaving service in struggling to secure housing, to find work and to access the support she needed. Then she said something that has stayed with me:

"The Covenant is supposed to mean something. But it means nothing."

That must change. The covenant must mean something when a veteran needs a home or a military family is looking to settle down. Those who sacrificed so much in service to our country ask one thing of us, which is that we stand by them in return. That is the promise we must keep and the standard we must set ourselves, which is why I support this Bill.

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

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for opening this debate and speaking to his new clauses. I will shortly speak to the new clauses and amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) on behalf of my party and to others tabled by my hon. Friends.

It is particularly appropriate that we should be holding this debate at the start of Armed Forces Week. Like many Members, I look forward to attending Armed Forces Day in my constituency, at Pingle field in Bicester on Saturday. We will raise the flag to salute the service and sacrifice of our incredible armed forces and their families. If previous years are anything to go by, I will again disgrace myself in misdirecting a bomb disposal robot under the patient eye of a member of the defence explosive ordnance disposal, munitions and search training team, which is based at the Bicester garrison.

Fred Thomas: The hon. Member mentions bomb disposal. He may not know that we have seen two significant bomb disposal events in Plymouth in the last couple of years. Does he agree that Armed Forces Day this Saturday is a great opportunity to thank our military community for keeping safe everyone who lives in residential areas, especially in Plymouth, where there is unexploded ordnance from world war two?

Calum Miller: I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for his intervention. I quite agree with him that the work of our brave service personnel in the bomb disposal units and those who train them—as I say, at the Bicester garrison in my constituency—deserve to be celebrated. I would resist the temptation to say that I hope everybody's Armed Forces Day go off with a bang.

The skill and commitment of our armed forces reflect the best of us, and it is a privilege to speak today on this Bill. I believe there is much in the Bill that should be welcomed and that deserves our support. Crucially, it renews the statutory basis for our armed forces, extends the armed forces covenant duty across Government, introduces a Defence Housing Service to oversee and implement improvements in the quality of accommodation for our troops, and reforms certain aspects of the service justice system.

The right hon. and gallant Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) has energetically taken the Government to task for their spending pledges, yet I regret that the Conservatives did not apply the same energy to supporting and protecting our armed forces during their time in office. The scandalously poor quality of service personnel housing serves as the clearest evidence that they allowed a dogmatic commitment to outsourcing to blind them to how they were failing our armed forces.

Matt Turmaine: I recently visited a 92-year-old constituent in Watford who had been terribly concerned about the state of the housing provided for her grandson, which is obviously a consequence of the previous Government's tenure. As a result of the work of this Labour Government, his housing situation is greatly improved. Does the hon. Member agree with me that the trajectory is at least in the right direction?

Calum Miller: It is important that we sustain progress in that direction. The Defence Housing Service, to which I have referred, must do that, and I will come on later in my remarks to comment, in common with others on the Liberal Democrat Benches, on some of the challenges that might be faced if the right capital is not provided.

If we are serious about reversing the calamitous decline in recruitment and retention under the Conservatives, we must renew and reinforce the covenant with service personnel and their families.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Calum Miller: I will not for the moment. I will, if I may, make a bit more progress.

It is equally vital, however, to give our armed forces confidence that the Government are serious about expanding our military capabilities, and we cannot do that without a credible defence investment plan. The outgoing Prime Minister allowed his office to brief that this document would be published before the NATO summit on 7 July. Today, Labour appears more concerned by who gets a seat at the Cabinet table than about actually governing the country. Can I therefore ask the Minister whether that commitment to publish the plan in the next fortnight is made by the Government, or merely by the current occupant of No. 10 Downing Street?

Once the DIP is finally published, it is critical that Ministers can be held to account for its implementation, and for the costs that the delay in its publication has already caused for UK businesses. Small and medium-sized enterprises are desperate to contribute to our national defence, but their survival has been jeopardised by delays to the DIP. New clauses 21 and 22 would guarantee this necessary transparency, requiring the Government to produce two reports a year to provide an update on the delivery of the DIP and a report on the impact of its delay on business.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): We should not let everything that is happening in Westminster today distract us from the urgent need to safeguard our national defence. New clause 22 would highlight the result of the defence investment plan being long overdue. Does my hon. Friend agree that our understanding is that we still expect the defence investment plan to be delivered before the NATO summit and before the selection of a prospective new Labour Prime Minister?

Calum Miller: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his remarks. As I was underscoring, he is quite right to say that so many in the defence industry are holding on for the announcement of the DIP. There are many companies in the supply chains whose very survival depends on it, and I urge the Government to recommit to publishing the DIP before 7 July.

Turning to the wider Bill, there are several important areas for improvement, and I will start with how we recruit and retain service personnel across our military, how we treat those who have left, and how we strengthen our understanding of the reasons why they have left. This priority requires a long-term plan. That is why our new clause 13 would mandate the publication of a retention strategy, alongside the Bill, outlining the Government's plan to ensure we can attract and keep talent in the military for longer. Our new clause 14 would also require an independent review to identify and examine factors such as diversity, inclusion, the medical discharge process and the state of defence housing.

On housing, I am pleased that Ministers have heeded Liberal Democrat calls to bring service family accommodation under the decent homes standard. We were troubled, however, to hear that delaying the implementation of this commitment was one of the Treasury's ruses to help fund the DIP. I am sure the Minister agrees that that would be short-sighted, so I invite her to recommit to achieving the decent homes standard for SFA properties before the standard comes into force. We also want the Government to take the next step by applying the same standard to single living accommodation, too. That is what amendment 13 would do, helping to deliver for about 80,000 single and unaccompanied service personnel.

Ian Roome: It is a big misconception that single living accommodation in the forces is primarily for those who are single; it is not. Even at the flag-raising ceremony here in Westminster today, most of those in uniform told me that their wives live in a different part of the country, and they are living in single living accommodation. They are not living in family accommodation, but they do have families. Does my hon. Friend agree that, with this investment, we should be upgrading single living accommodation, too?

Calum Miller: I strongly agree with my hon. and gallant Friend, and I see nodding their heads those around the Chamber who, having served in our armed forces, know this accommodation better than me. It is critical that our service personnel, whether they are single, living away from their families or living in family accommodation, have a right to decent housing, and I hope the Government will stand by that commitment.

Alex Baker: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Calum Miller: If the hon. Member does not mind, I will make a bit more progress.

Let me now turn to veteran support. Service personnel transitioning out of the forces and into civilian life need vastly more support to ensure a smooth transition. In my own constituency, I have heard just in the last six months from two families deeply affected by the abject failure to link up military and civilian medical records. Two of my constituents were denied, as veterans, the care and support they deserved for physical and mental health damage sustained in fighting for our nation. The Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Sandher-Jones) has been assiduous in responding to me and I am in no doubt of her personal commitment. However, I think she would agree that such cases highlight system-wide problems that must be tackled.

7.30 pm

One of the biggest challenges is to ensure the continuity for service personnel between military and civilian medical care. Too many are waiting too long to gain access to their medical records, which can create gaps in care. New clause 15 would address that by requiring that personnel leaving service must receive a complete copy of their medical records within one month of discharge, with the option for direct transfer to civilian health providers. We must also effectively monitor, support and improve mental health outcomes for our veterans. New clause 16 would deliver an important step in that direction by establishing a veterans' mental health oversight officer with a statutory remit to monitor provision, assess compliance with covenant duties and report annually to Parliament.

I also want to highlight the amendments tabled by my hon. Friends the Members for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), West Dorset (Edward Morello) and Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde). They cover issues relating to pension communications, the transfer of medical assessments, the reserve forces estate, the treatment of domestic abuse offences, veterans' mental health, personal independence payment reassessment exemptions for amputees, and disregarding armed forces compensation in means-tested benefits. Taken together, they speak to the critical importance of ensuring that the commitments of the covenant are applied equally and in full, ensuring that no servicewoman or serviceman, current or former, will be denied their benefits because of a postcode lottery.

New clause 19 would help to deliver that consistency of application by placing national standards on the extended covenant duty, requiring statutory guidance, minimum requirements for public bodies, proper training and a framework for monitoring reporting. New clause 20 would require the annual covenant report to assess compliance against those standards, analyse outcomes and make recommendations.

The Bill is right to focus on tackling offences committed in the armed forces. Where offences occur, we must protect the victims, whether within or outside the military. I welcome the Bill's introduction of new protections for victims of domestic abuse, stalking and sexual harm within the service justice system. Those changes are very necessary, but they do not properly address the question of whether victims have sufficient confidence that a system embedded in a single institution can handle the most serious offences against them with complete independence.

Amendment 12 seeks to tackle this issue more substantively by requiring that allegations of sexual offences and domestic abuse in the armed forces be referred to the civilian police, and that those offences would be prosecuted through the civilian justice system. It would allow, however, for the case to be referred back to the military police if the complainant chose that route instead. We know from the armed forces continuous attitude survey that the main reasons given by personnel for not making a written formal complaint continue to be not believing that anything will be done with the complaint and believing that it might adversely affect their career. By making it the default for these offences to be heard in the civilian system, while retaining freedom of choice for the complainant to have their case referred back to the services, the amendment would encourage more people to come forward if they knew the complaint could be dealt with in the completely independent civilian system.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree that it would also be helpful if there was a specific requirement, written into the Bill, for the classification of domestic abuse offences? I refer to my new clause 24 on this very matter.

Calum Miller: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for her excellent point, and I endorse her advocacy for new clause 24. It would indeed have that beneficial effect, bringing the service justice system in line with that in the civilian courts.

The amendments I have spoken to do not seek to unravel the Bill, but rather to encourage the Government to go further. I hope the Minister will take these amendments in the constructive spirit in which they are meant and that the Government will support them.

Luke Akehurst: The Bill is perhaps one of the most constitutionally significant Bills that Parliament regularly debates, as it renews the mandate for a standing Army on a five-yearly basis. It has therefore been a privilege to serve on the Select Committee established to scrutinise it.

I am grateful to the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), for pointing out the convention that one should address the opening speech, and the new clauses moved in it, because that gives me the opportunity to say—I am very sorry that the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) is not in his place, because it would have been a delight to cross swords with him metaphorically—that I am really quite flabbergasted that in new clauses 1 and 2 the right hon. Member has managed to insert issues relating to the middle east into a debate that is primarily about the welfare of the armed forces here in the UK. It was extremely imaginative of him to manage to do that, which perhaps indicates a degree of dedication to one particular policy area that is in some ways commendable and in other ways slightly disturbing. I am sorry he is not here, because I would have been delighted to have taken an intervention from him on that subject. Just in case he scrutinises what I have said, I refer right hon. and hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I once again pay tribute to the armed forces community across the North Durham constituency. As I have noted at every opportunity I have had to speak on the Bill, North Durham is home to a considerable number of veterans, as well as the families of service personnel. It was an honour yesterday to speak at the flag raising ceremony in Stanley Front Street for Armed Forces Week. We are so into Armed Forces Week in North Durham that we have two ceremonies—one at the start of the week and one at the end of the week—and this year it was my honour to be at the one at the start of the week. I pay tribute to Stanley town council and the Durham Light Infantry Association for their role in that ceremony. You could really see the pride that people in North Durham take in their connection to the armed forces. I am always seeking to use my platform here to advocate for those who serve our country, and I have taken every opportunity, such as serving on the Bill's Select Committee, to play a role in advancing policy that helps our armed forces community.

[Luke Akehurst]

The Labour Government introduced the Armed Forces Bill to deliver on their pledge to renew the contract between the state and the armed forces community. The Bill will deliver for veterans, serving personnel and the next generation of our armed forces by making key strides forward on the covenant, housing and service justice, as well as bolstering our defensive capabilities by changing reservist criteria—at the request of reservists, I might add—and giving the Government powers to tackle drone activity. I believe the parliamentary scrutiny the Bill has had, by the Select Committee and on the Floor of the House, will make it even stronger than it was at the start.

I pay tribute to the Government for engaging so constructively with the Bill Select Committee and for accepting the vast majority of our recommendations, resulting in 81 Government amendments to further strengthen the legislation in Committee of the Whole House. In particular, I want to take the opportunity to pay tribute to the former Defence Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey) and the former Armed Forces Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) for their tireless work. They have consistently stood up for what is right, not only for our armed forces community but for our country. From their service as Ministers to making the case for the increased defence spending to adequately protect the British people and, ultimately, to the very honourable decision they took to resign, I hope their decision will have encouraged the Government so that when we finally see the defence investment plan, the quantum and content of it will reflect the political sacrifice they have made in standing down.

I welcome the new Defence Secretary, my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis), and the new Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Sandher-Jones), with full confidence in their ability to step up and continue to do the right thing by serving personnel and veterans. All of us in this House should wish them well. They are doing hugely important work on the final stages of getting agreement on the DIP. Whatever the politics going on in Whitehall around that, we wish them all the very best in that process. They are taking on huge responsibility at a time when this country faces really severe threats. I repeat that I pay tribute to their predecessors, but I also pay tribute to them for stepping up and taking on these hugely important responsibilities at a time when it could not be more important.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): I place on record that, as a veteran myself, it was a huge privilege to serve on the Select Committee that considered this important legislation. I will concentrate my remarks on new clauses 4, 9 and 11. At first glance, they may appear to concern different matters, yet, in reality, they are united by the common principle that Parliament should ensure that those who serve this country are treated fairly, and that the law recognises the unique obligations we place on them.

We quite rightly celebrate the professionalism of our armed forces. We ask them to defend our interests overseas, deter our adversaries, and, when necessary, place themselves between danger and the rest of us. It is right that the first duty of any Government is the defence of our realm. It therefore follows that the first duty of Parliament towards those who discharge that responsibility is to ensure that they are treated with fairness, dignity and respect. That means understanding that military service is not simply another profession, but a vocation that places demands on individuals and their families that most of our fellow citizens will never be asked to bear.

I begin with new clause 4. I have long believed that when an individual commits to service in the armed forces, the nation enters a contract with them that carries practical consequences. We ask our service personnel to accept postings away from home, to move their families at short notice, to spend long periods separated from loved ones, and, in some cases, to place themselves in danger on our behalf. When we speak of supporting the armed forces, we cannot confine our attention solely to those in uniform; we must also consider the spouses and children who support them.

New clause 4, tabled by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty), addresses a concern that many Members across this House have heard repeatedly from serving personnel and veterans alike: that the financial burden imposed on families seeking indefinite leave to remain after years of loyal service to this country is too much. There is a straightforward question before us. If an individual has given years of service to our nation, why should their family then face significant financial barriers simply to secure their future here? They have worn our uniform, accepted unlimited liability in defence of our national interests, and contributed directly to our security. In those circumstances it cannot be right, having honoured their commitment to our country, that we appear reluctant to honour our commitment to them.

The armed forces covenant, as my right hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) mentioned, rests on the principle that those who serve should suffer no disadvantage as a result of that service. It is difficult to reconcile that principle with a situation in which a family that has supported a service member throughout years of deployments and postings, is then confronted with substantial costs in order to remain together in the country for which that service was given. New clause 4 is not a radical proposition; it is a relatively modest measure that simply recognises commitment and rewards service. Crucially, it sends a clear signal that Parliament values not only those who wear the uniform but the families who stand behind them.

Over the past two decades, there has been a considerable concern about the extent to which human rights litigation has affected military operations overseas. Parliament has recognised those concerns in previous legislation relating to overseas operations. That issue is not a novel one, but part of a continuing debate about how best to reconcile operational effectiveness, accountability and fairness.

The argument for new clauses 9 and 11 is, at its heart, a simple one. A soldier deployed on operations is not situated in the same circumstances as a civilian living in peacetime; the realities of combat are fundamentally different. Those of us who have had the privilege to spend time with serving personnel quickly come to appreciate that military operations are conducted in conditions of

danger, ambiguity and enormous pressure. Decisions are often made in moments, not months. Commanders and soldiers do not enjoy the luxury of hindsight that is available to lawyers examining events years later from the cold comfort of a courtroom.

7.45 pm

That fact does not mean that we should abandon accountability—our British forces are respected around the world precisely because they operate to the highest standards—but neither should we create a system in which those who have risked their life for this nation face the prospect of endless reinvestigation, long after the guns have fallen silent. The law should recognise those realities. Operational personnel should not be exposed to legal obligations that risk second-guessing battlefield decisions years after the event. That has simply contributed to uncertainty, excessive litigation, and a culture in which servicemen and women feel that they may face legal jeopardy for carrying out the duties entrusted to them by Parliament and the Government.

Those serving today must know that Parliament understands the realities that they face and will not allow them to become casualties of legal uncertainty after returning home. It is not unreasonable for Parliament to ask whether the legal framework governing military operations properly reflects the realities of military service. That is why I support new clauses 9 and 11, which seek to restore confidence among those who serve that Parliament understands the exceptional circumstances in which they operate and is prepared to legislate accordingly.

The armed forces ask much of those who serve and their families. New clause 4 recognises the sacrifices made by those military families, and new clauses 9 and 11 seek to address a long-standing concern about the legal environment in which our armed forces operate. The provisions proceed from the same objective: that those who serve this country deserve neither special favours nor exemptions, but a Parliament prepared to recognise the unique burdens that service imposes.

As the confident nation that I know we are, we should not be taking the armed forces for granted. We should honour the service of those who have served. Above all, we in this place must demonstrate—through actions, not merely words—that those who stand ready to defend Britain will always find Britain standing behind them. That is a principle embodied by these provisions, which is why I will support them.

Alan Strickland (Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor) (Lab): It is apt that the House meets during Armed Forces Week to discuss this important Bill. I strongly welcome it, and commend Ministers past and present for using its passage to not just renew service law, which Parliament is required to do every five years, as hon. Members have said, but genuinely drive wider improvements for the benefits of service personnel and our national defence. My speech focuses on housing elements of the Bill, around which there remains some debate, and on which there are a number of amendments.

Before I come to the amendments, there are two reasons why the new approach to defence accommodation is incredibly important. The first is a point of principle: there can be no greater calling in the public service of our nation that donning uniform to defend our fellow citizens. I am proud to be a County Durham MP, and the county has one of the highest proportions of serving and veteran armed forces personnel in the country. Those from our communities who are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice to defend our way of life deserve the best support. That includes housing. Providing good-quality service homes should be non-negotiable. It should be a source of shame that, under the last Government, the housing element of the duty we owe our personnel fell far short of what they rightly deserve.

My second point is pragmatic. The historic failures on service housing have caused operational problems for those tasked with defending our nation. The state of some military housing hampers the day-to-day ability of our armed forces to compete in a competitive labour market. That matters; a Defence Committee report in 2023 highlighted that housing and other issues were making it difficult for our armed forces to recruit and retain talented people. Because of the fantastic investment that our armed forces make in defence personnel—I have seen that for myself on bases—whether in fighting troops, engineers, or others, we thankfully make our personnel highly competitive in the modern labour market, so there is rightly a draw on them. This issue absolutely must be addressed if we are serious about improving our defence, and I commend Ministers for their determination to address it.

New clause 12 calls for a report on the potential for establishing a forces housing association. I respect the intent of this proposal entirely, but I think we might be in danger of putting form before function here. I say that as somebody who, before my election, worked for 14 years in housing—for seven years as a council housing cabinet member, building council housing, overseeing an arm's length management organisation and working with major developers to secure billions of pounds of investment in Tottenham after the riots, and then for seven years as the director of a large housing association, again delivering complex projects—so I have seen housing from many angles, and many providers.

Working in the housing sector, I have seen that what matters fundamentally is the quality of leadership and culture, not necessarily the detail of the structures. The emphasis should therefore be on strong, clear and transparent leadership. It can be found at the heart of the best social and public housing providers. That might sound like an obvious point, but in the rapidly changing world of housing, it takes a particular type of leader to deliver on projects involving large numbers of residents, stakeholders and contractors, because it is hard.

I was therefore pleased to hear the commitments made, in the oral evidence sessions of the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill, to the Defence Housing Service having an independent chair, non-executive directors and a family representative. That mix of strong, robust leadership is exactly right, and is in accordance with good practice in the wider housing sector. I hope that Ministers will make the most of this structure by recognising that there is a wealth of leadership experience and skill in council housing departments, big housing associations and other social housing providers—people who have dedicated their careers to this. They could lend their expertise to the Defence Housing Service. I hope that Ministers will proactively tap into that pool of talent across the country to ensure that the new organisation works at every level.

[Alan Strickland]

Amendment 8 seeks to introduce an objective of improving the satisfaction of service personnel. Having worked in the housing sector for 14 years, I would expect that the satisfaction of residents or customers would be a core part of everything that the Defence Housing Service did, and one of the main issues for discussion by the board and the leadership team. Whether or not Parliament sets these as objectives slightly misses the point; the point is that they should be the absolute bread and butter of that organisation, day to day. I am sure that Ministers will talk to the board and the leadership of that organisation about that.

On the point about organisational culture, having worked in the sector, I have seen complex housing organisations in which there is a culture of delivery, real care for residents and a determination to fix things, which can often be complex, and a culture of getting things done. Equally, I have seen housing providers in which the opposite is true—where things are not done, things take a long time, residents are seen as a nuisance and complaints are seen as a pain, rather than as an object for learning. Again, the key lesson for Ministers is to work with the new organisation to drive the culture; I know that having served in uniform, Ministers will be used to driving strong culture through organisations. That is the key issue here.

In my previous career, I saw that the social housing sector has become more complex. Organisations increasingly deliver maintenance, long-term asset management, investment programmes and new home building, and deal with the construction issues with homes for rent and sale—the complex mix of things we will be tasking the Defence Housing Service with doing. Some organisations were just overwhelmed. Strong leadership and strong culture are needed, and there is clear evidence that with those, we can make this work.

There is something else that we need to defend against in the Defence Housing Service—and I know that Ministers are cognisant of this. In council housing departments and charitable housing associations, the pressure to deliver quickly has often led to convoluted chains of accountability, involving layer upon layer of contractors and subcontractors. The point that my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker) made about accountability is important. We have seen in many of the reports following the terrible Grenfell tragedy that there were layers and layers of organisations involved, without any clear accountability, and that caused some of the appalling problems there. There should be an emphasis on accountability in the Defence Housing Service.

Ministers and the board will find really good advice in many reports from the Housing Ombudsman and the Regulator of Social Housing's in-depth assessments; there is lots of evidence from Government about how to make complex housing organisations work well. We know that this was one of the main issues that came with the privatised model of service housing that was introduced by the previous Conservative Government, and it is why I strongly support the changes being made.

On visits through the armed forces parliamentary scheme, we have met lots of service personnel who shared stories of outsourced housing contractors being difficult to contact, unresponsive and acting slowly; equally, we heard from senior and base commanders who were keen to ensure the best accommodation for their people, but who struggled to hold private providers to account and have lacked direct lines of accountability. I know that Ministers will be tackling those issues, and that might be a better way of addressing them than through the amendments that have been tabled.

Amendment 11 seeks to bring the Defence Housing Service's budget into the defence investment plan. The key point here is not which budget the money technically sits in, but whether the housing commitment will be properly resourced; I know that Ministers are committed to ensuring that it is. The £9 billion commitment from Government is really powerful; work has already started on repairing military homes. The debate about whether that £9 billion sits in the DIP or elsewhere, again, slightly misses the point; the point is whether this Government are committed to investing and providing resource to get this fixed and sorted, and the answer is yes. I am sure that will change and develop as time goes on, as the organisation is fully set up and the board takes real control of that. That, I think, is our key priority.

In summary, strong leadership, an accountable, can-do culture that gets stuff done and proper resourcing are the key ingredients of to delivering for our servicemen and women in uniform, and I am confident that ministerial colleagues will drive that forward. A number of Members from across the House from the '24 intake who came to the House with significant experience of working for complex housing organisations would be very happy to support Ministers on the road ahead.

Lastly, while I will not go into these elements in detail, I want to say how important the parts of the Bill that deal with the covenant are. Expanding the armed forces covenant duty to central Government Departments is absolutely the right thing to do if we are to stay true to the duty that we owe our service people. It is entirely right that it applies to all layers of Government. On Friday, I met a constituent at my surgery—a veteran—who was raising concerns about his access to services from the NHS and other parts of the local public sector. He was struggling to get the support that he needed. Members know from our casework that support for our veterans is not always consistent, and that must improve across the public sector. That is why enshrining the covenant in law, through this Bill, is such an important step. Those serving our nation in uniform, those who have served and their families deserve the very best support. That is why I am proud to support this Bill.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor (Alan Strickland).

I start by stating, on behalf of my party, our support for this Bill and its important provisions, not simply because it extends the legal basis of our armed forces, but because of the very important new provisions that it introduces. We very much support the extension, which the hon. Gentleman just mentioned, of the armed forces covenant to more policy areas. We also support the expansion of recall for reservists; it would be good if we could actually recruit more reservists, full stop, but it is very welcome that we will be able to recall more of them. Most of all, I support the principle of better housing for veterans and forces families. I think I represent

more forces families and veterans than any other MP; the area that I represent covers part of Salisbury plain, Tidworth, Bulford and Larkhill, and despite what it says outside Aldershot, we are the true home of the British Army—I hope that the hon. Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker) will allow me to make that claim—and I am very keen to ensure that our forces and their families are properly accommodated.

I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for Newton Aycliffe and Spennymoor that what really matters is the leadership of housing organisations. However, I want to express my concern about a measure that will create a new quango responsible for forces families. I instead support the official Opposition proposal that we create a dedicated housing association for that purpose.

I will turn now to the amendments tabled by other Members and parties that we support. It is important that the budget for the new housing organisation is properly reflected in the defence investment plan, when it comes out. I would also very much like a commitment from the Government that we will see in due course the effect of this long, unacceptable and unaccountable delay to the defence investment plan. What effect will the delay have on our procurement and military readiness?

8 pm

Most of all, we support the amendment, tabled by the official Opposition, that seeks to derogate from the ECHR. It is absolutely right that our armed forces are not constrained. They are facing an enemy in front of them; they should not be worrying about the lawyers behind them. The commanders and, ultimately, Ministers who send our forces into harm's way must take responsibility for the mission they undertake. It is absolutely wrong that our armed forces personnel should be worried about potential prosecution and persecution over many years in the light of legal claims brought under very vague human rights laws that have no place in military orders.

We have the law of armed conflict, and that is the right framework for conduct in operations, not the European convention on human rights. I would like us to leave the convention altogether. That is not going to happen with this Bill, but it would be very good if the Minister could comment on the appropriateness of the derogation, as proposed by the official Opposition.

We also support amendment 1, proposed by the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister), which would extend the armed forces covenant to Northern Ireland. That feels like exactly the right thing to do, and I am very grateful that he has tabled the amendment.

We do not support new clause 1, tabled by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). We do not support that proposal. We believe in parliamentary sovereignty, not in contracting out the conscience of our country to the International Criminal Court.

This is a very important Bill—it is constitutionally central. Nevertheless, the passage of it is a formality, and one that I am very glad to support. The discussions we are having on these amendments point to a much more profound debate that we need to have but cannot have—not just because the Government are in turmoil but because the Ministry of Defence itself sets the terms of debate. This Bill should be downstream of these much more profound questions: "What exactly do we need our armed forces for? What role does Britain want to play in the world?" The question I am asking is this: where is the strategy for the United Kingdom?

Luke Akehurst: Is the strategy not in the strategic defence review that was published last year? I remember reading it, and copies were available from the Vote Office. I would recommend that the hon. Gentleman has a look at the SDR, because it sets out what our role is in terms of geopolitics and military strategy.

Danny Kruger: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for mentioning the SDR, because I was about to do so myself. It is not a strategy. For starters, it is a defence review. The point I was just making is that the strategy we need is upstream of defence. We need a proper national security strategy that considers, in the round, all the different levers of national power and places defence in its proper place in the hierarchy, which is downstream of the crucial strategic questions about the role that the United Kingdom will play in the world. The SDR was published over a year ago; we have seen none of its recommendations implemented, and the money that is required for it still has not been delivered.

Luke Akehurst: My understanding is that the recommendations in the SDR that do not require financial investment—changes of doctrine or stance or the deployment of existing forces—have been implemented. It is the defence investment plan that we are waiting for, which is primarily about additional spending above and beyond what we already spend on equipment.

Danny Kruger: My point is that arguing loudly for a bigger armed forces, praising our troops, as we all do, or speaking up for our allies, as we should, are not a strategy. Publishing a strategic defence review or even a defence investment plan do not count either.

Michelle Scrogham (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): The hon. Member says that the SDR is not about strategy, but the clue is in the name. It is a strategic defence review. Does he not agree?

Danny Kruger: The word "strategy" can be put on all sorts of things. I am talking about what a strategy actually is. It is a plan of action that proceeds from an objective and a doctrine about how to achieve that objective. That is what we lack as a country. We have not done grand strategy in this country for decades.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): A strategy is not a plan. A strategy is about ways, ends and means. The ways are the plan. The means are the resources. The ends are where one is going to.

Danny Kruger: I am conscious that the hon. Gentleman is an academic in this space. The point that I am making is that we need an overall vision for our country, a doctrine of how to achieve it and then a set of actions—working together, which I understand to be a strategy, how we deploy different assets, the different policies we have, and the different means to the ends that we have identified in pursuit of our overall objective. I do not think that any of us in this House can accurately define what that is for our country, and that is a source of great regret.

[Danny Kruger]

I applaud everything that the Government are trying to do to improve conditions for our armed forces. It would be great if the money were to be forthcoming as well, but there is something bigger and more profound than the questions about specific posture, kit or even deployments. It is: what are we trying to do as a country?

I want to finish by suggesting a strategy. It might sound bold and simplistic, but it is only bold because we are so weak and diminished as a country. Our strategy should be to rejoin—not the EU—the club of great powers. Currently, the great powers are the United States and China, of course, but also Russia, India and Japan. Those are the countries that recognise each other in those terms. They are great powers not because they are good—very obviously China and Russia are very bad—but because they make the weather in the world, and Britain does not, despite our country's most incredible assets, opportunities and strengths.

The reason for setting out this objective to be a great power is not just for national pride or self-esteem but for a simple reason: a country that is not a great power is subject to those that are. Sovereignty and capability are vital in the age of tech, a high demand for energy, rare earths and high-tech skills. That is what a country needs in this age.

What does great power status look like? I do not want to join the EU. I think that would be a disaster economically and pointless from a security perspective.

Luke Akehurst: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Danny Kruger: I will not.

Instead, I would like the United Kingdom to lead European defence by leading a partnership of other countries that have a capable military—most obviously France, Germany, Poland and the Baltics—to defend the Euro-Atlantic from Russia, China and Iran. That is the best role we can play in partnership with our friends in the United States.

Ben Obese-Jecty: That sounds very much like a European defence force. In what way would that differ from the concept of a European army?

Danny Kruger: I absolutely do not believe that we should form a European army, and we certainly should not join any sort of chain of command organised within the EU, but we can act with European partners, as we currently do—most obviously with the northern states in the joint expeditionary force, but also with our other allies in Europe, such as Italy, France, Poland and Germany. We should do that on the basis of a genuine, bespoke partnership for the purpose of defending Europe, particularly the Euro-Atlantic seaboard, where the United Kingdom has a special responsibility.

My position is that we should preserve our national sovereignty, capability and independence, but that we can do that in partnership with other countries, in defence of our common interests. That feels to me to be completely consistent with national sovereignty.

Stuart Anderson: I am struggling to see where the JEF, NATO and another alliance, even with our own sovereign capability, come into play. Those frameworks are already in place to enable us to stand up on the stage. It is about our funding of our capability. To the earlier point about strategy that Members were getting confused about, a grand strategy will be set out by the leader of the country, and the strategic defence review is a strategy of defence within that grand strategy.

Danny Kruger: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I am taking the opportunity of a defence debate to make the point that defence is downstream of grand strategy, and that is what is fundamentally lacking. Our defences are not going to be as strong as they could be, because they are not necessarily oriented towards the fundamental objectives that we need, which I am trying to set out in very broad terms. I am not suggesting that we need to create new structures and new alliances with new institutions—we can work within the ones that we have—but the purpose of the United Kingdom's security strategy, and the fundamental objective we should have as a country, is to lead the defence of Europe with our partners, particularly the Euro-Atlantic seaboard.

Let me conclude with this point. To lead the alliance that I suggest, we need real strength at home. More than anything, that means economic reform, liberating the inventors and entrepreneurs, particularly in the exciting new fields of defence tech. It means freeing up private capital that will ultimately fund our defence in addition to anything that the Government can find. It means driving forward on AI, which is the new, great frontline for everything. It also means securing the supply of energy, licensing new oil and gas exploration, and radically reforming our planning system. None of that is being done by the Government. That is why, although I absolutely support the objectives of the Bill—we will vote for it tonight if it goes to a Division—I still fear for our security as a country.

Michelle Scrogham: It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Wiltshire (Danny Kruger), mostly because it is such a rarity—like hen's teeth—to see our Reform colleagues in the Chamber for these debates.

I turn to new clause 10, tabled by the Conservative party. I would be supportive of it if it focused less on the timeframes and more on getting the defence investment plan right. There is an urgent need to properly fund the defence investment plan as a credible, long-term commitment for our nation's security. I call on the Government to do that.

We have seen what happens when defence is funded inconsistently—the Conservatives, in their 14 years in government, provided a masterclass in that. For years, too often spending has been drip-fed, reactive, fragmented and tied to short-term pressures rather than long-term strategy. That approach does not save money; it stores up costs and leads to delays, inconsistencies and, ultimately, weaker capability.

Nowhere is that clearer than in my constituency of Barrow and Furness, the heart of our sovereign submarine building capability. When investment falters, as it did under the coalition Government of the Opposition parties, skills are lost, highly trained engineers move on, the training pipeline is cut and the supply chain contracts. When the nation inevitably needs to accelerate production again, we are forced to rebuild that capacity at far greater expense. That is why the DIP—the first line-by-line, long-term plan of its kind in a decade—is so important.

It is vital that we get it right, but also that it is properly funded to meet the scale of the threats we face and the demands placed on our armed forces. The consequences of not doing so extend beyond cost; over time, our armed forces risk becoming "hollowed out", as referenced by former Conservative Defence Secretaries.

Stuart Anderson: The hon. Member is right to mention defence being underfunded—I called it out under the last Government and I call it out under this Government. The previous Defence Secretary talked about 30 years of defence underfunding. We talk about the DIP going line by line and getting this right, but if it does not come out with correct funding and it is anywhere near the numbers quoted by the previous Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), that will probably be felt most in the hon. Member's constituency with its shipbuilding and, as she mentioned, submarine capability.

Michelle Scrogham: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. As he rightly says, nobody felt that more than we did in my constituency. I agree that we have to invest properly in the DIP, but we must also ensure that the priorities in the DIP are right. Warfare has changed so dramatically in recent years that we cannot go to the capabilities that we have always looked at, and we cannot continue to fund it in the way that has been done for the past couple of decades. It is about putting the right amount of money in, and about putting it into the right places.

Over time, our armed forces have become hollowed out. Our adversaries will be emboldened, and we leave ourselves at a greater risk of the conflicts that we all want to avoid. Defence is not just a cost; it is an engine for growth in communities like mine. Investment in defence supports skilled jobs, apprenticeships and innovation across the country.

This Armed Forces Bill demonstrates the Government's commitment to strengthening our services through improving support for personnel and their families, updating service justice arrangements and ensuring that our armed forces are better equipped to meet the challenges of the modern world. Those are important steps forward, and I am confident that the Bill significantly delivers the improvements that are needed. I therefore oppose new clause 10.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I wish to speak to new clause 4, tabled in my name. I thank all those across the House who signed my amendment. Some 10% of MPs in the House supported the amendment. Although that is not exceptional, it is certainly unusual, and I wish to put on record my thanks to all those who put their name to it—particularly those on the Labour Benches.

8.15 pm

The issue of waiving fees for indefinite leave to remain for the spouses and children of our service personnel has become something of a crusade: a worthy cause that is a rarity in this place. It is one that we fundamentally agree on, but, with the best will in the world, it will never be a flagship policy. Hence, three weeks ago during proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Government, in their infinite wisdom, decided to vote down my amendment and put the issue back into a holding pattern.

I have spoken to a lot of MPs in the past week to ask them to support the new clause. Regardless of whether they said that they would or would not do so, I have yet to find an MP who fundamentally disagrees with its aim—I include within that group Ministers. It is only Reform that believes that the immediate families of our non-UK personnel should not be granted a waiver when it comes to regularising their immigration status. It says little for Reform's so-called patriotic support for our armed forces that it is unwilling to support service personnel or the Royal British Legion.

Here we are again, but what has changed since last time? Two weeks ago, at Home Office questions, I asked the Minister responsible for migration and citizenship, the hon. Member for Dover and Deal (Mike Tapp) what progress he had made in progressing the waiving of visa fees for indefinite leave to remain for the dependants of current or former service personnel. He said:

"I am working with colleagues in the Ministry of Defence at the moment to deliver that important manifesto commitment."—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 7.]

How long does it take? He has been in post for nearly a year—it took half a day to tweak this new clause, working with the Public Bill Office—so what is the hold up? If he has time to make AI slop videos recounting the history of constituencies, "Tapp into History," he has time to improve the lives of the people he served alongside when he was in the Army. He should save the videos for after the reshuffle—he will have more free time then.

In 2022, we amended the Immigration and Nationality (Fees) Regulations 2018, waiving fees for non-UK service personnel. Having listened to the feedback from the Government during the Committee of the whole House, I have changed new clause 4 to reflect a further change to that legislation, adding this single paragraph:

"(c) in a case where the application is made by a person who is a spouse or child of a member or previously serving member of the armed forces who have served for four or more years."

That is it—that is all I am asking the Government to do. Page 119 of the 2024 Labour party manifesto says:

"We will also scrap visa fees for non-UK veterans who have served for four or more years, and their dependants."

What part of new clause 4 do the Government now disagree with?

By the way, let us not pretend that the Government do not know how they would pay for it, because that is on page 127 of their manifesto, listed under "additional public services spending", using the last year of the 2028-29 Office for Budget Responsibility forecast. The manifesto clearly states:

"we will begin to put these policies in place from day one of a Labour government".

We are now fast closing in on two years—maybe they meant day one of a new Government.

I have asked the Government on no fewer than eight occasions when the manifesto pledge would be delivered and what progress towards delivering it has been achieved, and answer came there none. Last week, I asked the Minister responsible for migration and citizenship whether he could estimate the number of spouses and children who have been impacted by the failure to deliver this policy since Labour came to power. He could not. He said:

"the relevant data could only be collated and verified for the purpose of answering this question at disproportionate cost."

Sure. We should bear in mind that both the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence claim to be working on delivering this, but as they have no idea about the current impact, it is safe to assume that no impact assessment has been conducted.

I asked the Minister responsible for migration and citizenship what the planned timetable is for delivering the manifesto pledge that the Government are so committed to delivering. He told me:

"This work is ongoing, and the Department will update Parliament in the usual way once cross Government decisions have been finalised."

What cross-Government decisions? I would be grateful if the Minister outlined in her summing up what decisions are awaiting finalisation.

I do not believe that there is a timetable for delivering on this commitment, for no more complex a reason than the Minister telling me when she was the Veterans Minister that there was not. On 19 January, she told me:

"it is not possible at this stage to provide an implementation date."

I put it to her that there is a timeline—a very rigid timeline. There are only two points each year when immigration rules can be amended—in the statement of changes to the immigration rules—and the next point is due this autumn. Will the Minister assure the House that the Ministry of Defence and the Home Office will implement the pledged changes in the next statement?

Despite this change being the lowest of low-hanging apolitical fruit, this Government have eschewed opportunity after opportunity to deliver it. Defence Ministers wax lyrical about armed forces pay rises and improving military housing, but on this they are nowhere. We are now on our third Minister for Veterans and People in two years, and I have raised the issue with each of them. We have made no progress. While I do not think for one second that any of them opposes it, it will never be a priority.

Better yet, despite the fact that the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence have allegedly been working on resolving the issue and remain committed to delivering it, the Government's new earned settlement model will pull the rug out from under their feet. If the Government do not introduce a carve-out for service personnel and families, the qualifying period will increase to 10 years, on top of the current fees of £3,229 per person. If the Government were truly committed to the armed forces covenant, they would not even have needed to ask the question during the consultation.

I welcome the Minister for Veterans and People, my friend the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) to his post—he is not here today—and I know that he is just the man to get this over the line. I also know how much it hurt him to vote against it on 2 June. The problem is that he did not anticipate that it would come back around so quickly or that, when it did, he would find himself on the hook as the new Minister responsible for delivering it. So what should he do? He has been pushing on this issue himself since 2017, when he was a serving RAF officer. His pedigree in this area is, frankly, unmatched, and I appreciate that he is now in an invidious position. When we last debated this, he made it clear as a Back Bencher that the Home Office was the bottleneck in delivering it. The Home Office says that it is working with Defence Ministers to deliver this, so what is the hold-up?

The new clause is watertight. All the issues raised by the Armed Forces Minister on 2 June have been addressed. There is nothing left to oppose. It now has more support from more parties—including those on the Government's own Benches—not to mention the slew of tactical abstentions last time round. There is a reshuffle coming, by September at the latest, and the Veterans Minister cannot guarantee that he will be in the same role, with the same level of influence, after the change in Administration. There are just three weeks left until the summer recess and what is likely to be a completely new Administration. No progress has been made on this issue to date.

Now, with the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence on a go-slow in anticipation of a regime change, the Veterans Minister has a choice: vote the new clause down, despite its widespread backing and his own affinity to the cause, or tell the Whips to let it go through on the nod. There is a grotesque irony that Parliament's biggest advocate for making this legislative change, having campaigned for it for a decade, will today be a contributing factor to why service families continue to suffer.

Alex Baker: The Minister whom the hon. and gallant Member is talking about is not actually in the Chamber. In the APPG, we worked on these issues together. The Minister has had seven days in that job to make progress. Is it fair to put him under this sort of scrutiny after only seven days?

Ben Obese-Jecty: I appreciate what the hon. Member is saying. I am not putting the Minister under scrutiny here; I am merely highlighting the invidious position that he finds himself in and the situation as we find it. I spoke to the hon. and gallant Member, the Minister, earlier today, so he knows full well that I am going to say this. I very much want to put this front and centre as an issue that needs to be resolved, and to put some heat and light on it to encourage the progress that we are yet to see.

The only reason to oppose this new clause is purely political, as the Government choose to play games with people's lives rather than support our armed forces community and uphold the armed forces covenant. Earlier this year, that same armed forces community was surveyed by the Army Families Federation on the armed forces pathway to settlement in the UK, in response to the 2025 "Restoring Control over the Immigration System" White Paper. It had 1,424 qualifying responses and more comments on reducing the cost of indefinite leave to remain than any other topic.

One of those responses stated:

"the current level of fees for ILR—and the subsequent cost of citizenship—places a significant financial burden on Armed Forces families. Given the service and sacrifices made by Armed Forces personnel, and the vital role their families play in supporting them, these costs are prohibitively high for many. As a result, families who are committed to remaining in the UK long-term face unnecessary financial hardship simply to secure their lawful status and future."

Another said:

"Speaking from experience it's a struggle to get us and our kids to join our husbands here in the UK. We have to work 2 jobs in order to pay for the visa and travelling expenses. We have to bring our 3 kids over to the UK. Due to the expensive costs we have to apply for loans to cater for the expenses. With the high living standards and tight financial constraints, we have to save up for

our ILR fee once our 5 years contract is done. It's so hard to save, especially for us. Me and my 3 kids have to apply for ILR together as our visa expired the same date, so that's a total of £12K we have to fork out to pay the fee. Can the home office look into this urgently? Thank you."

Another said:

"I have supported my partner's service to the UK while facing many of the same sacrifices required of military families. This includes frequent relocations, prolonged periods of separation, disrupted employment opportunities, and the emotional and practical challenges that come with military life. For Commonwealth families in particular, these sacrifices are made alongside the added uncertainty of immigration status. Charging ILR and citizenship fees places an unfair financial burden on spouses who have already contributed significantly to the stability and wellbeing of service personnel. Military spouses play a vital role in enabling service members to serve effectively, yet are required to pay substantial fees simply to remain in the country their families serve with loyalty and dedication".

This last one said:

"the financial burden of applying for ILR and subsequently citizenship is not proportionate to Armed Forces pay, particularly in the context of the current cost-of-living crisis. Many serving personnel simply do not earn enough to comfortably meet these fees, even though they have complied fully with all rules and requirements. It is difficult to understand why those who have shown long-term commitment, loyalty and service to the United Kingdom must go through one of the longest and most expensive settlement routes, while others are supported through different schemes that include accommodation, financial assistance and fee exemptions. This creates a strong perception of unfairness among service members, who feel they are being penalised for following the rules."

That last one really sticks in the craw. We price our service personnel out of being able to afford to live here as veterans while dishing out ILR to others like confetti, who have done nothing to earn it. There is perhaps no better example of a genuine two-tier system.

Before Labour Members go into the voting Lobby and swipe their pass on autopilot, I ask them to think about why they became MPs—specifically Labour MPs—because if the answer was to clamp down on immigration so hard, with the bar so high that we do not even let the children of people who have risked their lives in the service of this nation live here without fleecing them for thousands of pounds, they will get a slow handclap for achieving their political dreams. If, on the other hand, they have the moral courage to do the right thing, they should not go into the No Lobby. What is the worst that is going to happen? How whip-able do we think the parliamentary Labour party actually is right now, just a few hours after the Prime Minister has resigned?

I ask Labour Members to have the moral courage to do the right thing, to vote in favour of new clause 4 and to deliver on the promise they made to service families when they stood for election. In a matter of days, they will find themselves jockeying for position in the leadership contest. People who are Whips today might not be Whips tomorrow. Nobody is going to lose the Whip as the Government collapse because they did not vote against this new clause. There may never be a more perfect set of circumstances in which to rebel: a Government with no authority trying to whip Labour MPs to vote against their own manifesto pledge and against the wishes of the Royal British Legion. I dare say there has never been safer, more fertile ground upon which to rebel.

If Labour Members cannot vote in favour of the new clause, I beg them not to vote against it. When this issue was voted on three weeks ago, there were 102 abstentions. The Prime Minister has laid out the timetable for his departure. This Administration is in its death throes. How much do those on the Labour Benches feel they really owe the outgoing Administration? They should be asking what the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) would do, because I am not really asking the current Government any more. What is the point?

Today, at the start of Armed Forces Week, I ask Labour Members to consider how they will vote tonight. Do they want to vote against service families, against the Royal British Legion campaign and against doing the right thing in order to prop up a Government who have a lifespan we can now measure in hours? This is now about whether the next Government back this change. I ask them to support new clause 4, not to vote against it. Ministers should think very carefully about what they want their legacy to be. They should have the moral courage to do the right thing tonight.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Most speakers tonight have talked about the duty of care that we owe to those who put themselves in harm's way for the people of the United Kingdom. Those of us who come from Northern Ireland or represent Northern Ireland know that that is not just some vague form of words. Over the period of the troubles we saw at first hand—this is not abstract—the sacrifices that those who serve in the armed forces made. More than 300,000 people served in Northern Ireland during Operation Banner, and 722 of them gave their lives in Northern Ireland.

In the 1970s, I was involved in the reserve police force, going in and out of Army barracks and going out with Army patrols, so I know the conditions we expected people to live in: empty schools and old factories, some of which were surrounded by houses and so easily open to sniper fire, mortar bombing, and narrow streets where people were easily ambushed. We owe a duty to those who made those sacrifices to stop terror in our own streets of the United Kingdom, let alone those who go overseas.

8.30 pm

It angers me when those servicemen are dragged through the courts as part of a rewriting of the history of the troubles that makes the terrorists look like the victims and the soldiers look like terrorists. I see that the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) is in his place. He deserves credit for whatever role he played in holding back the worst provisions of the legacy legislation, and I hope that his departure from his role in the Ministry of Defence does not give the Government the opportunity to roll over to the Northern Ireland Office and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Dublin, and enact legislation that will punish the servicemen who served in Northern Ireland.

That is one of the reasons why I support new clause 9. The performance of soldiers in the past and what they did in Northern Ireland will be used in future by those who wish to denigrate the work that our soldiers do overseas or in other theatres of warfare where they are serving their country. We should not leave in place legislation that makes it easy to do that. That is why we will support new clause 9.

I will speak to amendment 1, which my party supports, in the name of the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister)—he would have been here to

speak to it, but he is unwell. He makes an important point: if the provision is to extend to local authorities across England, Scotland and Wales, there is no reason why local authorities in Northern Ireland should be excluded from it, especially when many of the soldiers who would benefit from it live in Northern Ireland. Many of them served part time or full time in the Royal Irish Regiment and Ulster Defence Regiment, and they are living with the consequences of their service, yet local authorities in Northern Ireland will be excluded from the provision.

I hope that that was a mistake and an oversight by the Government. I trust that it is not a deliberate attempt to try not to put themselves in conflict with local authorities in Northern Ireland that are controlled by Sinn Féin. If that was the reason, it is an absolute disgrace. If it was an oversight, I hope that the Government will rectify it and ensure that local authorities in Northern Ireland are included in the armed forces covenant requirements as they apply to local authorities in the rest of the United Kingdom. Many Unionist local authorities will want to legally give support to those who have served in Northern Ireland. If any Sinn Féin local authorities do not wish to do so, the Government should not simply say, "We will back away from this, then." The same obligation should be on them, because they have soldiers living in their areas.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. The armed forces covenant was a national promise to the veterans of this nation. A veteran from Birmingham, Glasgow or anywhere else in GB will have better access to the covenant provisions, because their local authorities will benefit from them, yet someone living in Upper Bann, South Antrim or Fermanagh will not have that access. Does he agree that that smells very much like kowtowing to Sinn Féin, its demands and the anti-covenant approach it has taken over many years?

Sammy Wilson: I do not know who advised that, or whether it was the Northern Ireland Office, because of course it is prone to trying to avoid any conflict with Sinn Féin when it comes to policies. If it was, I hope that this will be seriously thought about and that the Minister will look at ways of including local authorities in North Ireland in the legislation, so that, as my hon. Friend pointed out, the armed forces covenant, which is meant to be a national commitment, applies nationally right across the United Kingdom.

I want to support some of the other new clauses, though I want to dissociate myself from new clauses 1 and 2 tabled by the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). They represent more of his obsession with finding ways of trying to batter Israel than really being concerned about the welfare of soldiers. The fact that he is not here to answer challenges to those new clauses says a lot as well, because he knows exactly what the motivation is.

New clause 3 would put a duty on the Secretary of State to collect data on the number of veterans who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. It is very sad when I walk down the streets of London—towards Victoria station, for example—and see people sitting in shop doorways. I remember speaking to one of them. He was an ex-soldier, and he blamed his situation on himself, but the fact of the matter was that it seemed that the Army had no idea what condition he was in. I met an ex-soldier in my constituency advice centre on Friday who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder and who cannot find any support or help. He left the Army in 2004, and the impact had come on some years later. He did not have his medical records and had been referred to one body and then another, but was finding no help. We have a duty to monitor what happens to those who leave the armed forces. They sometimes leave with injuries, either mental or physical, and we must ensure that we look after them when they have suffered as a result of their service.

It is so easy for people to get in a boat, come across the channel and get into the United Kingdom and then be treated to accommodation and support and quickly be given asylum to stay in this country and leave to remain in this country, but there are those who have served in the armed forces and want to bring their families here and who face a financial penalty for doing so. Waiving those fees is one of the reasons why we support new clause 4. We should not be treating the families of those who served our country in a far lesser way than we treat those who break into our country illegally, and are then treated and have money lavished upon them. On the amendment referring to a veterans' commissioner dealing with mental health, given the number of soldiers who have suffered from mental health problems, it is important that they should have an advocate for the problems they face.

The last proposal I want to support is new clause 19 on national standards, funding and monitoring of the armed forces covenant duty. It is one thing to have a duty and to put it down as a covenant duty and a promise to soldiers, but if we are not monitoring how it works and funding it, it will of course not have the impact that it is meant to have. The Government were right to bring forward this legislation, and many of its provisions are welcome, but there are amendments before the House tonight that I believe would improve it. We owe it to those who have served us, and I hope that the Government will take on board the reasonable amendments that I have spoken about.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Louise Sandher-Jones): First, I want to take this opportunity to put on record my huge thanks to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey) for his service as Secretary of State for Defence. He has been a stalwart champion of our armed forces, and I am especially grateful for his support for our service personnel and their families, driving forward improvements to pay, housing and childcare. His guiding light is, and has always been, to serve those who serve us. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns). He is a formidable operator, a passionate advocate for military modernisation and transformation, and not half-bad at pull-ups either. I hope to match his work on the former, although perhaps am unlikely to do so on the latter, and I look forward to working with both of these fine colleagues as we go forward.

I thank hon. and right hon. Members from across the House for their contributions to this debate. Given the number of amendments before us, many of which raise issues fully debated in Committee and on which the

Government position remains unchanged, I do not intend to repeat those arguments, but I will focus on the new amendments and a number of the principal issues raised while relying on the record of earlier debates for the remainder.

Helen Maguire: I seek a quick clarification on something that has already been mentioned by the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) and was raised in Committee. Will the Minister confirm at the Dispatch Box, because this has been raised with me by the Surrey Military Support Group, that the term "local authority" refers to borough councils, unitary single foundation authorities and foundation strategic authorities?

Louise Sandher-Jones: To confirm, where the covenant duty is provided by local government, then it will apply. For example, if it provides housing, it applies. I hope that answers the hon. Lady's question.

I will begin by speaking to the amendment in the Secretary of State's name making minor and technical changes to the Military Lands Act 1892 that are consequential to the establishment of the reserve forces and cadets associations by clause 38 of the Bill.

New clause 4 would waive settlement visa fees for members of the armed forces and the dependants of serving or discharged members of the armed forces. I acknowledge the concerns raised by the hon. and gallant Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) and recognise that the new clause has been significantly redrafted to reflect the points raised in previous debates, and I also recognise the important role that stakeholders such as the Royal British Legion have played in highlighting this important issue. The Government are committed to delivering the manifesto commitment in full. Work is actively under way across Government and we are determined to bring forward a solution that is clear and works for service personnel and their families.

It is important that we get this right, rather than legislate in a way that is partial or risk creating inconsistencies and, as in Committee, new clause 4 does not clearly achieve the stated aim. It is also important that immigration fee waivers continue to be provided for through the established framework in secondary legislation, rather than be fixed in primary legislation. I know how passionate the hon. and gallant Gentleman is about this issue, and he is right to demand speed and progress. I hope he will recognise that while primary legislation is not needed, our commitment—my commitment—is no less than his and I look forward to when we do deliver this important manifesto commitment.

Ben Obese-Jecty: The Minister accepts that the new clause has been significantly redrafted to try to make it as watertight as possible. I appreciate what she says about primary and secondary legislation; it seems like a little bit of a convenient get-out-of-jail-free card for the Government. Can she confirm whether there is anything wrong with the new clause as it is drafted other than the change to primary legislation, and if there is not, what changes do the Government plan to push through a piece of secondary legislation in the very near future in order to implement the measures as drafted?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I thank the hon. and gallant Gentleman for his valiant attempt. I can assure him it is our manifesto commitment, and we will deliver it.

I will now turn to new clauses 21 and 22. These amendments seek to introduce additional statutory reporting requirements on the defence investment plan through both regular updates to Parliament and specific assessments of the impact of any delays. As was set out in response to the Leader of the Opposition's urgent question last week, the Government are already committed to keeping Parliament appropriately informed, and we do not consider it necessary to add to those commitments. Work to finalise the defence investment plan is continuing under our new Defence Secretary, and we are clear that we will publish it ahead of the NATO summit in July. In the meantime, we are getting on with delivery, having signed over 1,400 major contracts since the election, with 94% of spend going to UK-based companies.

Calum Miller: The Minister has just said that the Government intend to keep the House regularly updated on these matters, but she declined the Liberal Democrat amendment that would set out that commitment in the Bill. Will she commit from the Dispatch Box that the Government will report, within six months of the enactment of the Bill, on the delays caused by the delay to the DIP, and the impact that they have had on the economy?

8.45 pm

Louise Sandher-Jones: We are committed to publishing the DIP before the Ankara summit in July.

Amendment 11 concerns the Defence Housing Service's budget and the defence investment plan. I hope that the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) will understand that I will not comment on any figures in the DIP—it will be published soon enough. Our defence housing strategy will deliver a decade of renewal for defence family housing. Previously, military housing was subject to insufficient, stop-start funding. That did not deliver value for money for the taxpayer, or the improvements that our service families deserve. The Defence Housing Service's budget will be clearly set out, and it will account for its spending to Parliament via an annual report. As the Select Committee heard during the evidence sessions, there is nothing in the defence investment plan process that stops the Department getting work under way. The Defence Housing Service will be up and running from April 2027, and the work of renewing the estate can continue.

Mr Francois: We were told multiple times—loads of times—over five months that the Government would invest £9.2 billion over 10 years to achieve the objectives of the Defence Housing Service, so I ask the Minister again: will she give a commitment to the House that that figure has not been reduced? If she cannot do that, people will believe that it has been reduced.

Louise Sandher-Jones: I will not comment, piece by piece, on what might be in the defence investment plan. We are getting on with the job of making improvements for service families now, and we are preparing for the launch of the new Defence Housing Service.

Amendment 11 states that the Defence Housing Service must operate within a budget set out in the DIP. That risks constraining the Defence Housing Service in a scenario where investment is set out in the plan, but has to rise thereafter. Any additional spending then risks being in breach of this requirement, unless and until a new defence investment plan is published. I am sure

[Louise Sandher-Jones]

that the right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that that would constrain the service's ability to respond swiftly and appropriately to changing requirements.

New clause 11 would require any future Secretary of State to consider whether to make a derogation under article 15 of the ECHR, which provides that

"in time of war or other public emergency threatening the life of the nation…a State may take measures derogating from its obligations under the Convention only to the extent strictly required by the exigencies of the situation",

provided that such measures are

"not…inconsistent with the State's other obligations under international law".

When the Overseas Operations (Service Personnel and Veterans) Bill was being considered, concerns were raised that its clause 12 risked damaging the UK's reputation for upholding the rule of law. It was also seen as unnecessary, because the Government can already derogate under article 15 of the ECHR, so the provision did not add any additional legal power and was largely symbolic. It was the last Government who agreed to its removal from that Bill, and I have not heard a convincing case for its inclusion in this Bill.

I will address new clauses 3 and 5 together, as they both deal with how we care for our veterans. I thank hon. Members for tabling them. I appreciate their concerns about our armed forces veterans, and I acknowledge the sentiments behind the new clauses. We have published our new 10-year veterans strategy, which sets out a new narrative around the remarkable men and women who have served in our armed forces. It applies UK-wide, is cross-Government and cross-sector in scope, and will provide significant opportunity for both data collection and data sharing, and we do not wish to distract from the progression of this work.

Al Carns: We have seen movement on the covenant, and the introduction of the Defence Housing Service and Op Valour. Would it be possible for the Minister to set out their impact on recruitment, retention and morale across the armed forces over the past year or two?

Louise Sandher-Jones: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue. Recruitment and retention have both improved, and, crucially, morale has improved, as measured through the armed forces continuous attitude survey, so our work so far has shown clear results.

Stuart Anderson: I am very conscious of the words that we are saying to veterans. In the Minister's response to a written parliamentary question on 28 May, she said that UK veterans faced a six-month wait when applying for war pensions in 2024-25. It is now 18 months at a minimum. I know that because I am going through the process, after a minor amputation of my foot. That period has more than tripled on her watch. Was she aware of that? Is that acceptable? It is a bare minimum of 18 months before there is even a response.

Louise Sandher-Jones: I am very sorry to hear of the challenges that the hon. Gentleman faces. I am very well aware of the issues faced, and we have taken a number of measures to counter them. I will ensure that we write to him with very full details of the measures that we have taken to address the issue.

Sammy Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I am afraid that I am going to make some progress, because I only have so long.

We are delivering Op Valour, a new national programme designed to make it easier for veterans to access the care and support that they deserve. Part of the programme is about using data to ensure that the right services are delivered at the right time, to the right place.

On the issue of homelessness, we are delivering Op Fortitude. I say to the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and to everybody in this House that if they come across an ex-service person on the street, they should make use of Op Fortitude. The telephone number is 0800 952 0774. It is a single referral pathway that connects veterans who are experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, homelessness with help and support, and it has already helped more than 1,000 veterans with supported housing and temporary accommodation. On mental health, we have invested more than £25 million this financial year in Op Courage. Again, it is a single pathway in England for supporting veterans' mental health, and it has already supported more than 35,000 veterans. We have a range of programmes to support those leaving service in finding fulfilling and sustainable careers that make use of their unique skills and experience.

Let me turn to new clause 13. After well-documented, historic shortfalls in recruitment and retention, the figures are now far more positive. Under this Government, inflow is up by around 13%, and outflow is down by 9%. We have cut red tape, addressed system blockages and established a ministerial board to oversee both inflow and retention. I am concerned that if the Government were required to set out an armed forces retention strategy, alongside the annual "Votes A" paper on the maximum number of personnel to be maintained, it would create an additional layer of bureaucracy, and would largely duplicate information that is already available. We already publish information on the size and make-up of the armed forces, and we will continue to publish that. We will also continue to publish the outcomes of the various continuous attitudes surveys that the MOD runs annually.

New clause 14 would require an independent review of armed forces recruitment and retention. We are improving retention through sustained investment in our people. We have a range of policies designed to help those who are medically discharged, and to ensure that people get the support that they need, and they are kept under constant scrutiny. The results of that can be seen in the decreasing outflow rates in the quarterly personnel statistics.

As I have mentioned, we also publish the attitudes surveys each year, and we will continue to do so. Although these show that service personnel still have some significant issues with service life, we believe that the investments we have made will mean that we start to see an improvement in future surveys. We will also continue to publish a range of other reports. For example, the Service Complaints Ombudsman publishes an annual report, which will be taken forward by the new Armed Forces Commissioner.

Let me turn to amendment 12. The hon. Member for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller) raised the issue that low trust reduces the likelihood of reports of sexual offences. I take this issue very seriously and have

done a lot of work on it, but the feedback from victims and from our victim and witness care unit has been positive; it indicates that they feel supported, listened to and understood. We have seen an increase in reporting of sexual offences, which may indicate greater confidence in reporting them. We continue to strive to improve the service justice system, and to raise confidence in it. That is why the Bill strengthens support and protections for victims of sexual offences.

Amendment 15 would require the Secretary of State to review current practice regarding the transfer of medical records of armed forces personnel upon their transfer to the reserve forces. I reassure the House that no transfer of records is needed when transferring from regular to reserve service, because defence continues to hold and manage healthcare records in the same electronic system.

Let me turn to amendment 1. I thank the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) for it, and recognise the concerns raised regarding the position of Northern Ireland councils. However, the amendment reflects a misunderstanding of the role that those councils play in the delivery landscape. The covenant legal duty applies to bodies when they are exercising public functions in certain key policy areas. In England, Scotland and Wales, local authorities play a direct role in delivering services in policy areas such as housing, which is why they are included. In Northern Ireland, responsibility for those policy areas rests with the Executive Departments and their arm's length bodies; councils do not exercise functions in relation to the policy areas covered by the covenant duty. While councils can support the armed forces community through engagement, they do not have the levers to address the disadvantages that the duty seeks to tackle. Clause 2 reflects the distinct devolved arrangements across the UK, ensuring that the duty sits with those bodies best placed to make a meaningful difference.

Sammy Wilson: Will the Minister give way?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I am afraid that I do not have time, but I would emphasise that what I have outlined does not remove the ability for councils in Northern Ireland to pledge their support as a covenant signatory. We will work very closely with colleagues in Northern Ireland to uphold covenant principles in practice.

In my former role as Minister for Veterans and People, I recently met the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, and the hon. Member for Solihull West and Shirley (Dr Shastri-Hurst), to discuss the concerns behind amendments 3, 4 and 5. We will continue to work as a Government on the best way to address those concerns in practice. Last month, I met the Minister for School Standards, who has agreed to look into the concerns raised, particularly about improving support for service families when they move.

The better route is not a rigid statutory fix; rather, it is practical improvements through existing systems. The covenant legal duty statutory guidance already gives public bodies a flexible framework for taking account of the particular challenges that service families face. However, let me be clear that considering the statutory guidance and supporting the duty is not optional; once it is in force, public bodies subject to the duty must have regard to it in their decision making and policy development. Special educational needs, adoption and fostering, and NHS continuity are incredibly important issues, but they are not well addressed through rigid legislation—the systems are different, the legal frameworks are different, and the decisions involved often depend on professional judgment. Our focus is on improving continuity in delivery, so that service families get better support without unintended consequences.

Turning to new clauses 1 and 2, the International Criminal Court Act 2001 and the International Criminal Court (Scotland) Act 2001 give effect to the provisions in the statute of the International Criminal Court. As such, they are the applicable regime for the issues raised by those new clauses, rather than the Visiting Forces Act 1952. The International Criminal Court Act exercises jurisdiction over individuals, rather than states, and any request to the UK from the ICC in respect of a warrant or investigation would be dealt with under the International Criminal Court Act as the appropriate applicable legal framework. I would add that the International Criminal Court Act already enables UK courts to prosecute relevant offences committed by UK nationals outside of the UK, irrespective of whether they are a member of a foreign military organisation.

Jeremy Corbyn: Will the Minister give way?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I am afraid that I have little time, so I must make progress.

New clause 17 would exempt certain service personnel and veterans from routine reassessments or reviews of the personal independence payment. While I recognise the intention behind the amendment, it is important to note that the PIP is a civilian welfare benefit, administered by the Department for Work and Pensions. Once someone has been awarded the armed forces independence payment, it is paid for life. It is not subject to periodic reviews, and there is no requirement for reassessment; it is specifically designed to provide stability and certainty for those with the most severe, life-changing injuries sustained in service. It is set at the same level as the highest rate of PIP or disability living allowance, whether or not the recipient has any care needs.

Although I recognise the intention behind new clauses 19 and 20, a national standard is not required. I hope that what I have outlined provides the necessary assurances to the House that these new clauses are not necessary, and I ask that they be withdrawn. I commend amendment 2 to the House.

Jeremy Corbyn: I beg to ask leave to withdraw the motion.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

New Clause 4

WAIVED FEES FOR INDEFINITE LEAVE TO REMAIN FOR SPOUSES OR CHILDREN OF SERVING OR DISCHARGED MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES WHO HAVE SERVED FOR FOUR OR MORE YEARS

"(1) The Immigration and Nationality (Fees) Regulations 2018 is amended as follows.

(2) In Table 9 (fees for applications for limited leave to remain in the United Kingdom and connected applications) in 9.18 after "Forces" in paragraph (b) insert—

"(c) in a case where the application is made by a person who is a spouse or child of a member or previously serving member of the armed forces who have served for four or more years.

(3) In Table 9 (fees for applications for limited leave to remain in the United Kingdom and connected applications) in 9.18 in paragraph (b) leave out "(a) and (b)" and insert "(a), (b), and (c)"."—*(Ben Obese-Jecty.)*

This new clause would amend the Immigration and Nationality (Fees) Regulations 2018 to waive the fee for indefinite leave to remain applications for the spouses or children of any current or previously serving members of the armed forces who have served for four or more years.

Brought up, and read the First time.

Question put, That the clause be read a Second time.

The House divided: Ayes 164, Noes 311.

Division No. 33] [8.59 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Blackman, Bob
Bowie, Andrew
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David *(Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey)*
Dean, Bobby *(Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain)*
Denyer, Carla *(Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry)*
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee *(Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain)*
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Evans, Dr Luke
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Gilmour, Rachel
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Khan, Ayoub
Kohler, Mr Paul
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Lumsden, Douglas
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Malthouse, rh Kit
Martin, Mike
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
Medi, Llinos *(Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake)*
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Ramsay, Adrian
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Hannah
Spencer, Patrick *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Sultana, Zarah
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
James Wild and
Mr Andrew Snowden

NOES

Abbott, Jack
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam

Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gilbert, Tracy
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jarvis, rh Dan
Jermy, Terry
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewin, Andrew
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nash, Pamela
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, rh Steve
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rimmer, Ms Marie *(Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell)*
Robertson, Dave
Rodda, Matt
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Scrogham, Michelle
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
Gregor Poynton and Jake Richards

Question accordingly negatived.

9.14 pm

Proceedings interrupted (Programme Order, 2 June).

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

New Clause 11

Overseas operations and the European Convention on Human Rights

"After section 14 of the Human Rights Act 1998 insert—

"(1) Where the Secretary of State considers that any overseas operation is, or is likely to be, significant, the Secretary of State must authorise for the United Kingdom to make a derogation under Article 15(1) of the Convention.

(2) In this section —

"overseas operations" means operations of Her Majesty's forces outside the British Islands in the course of which members of those forces may come under attack or face the threat of attack or violent resistance;

"Her Majesty's forces" has the same meaning as in the Armed Forces Act 2006 (see section 374 of that Act).""—*(Mr Francois.)*

This new clause reinstates a duty, removed during passage of the Overseas Operations Act 2021, requiring the Secretary of State to derogate from the European Convention on Human Rights during significant overseas operations.

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The House divided: Ayes 104, Noes 391.

Division No. 34] [9.14 pm

AYES

Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Blackman, Bob
Bowie, Andrew
Brandreth, Aphra
Braverman, rh Suella
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David *(Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey)*
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Evans, Dr Luke
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Glen, rh John
Grant, Helen
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jopp, Lincoln
Kruger, Danny
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Lumsden, Douglas
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mayhew, Jerome
McMurdock, James
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Rosindell, Andrew
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Tellers for the Ayes:
James Wild and
Mr Andrew Snowden

NOES

Abbott, Jack
Adam, Shockat
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Aquarone, Steff
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Babarinde, Josh
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brewer, Alex
Brickell, Phil
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burnham, rh Andy
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Cane, Charlotte
Carling, Sam
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Carns, Al
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dance, Adam
Davies, Ann
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Bobby *(Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain)*
Dean, Josh
Denyer, Carla *(Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry)*
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dillon, Mr Lee *(Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain)*
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Dyke, Sarah
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris

Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Farnsworth, Linsey
Farron, Tim
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Franklin, Zöe
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
George, Andrew
Gilbert, Tracy
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Glover, Olly
Goldsborough, Ben
Gordon, Tom
Grady, John
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Harding, Monica
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Heylings, Pippa
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, rh Dan
Jarvis, Liz
Jermy, Terry
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Clive
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Ayoub
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lake, Ben
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
MacDonald, Mr Angus
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Martin, Mike
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mathew, Brian
Mayer, Alex
Maynard, Charlie
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Medi, Llinos *(Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake)*
Midgley, Anneliese
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Mohamed, Iqbal
Moran, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Helen
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Morrison, Mr Tom
Mullane, Margaret
Munt, Tessa
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, Katrina
Murray, Susan
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nash, Pamela
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Ramsay, Adrian
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, rh Steve
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rimmer, Ms Marie *(Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell)*
Robertson, Dave
Rodda, Matt
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sabine, Anna
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Slade, Vikki
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Hannah
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Jamie
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vince, Chris
Voaden, Caroline
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Wilson, Munira
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Noes:
Gregor Poynton and Jake Richards

Question accordingly negatived.

New Clause 22

REPORT ON THE IMPACT OF DEFENCE INVESTMENT PLAN DELAYS

"(1) Within six months of the passage of this Act, the Secretary of State must publish an impact assessment of the delays to the implementation of the Defence Investment Plan.

(2) The report under subsection (1) must include an assessment of the impact of such delays on—

(a) small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) within the UK defence supply chain,

(b) military procurement, equipment capability timelines, and operational readiness, and

(c) the financial sustainability of defence sector businesses.

(3) In preparing the report under subsection (1), the Secretary of State must consult—

(a) representatives of small and medium-sized enterprises in the defence sector, and

(b) the Defence Suppliers Forum.

(4) The Secretary of State must lay a copy of the report under subsection (1) before each House of Parliament."—*(Calum Miller.)*

This new clause requires the Secretary of State to publish and lay before Parliament a one-time report within six months of the Act's passage assessing the impact of Defence Investment Plan delays on military procurement and defence businesses, with particular focus on SMEs.

Brought up.

Question put, That the clause be added to the Bill.

The House divided: Ayes 74, Noes 323.

Division No. 35] [9.27 pm

AYES

Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Aquarone, Steff
Babarinde, Josh
Bennett, Alison
Bowie, Andrew
Braverman, rh Suella
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Cooper, Daisy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Dance, Adam
Davies, Ann
Dean, Bobby *(Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain)*
Dillon, Mr Lee *(Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain)*
Dyke, Sarah
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
George, Andrew
Glover, Olly
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Harding, Monica
Heylings, Pippa
Hobhouse, Wera
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jones, Clive
Kohler, Mr Paul
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lockhart, Carla
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Martin, Mike
Mathew, Brian
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James
Medi, Llinos *(Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake)*
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Murray, Susan
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Sollom, Ian
Stone, Jamie
Swann, Robin
Taylor, Luke
Tice, Richard
Voaden, Caroline
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Zöe Franklin and Tessa Munt

NOES

Abbott, Jack
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Bowie, Andrew
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burnham, rh Andy
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gilbert, Tracy
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia

Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jarvis, rh Dan
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nash, Pamela
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, rh Steve
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rimmer, Ms Marie *(Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell)*
Robertson, Dave
Rodda, Matt
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
Gregor Poynton and Jake Richards

Question accordingly negatived.

Clause 3

DEFENCE HOUSING AND OTHER PROPERTY

Amendment proposed: 11, page 7, line 15, at end insert—

"(4) The Defence Housing Service will operate within a multi-year budget, which must be set out in any Defence Investment Plan published by the Secretary of State.

(5) This must specify both capital (CDEL) and revenue spending (RDEL) on the Defence Housing Service, over the period of the Defence Investment Plan".—*(Mr Francois.)*

This amendment would ensure that Defence Housing Service's budget is set out in any Defence Investment Plan published by the Secretary of State.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 171, Noes 322.

Division No. 36] [9.39 pm

AYES

Amos, Gideon
Anderson, Lee
Anderson, Stuart
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Blackman, Bob
Bowie, Andrew
Brandreth, Aphra
Braverman, rh Suella
Brewer, Alex
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John

Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Davies, Ann
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David *(Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey)*
Dean, Bobby *(Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain)*
Denyer, Carla *(Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry)*
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee *(Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain)*
Dinenage, Dame Caroline
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Dyke, Sarah
Evans, Dr Luke
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Franklin, Zöe
Freeman, George *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Fuller, Richard
Garnier, Mark
George, Andrew
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Gordon, Tom
Grant, Helen
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harding, Monica
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hobhouse, Wera
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hussain, Mr Adnan
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jones, Clive
Jopp, Lincoln
Kruger, Danny
Lake, Ben
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Lumsden, Douglas
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Malthouse, rh Kit
Martin, Mike
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McMurdock, James
Medi, Llinos *(Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake)*
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pochin, Sarah
Pritchard, rh Mark
Raja, Shivani *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Ramsay, Adrian
Rankin, Jack
Reed, David
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Rosindell, Andrew
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Hannah
Spencer, Patrick *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stone, Jamie
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Timothy, Nick
Trott, rh Laura
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Whittingdale, rh Sir John
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wright, rh Sir Jeremy
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
James Wild and
Mr Andrew Snowden

NOES

Abbott, Jack
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burnham, rh Andy
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Craft, Jen
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies, Shaun
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Josh
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Eccles, Cat
Edwards, Lauren
Edwards, Sarah
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Elmore, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Fahnbulleh, Miatta
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gilbert, Tracy
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire

Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jarvis, rh Dan
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacAlister, Josh
Macdonald, Alice *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nash, Pamela
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Norris, Dan *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Nicholas Dakin)*
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osborne, Tristan
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Pollard, Luke
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Prinsley, Peter
Quigley, Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Rand, Mr Connor
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reed, rh Steve
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rimmer, Ms Marie *(Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell)*
Robertson, Dave
Rodda, Matt
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sackman, Sarah
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stainbank, Euan
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Toale, Jessica
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
Whittome, Nadia
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve

Tellers for the Noes:
Gregor Poynton and Jake Richards

Question accordingly negatived.

Schedule 6

Reserve Forces and Cadets Association

Amendment made: 2, page 141, line 16, at end insert—

"Military Lands Act 1892

3A (1) The Military Lands Act 1892 is amended as follows.

(2) In section 14 (powers of Secretary of State to make byelaws as to use of land held for military purposes and securing safety of public)—

(a) in subsection (1), for 'a volunteer corps' substitute 'the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association';

(b) in subsection (3)—

(i) for 'a volunteer corps' substitute 'the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association';

(ii) for 'that corps or in any person as trustee for that corps' substitute 'the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association'.

(3) In section 15 (application of byelaws where right of firing acquired)—

(a) for 'a volunteer corps' substitute 'the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association';

(b) for 'or volunteer corps' substitute 'or the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association'."—*(Louise Sandher-Jones.)*

This amendment makes consequential amendments to the Military Lands Act 1892 as a result of the establishment of the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association by clause 38 of the Bill.

Third Reading

King's consent signified.

9.51 pm

Louise Sandher-Jones: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank everybody who has helped bring to the Bill to this stage, in particular the parliamentary staff, the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel and officials in the Ministry of Defence, especially the Bill team. They have all worked diligently to deliver it. I also thank the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois)

[Louise Sandher-Jones]

and all Members on both sides of the House for their constructive engagement throughout the passage of the Bill. I place on record my particular thanks to my predecessor, my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), for all his hard work and dedication in getting the Bill to this stage.

The first duty of any Government is the defence of the United Kingdom. It is a duty carried out every day by the extraordinary men and women of our armed forces, with the support of their families, who together make immense sacrifices to keep our nation safe. Too often, however, those who serve and the families who stand beside them feel undervalued. This Government were elected on a promise to change that and to renew the nation's contract with those who serve. Through the Bill, we are delivering on that promise.

The Bill not only fulfils our constitutional responsibility to renew the legal basis for the armed forces, but delivers meaningful reform across four key pillars: extending the armed forces covenant legal duty, establishing the Defence Housing Service, expanding our pool of reserves, and reforming the service justice system to boost protections and support for serving personnel.

First, the Bill strengthens the armed forces covenant—the promise that those who serve and their families should face no disadvantage because of that service.

Secondly, the Bill addresses long-standing concerns about defence housing. The quality of accommodation is not a peripheral issue; it is central to recruitment, retention and family life.

Thirdly, the Bill recognises the increasingly vital role that reservists play in modern defence. They are essential to our operational capability. Deployed alongside regulars and reserves, our strategic reserve gives us wider access to the specialist skills we increasingly need in the face of a shifting landscape of threats. The measures in the Bill help to support mobilisation, improve flexibility and ensure that reservists are properly integrated, valued and supported. They will therefore strengthen not only our military capability, but the essential connection between our armed forces and wider society.

Finally, the Bill delivers important reforms to the service justice system. Discipline, fairness and confidence in the system are fundamental to operational effectiveness and morale. The changes set out in the Bill aim to modernise and improve victim support and boost protections for those serving.

Taken together, these four pillars reflect our commitment to improve service life in a practical and lasting way. At a time of growing global uncertainty, we are asking more of our armed forces than ever before, so it is right that we match that ask with action to protect, support and value those who serve.

The Bill not only renews the legal foundation of our armed forces; it renews our national commitment to them. I end by paying tribute to the courage, professionalism and dedication shown by the men and women of our armed forces. We are proud to count them as the finest in the world and, above all, this Bill is for them. I therefore commend the Bill to the House.

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

9.55 pm

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): I start in the same way that the Minister did, by thanking all the Clerks and parliamentary staff who made the Bill come together. They have kept things on track, and it has been impressive to watch.

Given the strength of the political headwinds we are navigating at present, and with little sign of them abating in the months ahead, I want to take a step back from the heat of the moment and reflect on what has been achieved through the passage of this Bill. I hope that those on the Government Benches will recognise that His Majesty's loyal Opposition have approached this legislation as a critical friend, scrutinising its provisions carefully, seeking improvements where they are needed and holding the Government to account where challenge was warranted.

It is in that same constructive spirit that I make my brief remarks this evening, but before I do, I must pay tribute to the former Armed Forces Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), who is no longer in his place. He declared from the outset of the Bill that no one would drone on more about drones, and he was true to his word. As a fellow former regular Royal Marine, I can say with some fondness that his bootneck persistence had a material impact on how this House discusses the changing character of warfare. His resignation speech made clear that we have rather more in common than perhaps either side would care to admit. He may no longer sit at the Ministry of Defence table, but I have a sneaking suspicion that he will return in the not-too-distant future, and I look forward to working with him for the good of our country when he does.

The Bill contains a number of welcome reforms. The extension of the armed forces covenant duty into Whitehall strengthens the principle that supports our service personnel, veterans and their families. That should be felt across the whole of government, building on the previous Conservative Government's achievements in enshrining the covenant into law. I commend Ministers for carrying on that work.

The reforms to the service justice system give victims greater confidence in the process. There are positive steps on accommodation and welfare, though as many hon. and right hon. Members have mentioned today, we will need to see the defence investment plan before we can properly understand how those pledges will be funded. These are set to be meaningful improvements, if they are in the defence investment plan and funded in the way we discussed in Committee, and they deserve recognition. I hope that Ministers will continue to consider what more can be done for veterans. We ask a great deal of those who have served, and our responsibility to them does not end when they leave uniform.

It is precisely that responsibility which leads me—tangentially, Madam Deputy Speaker—to raise the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill. Many of those who served on Operation Banner are in my constituency, home of the Commando Training Centre Royal Marines. They remain in limbo as the Government seek to repeal the protections granted by the previous Governments, and the process itself is becoming the punishment. On that, the former Armed Forces Minister and I are in complete agreement, and I know that many other hon. and right hon. Members across this House are in agreement, too.

He said plainly that this legislation is "unfit for purpose", and I hope his colleagues on the Government Benches will reflect carefully on those words and have the courage to challenge and ensure that this legislation is either amended significantly or thrown out.

I wish to reiterate the clear message from the Leader of the Opposition that with the international order deteriorating at pace, we do not have time for cheap politics. The defence of our nation and the security of our countrymen and women are at stake, and we must make the difficult decisions necessary to give our armed forces what they need to keep us safe. The Leader of the Opposition has made it clear that we would lend our 117 votes to pass welfare reforms, so that the savings could be redirected to the defence budget. That offer stands; anything less would be a catastrophic dereliction of duty. The Prime Minister has rejected that offer—

10 pm

Debate interrupted (Programme Order, 2 June).

The Deputy Speaker put forthwith the Question already proposed from the Chair (Standing Order No. 83E), That the Bill be now read the Third time.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

Town and Country Planning

That the draft Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 27 April, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*(Jade Botterill.)*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

Customs

That the Customs (Tariff and Miscellaneous Amendments) (No. 4) Regulations 2026 (SI, 2026, No. 572), dated 1 June 2026, a copy of which was laid before this House on 1 June, be approved.—*(Jade Botterill.)*

Question put.

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 24 June (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

Income Tax

That the draft Pensions (Abolition of Lifetime Allowance Charge etc) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 1 June, be approved.—*(Jade Botterill.)*

Question agreed to.

ESTIMATES (BACKBENCH BUSINESS COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATION)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 152J),

That this House agrees with the Report of the Backbench Business Committee of 16 June:

(1) That a day not later than 5 August be allotted for the consideration of the following Estimates for the financial year 2026-27: Cabinet Office, in so far as it relates to security and resilience; Northern Ireland Office; and Home Office and Ministry of Justice, in so far as they relate to criminal justice; and

(2) That a further day not later than 5 August be allotted for consideration of the following Estimates for the financial year 2026-27: Department for Culture, Media and Sport, in so far as it relates to sport and youth services; Department of Health and Social Care, in so far as it relates to pharmaceutical procurement; and Department for Work and Pensions, in so far as it relates to spending priorities and performance.—*(Jade Botterill.)*

Question agreed to.

COMMITTEES

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With the leave of the House, I will take the next items of business together.

Ordered,

Education

That Chris Vince be discharged from the Education Committee and Jodie Gosling be added.

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

That Tim Roca be discharged from the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and Ben Goldsborough be added.

Housing, Communities and Local Government

That Andrew Lewin and Sean Woodcock be discharged from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and Mr Jonathan Brash and Ashley Dalton be added.

Justice

That Linsey Farnsworth be discharged from the Justice Committee and Janet Daby be added.

Science, Innovation and Technology

That Dr Lauren Sullivan and Adam Thompson be discharged from the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee and Tom Collins and Maya Ellis be added.

Transport

That Baggy Shanker be discharged from the Transport Committee and Daniel Francis be added.

Treasury

That Luke Murphy be discharged from the Treasury Committee and Ms Julie Minns be added.

Women and Equalities

That David Burton-Sampson be discharged from the Women and Equalities Committee and Richard Quigley be added.

Work and Pensions

That Johanna Baxter and Amanda Hack be discharged from the Work and Pensions Committee and Patrick Hurley and Liz Twist be added.—*(Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)*

British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme

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

10.3 pm

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): First, I would like to declare an interest: I am a former coal miner and a member of the British Coal staff superannuation scheme.

In the 1950s, there were over 700,000 men working in the pits in this country—people like my grandads, great grandad, dad and uncles—in fact, I cannot remember any male member of my family not working down the pit in the 1950s and 1960s. When I went underground for the first time in the 1980s, there were still around 170,000 men working in the coal mine. Now we have probably about 112,000 former miners still living. There are around 38,000 members in the BCSSS, and of course many of them will be women—women who worked in the industry, or widows of men who did. I am no spring chicken—I am getting on a bit—but I am one of the youngest members in the scheme, the average age of a member being about 78 years. One of the questions that we must ask ourselves is: how many members of the scheme will be left in 10 years' time? I reckon there will be half as many as there are today, because members of both schemes—the mineworkers' pension scheme and the BCSSS—are dying every single day. All we are asking for is one simple thing: fairness in the surplus sharing arrangements.

It is hard to explain what it was like to work down a coalmine—there is one other hon. Member in the Chamber, the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery), who knows what it was like—but it is like nothing else. I worked at four different pits in my time as a coalminer. I started off at Sutton colliery and ended up at Welbeck colliery in north Notts. I did not need an alarm clock to get up to go to work on a day shift—I could hear my dad's alarm clock going off. He would wake up and he would get me up, and he would take me to Sutton colliery, where we would do a shift together.

Most sons are proud to follow their dads into the workplace, and it was no different for me. I was very proud to follow my dad into the coalmine. I grew up in a coalmining community, where lads followed their dads into the pit—that was the norm. It was the best education I ever had, to be honest—better than any school or college—because it taught me how working-class people think. Those tough, hard men who worked down the pit were products of where they were born. If they had been born in a village like mine 60, 70, 80 or 90 years ago, there was a high chance that they would end up in a coalmine. Those men did incredibly dangerous jobs to put food on the table, pay the rent or a mortgage, and maybe, if they were lucky, get a week in a caravan in Skegness once a year. That was our life.

Mining was more than just a job. The miners did not stop turning coal once they left the pit, had a bath and went home—they would still be talking about it in the miners' welfare at night-time, or at a football match on a Saturday. It was just a way of life that was bred into the mining communities. There will be ex-miners watching the debate who will know exactly what I am talking about when I say that the experience of working at a pit was different from working in any other industry. There was the smell of the pit head bath, which I can still smell now; the sound of laughter in the bath as hundreds of men stood there naked, washing each other's backs to scrub away the coaldust, the dirt and the grime; and the feeling of your ears popping as you went through the air doors to reach shaft side, before you went underground. What ex-miners really remember is the danger, the noise and the heat, and the sense of unity they had with their fellow working miners. It is the sort of unity we see now among the ex-miners who are still here, fighting for a fairer deal under both pension schemes.

I started in the pit a year after the miners' strike of 1984-85. My dad had been a striking miner. He was on strike because he knew that closing the pits would kill communities. He was right, and 40 years later, we are still recovering. It was the fault of politicians and union leaders that communities were divided. They killed an industry that had served us well in this country. Some men, like my dad, went on strike and others worked. Looking back, I have no problem with either group. I knew men in South Yorkshire who wanted to work but were too scared to go to work, and likewise I knew men in Nottinghamshire who wanted to go on strike, but they thought it was pointless—and it was pointless. Communities of decent, hard-working miners were ripped apart because they were being used by people in high places, who had personal scores to settle. Well, we have politicians and people in high places now who have the chance to make amends for this injustice.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) on securing the debate. I think it is the third time that he has brought the issue before the House, and I congratulate him on that. The issue is a matter of basic dignity and fair play, because this is about the miners' own money, paid in from hard, back-breaking labour. Does he agree that the Minister must commit to scrapping the outdated 50:50 split entirely, and ensure that 100% of future surpluses go directly into the pockets of those elderly pensioners and their widows, some of whom live in my constituency of Strangford, so that absolute, total pension justice can finally be delivered?

Lee Anderson: It is heart-warming to know that former miners are living out their final years in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. He is quite right; they need to live in dignity, and a fairer surplus sharing agreement would allow them to live a more comfortable life. Let us not forget that once they get the extra money, they will spend it in the local community.

I have to give credit to the Government for the investment reserve fund for both schemes. They made a promise, and they stuck to it—fair play. But we must battle on to get more justice for the miners, because they deserve it for the service that they have given to our great country.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is a delight to hear a Nottinghamshire voice; as the hon. Gentleman knows, I was an adopted son of Nottinghamshire for a long time. He is making a case for the nobility of labour, and that case is too rarely made in this place. Working men deserve the same respect as anybody who learned at a university, as I and many people here did. That nobility of labour is personified by the hard-working miners whom he describes, many of whom holidayed in Lincolnshire—and retired there, too, as he well knows.

Lee Anderson: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his wisdom, and he is quite right. I am sure that many of the ex-miners watching this debate will be very encouraged by his intervention.

I have two questions for the Minister. Will he commit to working with the scheme's trustees to ensure that 100% of any surplus is shared with any members and their spouses?

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): There is a reason why this request is actually fair and just. My hon. Friend talks so evocatively about the dangers undertaken by coalminers going underground, and in today's world, that is almost impossible to imagine. That is the key difference. This was one of the most dangerous occupations in the country, but it literally kept the lights on and kept industry moving. For that reason, above all, justice and fairness must surely prevail.

Lee Anderson: Justice and fairness are the two key words in this debate.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): When I was elected nearly two years ago, the very first person to contact me was a BCSSS member. There are about 750 BCSSS members in my constituency, and the campaign has certainly been part of my heart ever since I was elected. I know that many BCSSS members will be watching tonight and listening to the debate, and I am sure that the stories you tell will ensure that they are—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. No "you" or "your".

Jo White: May I take this opportunity to reassure those BCSSS members that, whoever is the next Prime Minister, this issue will continue to be the No. 1 issue for most of my colleagues and the Members here today?

Lee Anderson: Those are very wise words. It is very encouraging to hear that whoever becomes the next PM will treat this issue seriously.

Let me go back to my original request. Will the Minister commit to ensuring that the scheme can share 100% of any future surplus with all members and their spouses from its next valuation? I think that will be in March 2027. Will that be announced in the autumn Budget? That is my first ask.

The trustees have asked if they can be given total control over future surpluses. The scheme has £7.8 billion in assets. That is a lot of money—our money, and we want it back. We are not asking for much.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that whatever we do with the BCSSS surplus, we should do with the mineworkers' pension scheme as well? We must ensure that mineworkers are looked after, and that the surplus goes back to the scheme's members, too.

Lee Anderson: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. Members of both schemes need the justice that they deserve.

I live in a coalmining community; I was born there, and I have lived there all my life. I feel incredibly proud of the contribution that my community has made to this country, but I feel incredibly sad when I look at what has happened since all the pits closed in the '80s and '90s. As I said, that is because of union leaders and politicians in this place who destroyed our industry, and they will never be forgiven for doing that. However, politicians in this place now have a chance to make some amends and give the miners the justice that they deserve.

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): A number of years ago, the Business and Trade Committee came forward with recommendations, which were totally ignored by the Government of the day. The Labour party has been in office for just under two years and has made tremendous strides, which has had a huge impact on members of both schemes. Does the hon. Member agree that is the case?

Lee Anderson: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and I agree 100% with the point he has made.

I thank all Members who have turned up tonight—I would have expected a few more, because there are probably 200 coalfield constituencies in this country. Please, Minister, give justice for the miners.

10.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Chris McDonald): I start by acknowledging the debt of gratitude that our country owes to our miners and our mining communities. I particularly wish to take this opportunity to note that this year marks the 75th anniversary of the Easington pit disaster, where on 29 May 1951, 83 men died following an underground explosion. I grew up in a mining village just down the road from Easington, and the shadow of that day hung over the community for decades. As a former member of the Easington colliery band, I remember players who were members of the band at that time telling me how they played at the funerals of all 83 men. It will be deeply sorrowful indeed at this year's Durham miners' gala to see the Easington colliery band and the colliery banner—no doubt with black drapes solemnly attached—process through the streets of Durham city.

I tell that story to make clear our thankfulness, and my own thankfulness, to those who laboured in our pits, their families and their communities, for they are my family and my community. I want to be clear that every penny in their pension scheme, whether it is the mineworkers' pension scheme or the British Coal staff superannuation scheme, is theirs by right. The withdrawal of funds by previous Governments is an historic injustice, and one that I am determined to put right with the wholehearted support of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. In this, I am guided by the principle that we transfer as much of the money as possible as quickly as we possibly can to those in receipt of a pension, while also ensuring that sufficient funds are available to pay future pensions. It is in balancing those two aspects that I am currently in discussions with the trustees of both the British Coal staff superannuation scheme and the mineworkers' pension scheme. I thank the trustees for their constructive and meaningful engagement on behalf of their members.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his understanding of these issues—which is a deep understanding—and his diligence in considering them.

[Steve Yemm]

I also thank him for meeting me, along with the trustees of both the mineworkers' pension scheme and the British Coal staff superannuation scheme. I hope the Minister will be around for a significant period of time to see this through at the Budget. I think it is very important that he remains in his place.

Chris McDonald: I thank my hon. Friend very much for his good wishes. Perhaps I can return the favour by thanking the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) and my hon. Friends the Members for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) and for Easington (Grahame Morris), who—along with the National Union of Mineworkers and its general secretary, Chris Kitchen—have been diligent representatives of the mineworkers, their families and their communities.

When British Coal was privatised in 1994, the British Coal staff superannuation scheme closed to the accrual of benefits, and remaining employees were given the right to participate in successor schemes. The Government of the day gave the mineworkers a guarantee that the value of the fund would not decrease, ensuring that pensions would continue to be paid while taking half of any surplus on the investment. The other half could be used to improve benefits through bonus payments. That surplus-sharing arrangement was ended in 2015, but future benefits were fixed, ensuring that pensions could be paid, with the aim of returning the reserve to Government in 2033. Since the 2015 changes, the scheme's investments have performed well, building up a reserve of £2.3 billion.

Today, there remain almost 40,000 members of the scheme, the vast majority of whom are receiving their pension. Those 40,000 cover the full spectrum of those who contributed to Britain's mining industry, from former pit workers and supervisors to clerical staff and canteen workers. As of 2024, the average age of members of the scheme was 78, although the hon. Member for Ashfield is obviously much younger than that. The group includes 11,000 widows, with an average age of 84.

As I have mentioned, we owe former mining communities a debt of gratitude for their contribution to national prosperity. We must acknowledge the hard work and sacrifice of coalminers who powered our country for decades. Previous Governments failed to ensure that former British Coal employees got the level of pension that they deserved. Earlier in this debate we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington, and he rightly said that in 2021 the then Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee looked at the mineworkers' pension scheme and recommended that the Government took no further funds from the scheme, transferred the reserve to scheme members and reviewed the surplus sharing arrangements. The Conservative Government of the day declined to accept those recommendations, and I know that the hon. Member for Ashfield would not have agreed with that. While he was unable to persuade his colleagues at the time, he does not need to persuade Labour Ministers in this Government, because we are determined that these historic wrongs will be righted.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) on securing this debate and thank him for his service down the mines. I say that as a coalminer's daughter, and I put on record that I am proud of my dad for the work he did. The Minister mentioned the delays caused by previous Governments' inaction. I am glad that this Government are acting, but every day former miners and mineworkers are passing away. Can he reassure those affected by this injustice in my constituency of Amber Valley that he is working as fast as possible to resolve this issue?

Chris McDonald: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue, and it fits very much with the point I was making about the age profile. I assure her that I am acutely aware of how many miners, miners' widows and other coal workers are dying every day and every week not in receipt of their pension entitlements. That is why I proceeded as quickly as I could with the initial arrangements for the British Coal staff superannuation scheme last autumn. With the co-operation of the trustees, we are proceeding at pace on both schemes.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson) for bringing forward this debate. He will know, because I have spoken to him before about this, that my father-in-law's pit would fall within his constituency. My constituency of North West Leicestershire has about 2,200 coalminers, of whom a big majority are in the BCSSS. I am reassured by the Minister's comments about making sure we get fairness. Can he say some more about how these decisions will be made, and how soon we can get fair justice for our miners?

Chris McDonald: Yes, I will say more about the work I am doing with the trustees and the timing, as my hon. Friend rightly requests. The Government are implementing the recommendations of the BEIS Committee report from 2021 in respect of the British Coal staff superannuation scheme and the mineworkers' pension scheme, and we continue to provide a guarantee to the British Coal staff superannuation scheme, ensuring that scheme members' pensions will always be paid after retirement. We have transferred the £2.3 billion reserve within the scheme for use as a bonus pension. This led to a 41% increase in pension incomes last December, backdated to November 2024. On average, that meant an extra £100 a week for scheme members, and I know that money will be spent in coalmining communities. That is direct support for pensioners and local communities that powered our country for decades.

I am clear, however, that there is still more to do. The Government are discussing proposals for future arrangements for the scheme, including the potential for future surpluses to be used to enhance the benefits for the trustees. The hon. Member for Ashfield asked me if I would commit to working with the trustees, and I can tell him simply: I will, and I am. On timing, he asked me whether the decision will be made at the Budget. I of course leave decisions at the Budget to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, but she is incredibly supportive of the work that I am doing, and I place on the record her support for me in my work and for mining communities.

Lee Pitcher: The Minister talked earlier about putting the wrongs right, and those decisions that will be made in the future will hopefully do just that, but once that is done, we want to make sure that they are future-proofed for everyone, regardless of what happens in the future.

Will the Minister also commit to ensuring that once those wrongs are put right, that will continue, whoever governs in the future?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. You have had more than one intervention, Mr Pitcher.

Chris McDonald: Like my hon. Friend, I sincerely hope that these changes will permanently right the wrongs. It is important that we think carefully about moving as much money as possible out of the scheme, but also ensuring that there are sufficient funds to pay existing pensions.

Let me briefly raise the issue of the mineworkers' pension scheme. The Government are taking a similar approach to both schemes. In 2024 they transferred the mineworkers pension scheme reserve, increasing pensions by 32%, but I want to reassure members of that scheme that I am also considering proposals for future arrangements put forward by their trustees. Those proposals could further enhance members' benefits, and we are seeking to do that as swiftly as possible, while also managing the future funding risks.

Ian Lavery: I should declare an interest, as probably the only deferred member of the mineworkers' pension scheme left in the Commons. There is a perception that the Government treat the BCSSS differently from the MPS. There is a belief that some have received preferential treatment—better treatment than others. When the Minister is negotiating with the trustees from both parties, will he ensure that there is equality of justice, across the board, for members of both schemes?

Chris McDonald: I am extremely pleased that my hon. Friend has raised that issue, because I know that it concerns members of, particularly, the mineworkers' pension scheme and people in those communities. I want to reassure members of the mineworkers' pension scheme that I am endeavouring to ensure that we get as much money out of the scheme as possible. The issue of equality does concern me. However, I am sure my hon. Friend will understand that in the case of both schemes my aim has been to move as much money out as possible, as quickly as possible, for all those members.

I do not see this as a divisive issue between two parts of the mining community, because ultimately both parts of the mining community, whichever scheme they were in, were disadvantaged by Governments of the time. I will take forward the proposals from the trustees, which I hope will further enhance members' benefits. I want to reassure my hon. Friend, and other members of the mineworkers' pension scheme, that my top priority is to reach agreement on how best to enhance these pensions as swiftly as possible, so that we can get that funding into the pockets of scheme members.

I opened my speech with some words about the Easington colliery disaster, and I mentioned the Durham miners gala. There is a miners memorial in Durham cathedral, and the words on that memorial are sung by the cathedral choir at the miners festival service on gala day every year, as they will be this year, in a few weeks' time. I shall be there, playing in the cathedral with my band, and I thought that this might be a suitable moment for us to mark the Easington pit disaster ourselves, here in the House. So I simply say to Members:

"Remember before God the Durham miners who have given their lives in the pits of this county".

Question put and agreed to.

10.28 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 22 June 2026

[Carolyn Harris *in the Chair*]

UK Politics: Pro-Israel Influence

[Relevant documents: First Report of the Foreign Affairs Committee of Session 2024-26, Israel-Palestine conflict, HC 488, and the Government response, HC 1374; and oral evidence taken before the Foreign Affairs Committee on 16 June, 13 May, 22 April and 11 March 2025, on The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Session 2024-26, HC 488.]

4.30 pm

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that "Rules of behaviour and courtesies in the House of Commons" notes:

> "The privilege of freedom of speech in debate…allows us to conduct our debates without fear of outside interference. But it is a freedom which should be exercised responsibly, in the public interest and taking into account the interests of others outside this House."

Additionally, paragraph 21.21 of "Erskine May" states:

> "Good temper and moderation are the characteristics of parliamentary language."

The rules of behaviour further note:

> "There is no hard and fast list of unparliamentary words. Whether something said is a breach of order depends on the context…Any abusive or insulting language used in debate will be required to be withdrawn immediately."

I remind members of the public that they are here to observe proceedings, not to participate or comment. Demonstrations of approval or disapproval are not permitted and any interruption of proceedings will result in removal from the Public Gallery.

The debate is very oversubscribed and there will be limited time. If a Member's name is not on my list to speak, they will not be called. I still expect anyone who is on my list to bob, and any interventions will be minimal, in response and in asking. I hope I have made myself perfectly clear.

4.31 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I beg to move,

> That this House has considered e-petition 752646 relating to pro-Israel influence on UK politics and democracy.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mrs Harris. This is no criticism of my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who introduces the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, but am I alone in feeling distinctly uneasy about this debate? Why is Israel singled out in this way? Why not Gulf countries, Iran, eastern Europe or the USA? The petition is being discussed at a time when the Jewish community are clearly under threat and are suffering numerous hideous attacks. I am not sure I trust the motivation of the petition organisers. I fear the whole thing smacks of an antisemitic conspiracy theory.

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Thank you for your point of order and for notifying me of it in advance, but decisions relating to the publication of e-petitions and the scheduling of e-petition debates properly sit with the Petitions Committee. If you have not already done so, I encourage you to make direct contact with the Chair of that Committee regarding your concerns. I reiterate that, as Mr Speaker and the Deputy Speakers regularly remind Members in the main Chamber, there is a need for "good temper and moderation" in parliamentary language, as set out in "Erskine May" paragraph 21.21. The same rules and courtesies apply in Westminster Hall, and you can be assured that I will exercise all my authority to make sure they are complied with.

John Lamont: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) for his point of order. As he will discover during the course of my contribution, I have a great degree of sympathy with his remarks. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. While I will take interventions later in my speech, I would be grateful if I could develop some of my key points before doing so.

The petition was created by Andy Kalil and signed by over 118,000 people. I begin by making it explicit that I do not support the petition; indeed, I believe that it raises profound concerns, not because it seeks scrutiny of politics or lobbying but because of the way in which it frames those concerns and the sinister narratives upon which it draws. The debate raises important questions not simply about foreign influence or political advocacy but about the boundaries between legitimate political criticism and conspiracy theories that have historically fuelled antisemitism.

Let me also say at the outset that I recognise that many of the people who signed the petition, including the 194 in my constituency, may have done so in good faith. Many will have believed that they were supporting transparency in public life or expressing concern about the events in the middle east. I do not question their motives; however, Parliament has a responsibility not only to consider what is being said but to understand the historical and political context in which it is being said. We have a duty to recognise when language and ideas echo prejudices that have caused immense harm throughout history.

The petition calls for a public inquiry into what it describes as

> "pro-Israel influence on politics and democracy".

That wording matters. The petition does not call for a review of lobbying regulations generally. It does not seek greater transparency about foreign influence from all states; indeed, it cynically overlooks the fact that there are campaigns and lobbies operating in the UK in support of almost all countries in the world. It does not ask for a broad examination of how political advocacy works in the United Kingdom. Instead, it singles out one country and, more importantly, invokes a long-standing allegation that people who support that country exercise hidden or improper influence over our democratic institutions.

That false accusation has a very long and very troubling history. For centuries, at the heart of antisemitism has been the claim that Jews exercise secret control over Governments, political systems, financial institutions,

[John Lamont]

the media or public life. Those ideas have appeared in countless forms throughout history. They have been repackaged and modernised for different generations, but the core allegation remains remarkably consistent: that Jews acting collectively and covertly manipulate political events from behind the scenes.

The most notorious example was the fraudulent document known as "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion", which purported to reveal a Jewish conspiracy to dominate the world. Although repeatedly exposed as a forgery, its pernicious influence was immense. It fuelled antisemitic movements across Europe and beyond, and helped to create an environment in which discrimination, persecution and violence flourished.

Today, such ideas are often expressed through different language, but the ill intent of its practitioners and its harmful consequences for Jews and wider society are all too familiar. Rather than speaking explicitly about Jews, some speak about Zionists, the lobby, hidden influence networks or pro-Israel control. The packaging has changed, but it is no less insidious in its implication.

Like many of my colleagues, I have been accosted while walking outside Parliament by so-called peace activists handing out mock banknotes with "Bank of Zionism" written on them—an insinuation of Jewish control of our politics and economy. It is unmistakably racist, but that is exactly the sort of harmful activity and rhetoric that has become commonplace—the sort of message that today's petition stems from.

That is why concerns have been raised by so many across the political spectrum about the framing of the petition. This is not an attempt to prevent criticism of Israel or shield any Government from scrutiny. The Government of Israel, like every Government in the world, can and should be subject to criticism. Their policies can be challenged. Their decisions can be debated. Their actions can be scrutinised robustly and vigorously. Indeed, that is entirely consistent with democratic debate.

It should be noted that extensive parliamentary time has been spent debating Israel. In the year following Hamas's horrific terror rampage of 7 October 2023, MPs made an astonishing 4,369 contributions in the Chamber relating to Israel. Consider for a second that that is more than double the number of mentions of the national health service, at 1,895. In the same period, Russia's invasion of Ukraine was mentioned 1,449 times, while the appalling suffering unleashed by the war in Sudan warranted only a paltry 225 mentions. The same disproportionate focus on Israel within this place continues to this day.

Presented with those facts, it is undeniable that anyone who claims the existence of a lobby seeking to silence dissent is nothing less than delusional. A reasonable case can be made that the very opposite is true: Israel has been uniquely singled out. Holding Israel to standards that are not applied to any other country is an unmistakable breach of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's working definition of antisemitism, as the former UK special envoy for post-Holocaust issues, Lord Pickles, has warned.

The IHRA definition also as potentially antisemitic identifies allegations concerning Jewish control of Governments, institutions and public life, as well as accusations of dual loyalty directed towards Jewish citizens. The grossly disproportionate focus on Israel, and the hardline language that that has all too often entailed, means, I regret to say, that this mother of all Parliaments has played a dangerous role in the explosion of antisemitism in this country. It is a painful truth, but Lord Austin was right to say so last week in the other place.

As part of my preparation for the debate, I spoke to academics from the Royal United Services Institute who have considered the extent of foreign influence in the United Kingdom. The clearest and most substantiated concerns identified by successive Governments, parliamentary Committees and security services relate to hostile state activities from countries such as Russia and China. That makes it all the more striking that the petition singles out Israel, and frames its concern in language that echoes long-standing conspiracy theories about hidden influence.

There is a clear difference between criticising a Government and advancing allegations that supporters of that Government exercise covert influence over democratic institutions. The concern is about not simply what the petition says but what it implies. When political outcomes are routinely attributed to hidden influence rather than democratic choice, trust in democratic institutions is eroded. Conspiracy theories weaken our democracy, encourage suspicion and promote division. That is true regardless of who the alleged conspirators are, but when those allegations reinforce one of the oldest prejudices in human history, the consequences are particularly serious.

We should also remember that conspiracy theories do not exist in a vacuum. History teaches us that conspiracy theories portraying Jews as powerful, manipulative and disloyal have often preceded discrimination, exclusion and violence. That is not a theoretical concern. At a time when antisemitism is rising across many parts of society, we must be especially careful not to lend legitimacy to narratives that reinforce such ideas.

The context matters. The Jewish community in Britain has experienced a sustained increase in antisemitic incidents in recent years. Many British Jews report feeling less secure than they have for decades, and synagogues, schools and community institutions continue to require significant security measures.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I briefly declare an interest: the hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) and I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group on British Jews. I applaud my hon. Friend for the robust way in which he is introducing the debate. Does he agree that, given global events, our Jewish constituents are justified in feeling uneasy, and that we must absolutely ensure that we do not import those conflicts on to the streets of our country?

John Lamont: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. Against a backdrop of the Jewish community asking for extra protections, it is entirely understandable that a petition built around allegations of hidden pro-Israel influence has generated such deep anxiety. Many British Jews hear in that language echoes of accusations that have been directed at their community for generations. We should listen carefully to those concerns.

That does not mean that public life should be beyond scrutiny—quite the opposite. Transparency is essential, foreign influence should be taken seriously, lobbying should be transparent, political donations should be properly regulated and Parliament should remain vigilant against inappropriate influence from any source, but those principles must be applied consistently. If concerns about lobbying exist, they should be addressed through the established mechanisms that already exist.

The challenge for all Members today is to ensure that the debate does not inadvertently amplify the very narratives that have caused such concern. We must expose those narratives, not to amplify but to challenge conspiracy theories. Parliament is at its strongest when it combines robust democratic debate with moral clarity. As legislators, we have a responsibility to understand that hatred evolves and adopts new language to advance old prejudices. We must now respond appropriately.

If there is one positive outcome of today's debate, I hope it will be that there is a greater public understanding of how antisemitism can manifest in modern political discourse, particularly through conspiracy theories concerning power, influence and loyalty. We should use this opportunity not to legitimise those narratives but to expose them.

This should not be a partisan issue. Members from every party should be able to agree that legitimate political disagreement must never rely upon, excuse or reinforce antisemitic narratives. We should be collectively clear that allegations of covert Jewish or pro-Israel control of politics are not legitimate political criticism; they are rooted in a tradition of antisemitic conspiracy theory that has caused immense harm throughout history. Parliament should reject those narratives.

The Prime Minister and the Government have rightly committed to a whole-of-society approach to tackling antisemitism. This debate is therefore about more than a petition; it is an early test of their resolve to confront antisemitism wherever it appears. I hope the Minister will use his contribution to make it clear that conspiracy theories concerning Jewish or pro-Israel control of politics have no place in democratic discourse.

I hope that Members from all parties will stand together in defence of democratic debate, free from prejudice and conspiracy. Allegations of hidden pro-Israel or Zionist control of British democracy draw upon a tradition of conspiracy thinking that has poisoned public life for generations. Parliament should reject those ideas, and send a clear message that antisemitic narratives, whether old or newly repackaged, will find no home in this Parliament of the United Kingdom.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. The clock displays are broken, but we are working on fixing them. I will notify Members by coughing just before their three minutes are up.

4.46 pm

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I refer Members and the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Let us be clear: scrutinising foreign influence is not, in itself, a problem. Any healthy democracy should look hard at lobbying, donations, pressure groups and influence campaigns wherever they come from. That is not and should not be in question, but it is exactly my concern about how this debate is framed. They should be scrutinised wherever they come from.

If this is about foreign influence in general, let us have that conversation properly; if it is about transparency in lobbying, let us have that conversation, too; but if the concerns keep landing on Israel specifically, more than they do on other countries, as has been mentioned, it is worth pausing and asking why that might be. There is something deeply uncomfortable about the idea that, out of nearly 200 countries, it is the world's only Jewish state that needs a special parliamentary inquiry into hidden influence. I gently note that this type of framing has a very long history, and it is not always an easy one.

Jewish people have, at different points over the centuries, faced accusations of secretly controlling Governments, finance or politicians from behind the scenes. I have heard versions of those accusations, sometimes about me personally. I am not suggesting that everyone who supports this debate has that intention, but it is worth being honest about the fact that the framing echoes something older, more sinister and more troubling.

Given that more than 100,000 people have signed this petition, I hope that the Minister considers including something educational in his response, just so that people have the full context. I also push back on the idea that Israel somehow escapes scrutiny in this House. As the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) said, it is one of the countries we debate the most regularly.

Whether it is on military action, settlements, Gaza, sanctions, trade, arms exports or the recognition of Palestine, I have criticised Israeli Government policy myself. That is exactly how it should be. We should feel free to criticise any Government's actions—British, American or otherwise. Criticism is healthy. Where there is genuine evidence of wrongdoing, it should of course be looked into, as it would be for any country. I just ask that we hold to the same standard on Israel as we would for anywhere else, rather than treating it as a special case.

Most of us are in this job because we believe in something—our values, our constituents, our party—or simply honest disagreements with one another. I know that I cannot be bought and I never will be, so I ask that we try to avoid both naivety and overreaction here. Let us support the principle of transparency being consistently applied to every country in the same way, and let us be mindful, so we do not end up unintentionally leaning on older, uncomfortable and wrong narratives.

4.49 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I hope, Mrs Harris, that anything I say here today will not cause you to cough or choke, but I want to be very clear that the motion we are discussing is not about lobbying and it is not about the influence of Israel on politics. This is yet another angle of the antisemitism that we are experiencing in this country, especially driven by the left.

As other speakers have already pointed out today, it is a very dangerous idea that somehow or other Jews control politics in our country. We have seen examples throughout history, from when Jews were accused of co-ordinating a program of poisoning wells that caused the black death, to the Holocaust, when Hitler accused

[Sammy Wilson]

Jewish influence of causing Germany's defeat in the first world war, and therefore claimed that it had to be dealt with. We have seen the impact of antisemitism in this country. We only have to look at what happened in Golders Green, in Manchester and in other attempted bombings of synagogues to see the threat that Jews feel in this country, and to know that the poison of antisemitism has an impact on people's lives.

I agree with other speakers that if there is a secret Jewish lobby seeking to influence Government in the United Kingdom, it is not being very successful, because Israel has been the most scrutinised country and their Government the most scrutinised Government here in Parliament. In the House and in Westminster Hall, almost every week we have questions, urgent questions, written questions, statements, debates and so on about Israel. Some of our own domestic affairs, such as unemployment, inflation and the health service, receive less scrutiny, so to say that somehow or other the Jewish lobby has influenced the direction of our politics just does not withstand examination.

Israel is the one of the few democracies in the middle east. We should debate the positive contribution it makes to our country, in terms of help with security, research and development in health, and in other ways. We benefit from that collaboration and that research, and that is what we should emphasise today.

4.53 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mrs Harris. I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on his opening speech.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) said, there is absolutely nothing wrong with engaging in deep scrutiny of the things that may or may not influence our politics, but it should not just be focused on Israel. China, Iran, Russia and Belarus are all bad-faith actors that seek to change the way we do things in this country, yet there often seems to be very little attention given to them.

That worries me, for two reasons. For those who do not know, my wife is Jewish. I am not "declaring" that, because it is not something that I need to declare, but it is relevant for the purpose of this conversation. She is a British Jew, a British citizen. She had the audacity in a previous life to stand for election and get elected, and she was a much better MP than I ever will be. [Hon. Members: "Hear, Hear."] *[Laughter.]* To fund that election campaign, my wife took a donation from a British citizen who happened to be Jewish. What happened? Her name appeared on a list propagated by the Green party's deputy leader, Mothin Ali—it continues to be propagated to this day, by the way—which talks about politicians being

"bought and sold for Israel."

My wife was not alone on that list. There are also members of the current Cabinet, members of the shadow Cabinet and Members of the House of Lords—individuals whose only contribution has been to try to make a difference in society. They are British citizens being funded by British citizens. The only difference is that the British citizens offering those donations are Jewish.

Unfortunately, that is where debates such as this one lead to in society. When someone expresses a pro-Israel position, one starts to ask, "Why do you think that? Are you Jewish? What is your opinion on Israel?" before a conversation with them about anything else can start. It drives debate to a place where we are sceptical of people who are Jewish, because they might have some tenuous link to a country far away. What does that do? That stops Jewish people wanting to participate in any form of public life. I know that to be true, because other Jewish people tell me that, and I have seen it in conversations around my dinner table.

I was in a synagogue in Manchester on the day that the Heaton Park synagogue was attacked. I saw British citizens who were scared—scared because of the pervasive narrative that has been allowed in this country that because Israel is a Jewish state, Jewish people are rightful targets for attack and scrutiny disproportionate to the impact that they have on society. Although I welcome any debates that allow us genuinely to scrutinise the impact that foreign Governments have on this country, the fact that we are yet again spending all our time talking about just one—the only Jewish state—says more about the petitioner than about the people here to debate it.

4.55 pm

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): May I start with a preamble? It is important to say that this is not about the Jewish community; it is about the state of Israel. We must be careful in our words and ensure that we do not conflate the two.

It is always said that the strength of a nation's alliance is measured by how much it can endure. For two years, this Government have supported the state of Israel through the unimaginable: genocide in Gaza, illegal settlement building in the occupied west bank, and even war in Iran. It is also said that the power of a lobby group is measured by how far a Government can be pushed beyond the limits of policy making. I think it is fair to say that for millions up and down this country, the Government's approach to Israel has defied the most basic logic, justice and humanity. Continued arms sales amid mass extermination, the weaponisation of terrorism law to silence dissent, the welcoming of wanted war criminals on the steps of 10 Downing Street—with every decision this Government have made, it is not only reasonable to ask questions about political influence in Britain, but necessary.

This is not about Jewish communities or Jewish identity, and it is not about denying anyone the right to advocate for Israel, Palestine or any other state. Lobbying is part of our democracy, but when such practices are shrouded in secrecy while shifting huge sums of money, we must ask, "Are this Government truly committed to cleansing our politics of foreign influence, or are they just concerned with blocking the foreign donations they do not get?"

This is about more than simply election funds. It is about access and influence. Anyone who claims that these donors receive nothing in return is being naïve. The transactional nature of donations applies no less to those in the highest echelons of our democracy. Just this year, Labour Friends of Israel, which funded many Cabinet members, was reported to the Electoral Commission over concerns about opaque funding arrangements.

Ministers in this Government publicly identify themselves as members of that organisation, yet it is not registered as a Members' association, and therefore avoids the further disclosure requirements that accompany that status. That cannot be right.

More troubling still is the question of direct support from the Israeli state. Electoral records show that the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs has provided financial support to UK parliamentarians. That must be transparent.

4.58 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairing, Mrs Harris, but I take no pleasure whatsoever in speaking in the debate on this petition. Its manipulative title fits the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism, as Lord Pickles has clearly stated.

I must register my interests. I am, of course, a Jewish MP—perhaps the only Jewish MP in the Chamber this afternoon. I am a member of Labour Friends of Israel and of the all-party parliamentary group on British Jews, and a representative on the Board of Deputies of British Jews.

Shame on those who have orchestrated this regurgitation of antisemitic tropes. It is ancient just as it is predictable. In 1190, 57 Jews were slaughtered in Bury St Edmunds, then Norwich, Lincoln and York. Our country has a terrible record of anti-Jewish hatred, and all the Jews of England were expelled in 1290. Few people know that. Antisemitism is not new in this country.

Just think a little about the title of the petition:

"pro-Israel influence on UK politics and democracy".

It is familiar; we have seen it before. In the '20s and '30s, German antisemites and Nazis argued that the Weimar Republic had become verjudet—"Jewified". In 1941, Nazi propaganda depicted Jews as secretly manipulating London, Washington and Moscow. The idea that Jews exercise hidden influence over politics, democracy and society is not new; it is an ancient conspiracy theory repeatedly used to isolate Jews, undermine social cohesion and stoke hatred.

Let me tell the Chamber what really threatens democracy: the funding of political parties by billionaire expats; Elon Musk's claims that civil war in Britain is inevitable; the vice-president of the United States blaming the terrible murder of Henry Nowak on mass migration; Russian interference in democracies across Europe; and alleged Iranian links to a number of recent attacks on Jewish institutions, synagogues and communities—yet here we are, forced to debate Israel's role in our politics and democracy. Antisemitism is an ancient hatred repeatedly repackaged to distract people from their real grievances. Once again, it is rearing its head in Britain, reaching appalling levels on our streets, in our workplaces and online.

This debate is making those divisions worse, and the terrible conflict in the middle east is no justification for it. Citizens of conscience march with a genuine and heartfelt sense of outrage at the war, and I respect that, but there are those who seek to intimidate. Hon. Members should try being a law-abiding Jew in a British town centre on a Saturday afternoon—for too many Jewish citizens, public spaces are not safe.

Let us come to our senses. We must reject antisemitism in all its forms, reject conspiracy theory dressed up as political analysis, and defend a politics based on evidence, decency and truth.

5.1 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. This motion is antisemitic in its very motivation and at its core. As such, we should utterly reject it. Hon. Members have spoken brilliantly and passionately about that, but we can turn that terrible negative into a positive.

The motion asks us to talk about the influence of Israel on democracy. Democracy thrives when citizens are healthy, so maybe we should celebrate the incredible brilliance and influence of Israeli scientists, entrepreneurs and those specialising in medical research and artificial intelligence applications. Their work and innovations, whether they live in the state of Israel or somewhere else such as London, have an incredibly positive influence on the success and health of us all.

We should say that we want more of that success and brilliance—more of that innovation and more partnerships with brilliant Israeli scientists who can share their knowledge and understanding. I want more entrepreneurs from Israel listing their companies on joint listings, preferably on the UK stock exchange rather than somewhere else. I want more AI experts from Israel sharing that best practice and knowledge for the benefit of all of us.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Does the hon. Gentleman believe that we need more of the AI weapons that Israel has used to shoot at children's genitalia in Gaza?

Richard Tice: The use of AI across society, and its applications in all industries, are changing rapidly, but I gently suggest to the hon. Gentleman that the best way to guarantee peace is to prepare for war so that our opponents respect us.

To conclude, Israel has so much to offer as the only democracy in the middle east and we should work closely with it. As other hon. Members have said, there is a massive difference between criticising politicians who may be elected in a democracy—whether in Israel or elsewhere—which is completely legitimate, and criticising a state. I want to celebrate the influence of incredible entrepreneurs, scientists, technicians and cyber-security specialists in Israel, from the Jewish community, and in our great nation—and I want to have more of that, not less.

5.4 pm

Tahir Ali (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. This debate touches on a principle fundamental to our democracy: British democracy is by the British people, for the British people and accountable to the British people. No foreign Government, no matter who they are, should abuse our system for privileges at the cost of British interests.

Historically, many foreign actors have tried to meddle in our politics in their own interests. Over the past decade, the Israeli Government have been guilty of exactly that: meddling in our politics in the interests of

[Tahir Ali]

what is ultimately a foreign nation. This is not a debate about international relations, foreign policy or the Palestine-Israel conflict, nor is it a debate about the right of British citizens to advocate for their views.

To make matters more apparent, in 2017, an Israeli official employed at the London embassy was recorded by an undercover journalist expressing his desire to "take down" pro-Palestine British politicians. The Israeli official, Shai Masot, expressed his goal to "take down" ex-Minister Alan Duncan because of his criticism of Israel's illegal settlement expansion.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government have not gone far enough to challenge the expansion of illegal settlements? Does he agree that too many red lines have been crossed, and that the Government have sat on their hands and done very little to change that?

Tahir Ali: Although I agree with my hon. Friend's sentiments, this debate is about lobby groups, and especially the Israeli Government.

Pro-Israeli lobby groups have paid hundreds of thousands in political donations in the UK. The amount of evidence, which I will refrain from sharing due to limited time, is countless. If we believe in democracy, we must demand scrutiny; if we value our sovereignty, we must demand accountability; and if we believe in British independence, we must ensure that no foreign state, whether Israel, China, Russia, Iran, India or any other country, is permitted undue influence over our institutions. I urge the Government to strengthen the lobbying regulations, improve the disclosure requirements and review the relationships between foreign Governments and parliamentary bodies. British policy must be determined by British interests, British law and British democratic accountability.

In January 2025, Lord Austin was reappointed as the UK trade envoy to Israel. Last October, it was revealed that Government officials had urged Ministers to allow him to pursue a visit in May 2025, yet that came after the Foreign Secretary's announcement in the same month that the UK would suspend free trade agreement talks with Israel in response to its blockade of Gaza and its attacks on hospitals. Despite the Government saying that the trade envoy would not meet any representatives of—

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. I call Iqbal Mohamed.

5.8 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate. I join my friend, the hon. Member for Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley (Tahir Ali), in condemning antisemitism in all forms, anywhere. My remarks referring to Israel refer to the Israeli Government's actions and organisations' interactions with parliamentarians in this place.

In June 2024, Declassified UK revealed that 13 of the then 25 members of the Labour Cabinet received hundreds of thousands in donations from pro-Israel donors, and that some 180 of Britain's 650 MPs had accepted such funding during their political careers. That is one in four elected Members.

Gareth Snell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Iqbal Mohamed: I will continue. The 255 of my constituents who signed this petition, and the 118,000 people who signed from across the country, would like to hold our Government and our system to account for these donations. What are they for?

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman made a big claim about "pro-Israel donors"; could he clarify what he actually meant by that? Does he have a particular definition about what that actually means—who those donors were and the purpose for which he believes that money was given?

Iqbal Mohamed: My definition would be donors who turn a blind eye to blatant violations of Israeli law, British law or international law.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): Will the hon. Member give way?

Iqbal Mohamed: I will continue because of time.

Britain claims to defend its democracy from foreign interference. We rightly sanction Russia for undermining democratic institutions, and warn about the threats from China and Iran to our political system, yet when substantial evidence of foreign influence concerns Israel, our principles of transparency, scrutiny and accountability appear to vanish.

Given the lack of time, I will give just one example. Elbit Systems, Israel's largest arms manufacturer, operates 16 sites across the UK and supplies around 85% of Israel's drones and military ground equipment—systems that have been widely used during Israel's genocide in Gaza. Declassified UK reported that in December 2024, representatives of Elbit Systems met Home Office officials in a private meeting, with details withheld under FOI exemptions. Elbit Systems benefits from substantial British defence contracts. The defence industry cannot become a shield for privileged and secret political access without accountability.

No amount of democracy should exempt a state from scrutiny, no lobbying should be beyond accountability, and no Government should let political convenience override the principles of democratic integrity.

5.11 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I agree wholeheartedly that conflating a people's religion with a Government's actions is totally unacceptable. Criticising the state of Israel and its actions, especially with its present Government, is not antisemitic, otherwise the bombing of Iraq or Afghanistan would be Islamophobic.

I want to concentrate my speech particularly on Elbit, which supplies around 85% of Israeli military drones and land-based military equipment. As the International Court of Justice considers allegations of genocide, and while the ICC has issued arrest warrants against the Israeli Prime Minister and former Minister

of Defence, Elbit continues to profit from the genocide in Gaza. United Nations investigators have documented the repeated use of armed quadcopter drones against Palestinian civilians. One of those systems, the Lanius drone, is manufactured by Elbit.

Elbit has a significant presence in my city of Leicester through its manufacturing and technology operations. The company generates billions of dollars in annual revenue while supplying the military equipment used in a conflict that is subject to allegations of genocide before the International Court of Justice. That is why parliamentary scrutiny of its access to Ministers is essential.

It is deeply alarming that freedom of information disclosures reveal repeated meetings between Elbit executives and the Home Office. Briefing papers show that Ministers were preparing to reassure the company in response to Palestine Action protests. They also reveal that Home Office officials had been in contact with the police regarding those protests, while another meeting was scheduled to include a representative from the Attorney General's Office.

It is disturbing that, while Ministers meet privately with executives from a company whose weapons are alleged to have been used in acts now under scrutiny before the international courts, those who want to challenge those activities through protest increasingly face being associated with terrorism. While the suppliers of war and genocide are granted meetings with Ministers, those opposing the machinery of war risk being treated as a threat. Most troubling of all, the section of the ministerial briefing entitled "Past lobbying" was redacted. If there is nothing to conceal, why are the details of previous lobbying being withheld from Parliament and the public?

My question for the Minister is straightforward: why was an arms manufacturer being reassured by Government Departments while international legal proceedings over genocide in Gaza continued? What safeguards exist to ensure that commercial relationships with any foreign defence contractors do not influence policing, prosecutorial independence or British foreign policy? Transparency is not optional; if Ministers are confident that those relationships are appropriate, they should have no objection to placing them fully in the public domain.

5.14 pm

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I will begin, as many have, by associating myself with the remarks of the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont). In the interests of time, I will skip over the many things on which I agreed with him and talk about some of our role as leaders.

What I am about to say is not meant as a partisan attack. I am just as angry about incidents of antisemitism in my own party as I am when I see it in others. On that note, and on this day in particular, I pay tribute to the Prime Minister, who rooted out the poisonous antisemitism that had taken hold of our party. However, the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) talked about choosing our words carefully before going straight into the conflation of the actions of the Israeli Government with the Jewish people. There was an attack on Labour Friends of Israel, which receives no money whatsoever from the Israeli Government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) referred to a list. I have also been on that infamous list. I am proud that one of those donors is a big supporter of refugee rights around the world. He just happens to be Jewish. How many conversations have I had with him about Israel and the actions of the Israeli Government? Zero. The idea that any of us is somehow having their strings pulled by anyone is an absolute disgrace.

Ayoub Khan: Will the hon. Member give way?

David Taylor: I will not, unless the hon. Member wants to apologise for some of his remarks.

Where do we even begin with some of the things that we have heard in the Chamber in recent years? In relation to the ban on Maccabi Tel Aviv fans, one Member referred to a stunt by an MP representing the Zionist lobby. Another MP referred to Israel's "thirst" for the "blood of innocent civilians" in a clear antisemitic trope. Another referred to the "blood-soaked tentacles" of the Israel Defence Forces—another clear antisemitic trope.

That is before we get to political parties outside the Chamber, which are not yet represented in this House in any decent numbers. I am referring to the Green party, and specifically to its deputy leader, who talked about supporting the right of indigenous people to fight back on 7 October, the day the attacks happened. He has never apologised properly for those remarks, if at all, and it has since been revealed that he actively supports members of his party who have rightly been suspended for antisemitism.

We leaders have a responsibility to be careful with our words and not stir up hatred in the community, among which is a very fragile Jewish community reeling from ever-more antisemitic attacks. In the case of the Golders Green attacks, there was serious injury and death, too.

5.17 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for setting the scene incredibly well and for giving us a chance to participate.

I rise to speak on a matter that touches the very core of our democratic values, foreign policy and historical obligations as a nation. The Minister and hon. Members know that I have never been one to hide my views on this issue. I stand here proud to say that I am a friend of Israel, whether in this Chamber, walking the streets of Newtownards in my constituency or speaking to believers across our great United Kingdom. I declare my interest as a friend of Israel. Of course, saying that does not mean that I blindly support or defend every action of that nation—no nation is infallible. I am not infallible, Mrs Harris, and neither are you, with great respect—none of us in this room is. I do not agree with all the things that Israel has done.

We hear a lot of noise in the media. We hear sinister undertones and talk about undue influence and lobbying in UK politics by the pro-Israel community, but I can highlight exactly what that influence is: shared democratic values. Israel is a lone beacon of democracy, freedom of speech and the rule of law in a deeply unstable region

[Jim Shannon]

of the world. When British citizens and British parliamentarians stand up to defend Israel, they are defending the very principle upon which this mother of Parliaments was built. The idea of democracy is not as clear anywhere else in the middle east as it is in Israel, which puts that principle to use.

The Democratic Unionist party, of which I am very proud to be a Member, has always stood four-square with the Jewish community in Northern Ireland. We know only too well what it is like to see a democratic state subjected to the scourge of terrorism. We know what it is like to see a legitimate Government forced to defend their citizens from those who wish to wipe them off the map—that is Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis. We know all too well the experience of living through terrorist war and seeing acts of thuggery whitewashed, while being held to impossible standards. As I said, Israel is not perfect, but at least it is held to account by all of us and by itself.

When my constituents ask me why the UK must maintain robust, iron-clad diplomatic and security ties with Israel, I tell them that it is because our safety is intertwined. Our intelligence sharing saves lives right here on the streets of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, in Israel and across the world. Let us be completely honest: the real threat to our democracy comes not from those advocating for an ally, but from the terrifying antisemitism on our university campuses and streets that masks itself as political debate. It comes from foreign adversaries who want to fracture our alliances and see western democracies fall.

I urge the Minister to send a clear message from our Government, reaffirming that the relationship of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland with Israel is not a matter of political expediency or bowing to pressure but a fundamental commitment to a fellow democracy and a friend to this nation. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has shown that we stand for what is right, and Israel's ability to exist, which is ultimately at stake, is right and proper. I will continue to stand for that while not being unduly influenced by anything other than belief.

5.20 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mrs Harris. It is critical that we do not let fair concerns about weaknesses and loopholes in our political system spill over or give any credence to ancient, dangerous and poisonous antisemitic conspiracy theories. Of course, it is possible to fairly and rightly criticise the actions of the Government of Israel, but let us be very clear: the dangerous antisemitic trope that British Jewish people are somehow puppets for a foreign state, or that there is a secret conspiracy to exercise undue control over the Government, must be actively called out. I robustly and unequivocally reject any such antisemitic conspiracy theories. No one should use concerns about foreign interference to stir hate or to smear and stigmatise the Jewish community.

Our democracy is under pressure from a structural failure that has been building for years. We have allowed money, opacity and foreign influence to creep into British politics, and successive Governments have been far too slow to act. The most recent Conservative Government bear a particular responsibility. They were relaxed about Russian money flooding into the UK, they weakened the independence of the Electoral Commission and they presided over a culture of cronyism and sleaze that corroded public trust. That is not ancient history; it is the recent record, and it matters when we ask why too many people feel that British politics is no longer conducted in their interests. More than 118,000 people signed this petition, including 154 people in my Hazel Grove constituency.

The Liberal Democrats have long believed that protecting our democracy must be treated as a national security priority. The first and best way to safeguard that democracy is by ensuring transparency. We have long campaigned for reform of political finance and for protecting our democracy from any undue or opaque foreign influence. We have called for real change, including a cap on political donations—no matter where they are from—and a publicly searchable database of all online political advertising. Tweaking around the edges will not do. We also need a strengthened Electoral Commission with genuine enforcement powers, including higher fines for breaches of political finance law.

While we welcome much of what is in the Representation of the People Bill and feel that it is a step in the right direction, it is but a step forwards—we need a leap. The Bill is an opportunity to make genuine, transformational change to the strength and transparency of our democracy. It is an opportunity to close the loopholes that allow foreign billionaires and oligarchs to buy political access in this country. We Liberal Democrats will push hard for those changes as the Bill progresses through Parliament.

Our democracy should not be for sale to hostile states, foreign oligarchs or any outside interest that places its own agenda above the interests of the people who we in this place are elected to serve. Our solution must be not to play geopolitical whack-a-mole but to fortify structurally our democracy. Seven Prime Ministers in a decade might suggest that it is more than just the wrong people getting the keys to No. 10. Our problems are just a little more structural than that.

British people deserve fairness, transparency and a democracy that they can believe in. Politics affects us all, and the Government should do all they can to protect democracy for all our communities. That includes pushing back robustly against antisemitism wherever it is, including in the House.

5.24 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Harris. We are here to debate e-petition 752646, which calls for a public inquiry into what the petitioners term "pro-Israel influence" on UK politics, party policies and public debate. I thank the petitioners for raising concerns about foreign influence, transparency and public confidence in democratic institutions, but I share the misgivings of my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) about the apparent motivations of some the petition's supporters.

Although Parliament must always take seriously any issue that touches on the integrity of UK democracy, the evidence that has been put forward does not support the allegations. There is clearly deep public concern

about the conflict in Gaza and the west bank, and that strength of feeling runs across communities and all parts of the country. As the hon. Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) made clear, there is nothing wrong with criticising the political decisions of any Government, including that of Israel—I have certainly done so myself in relation to illegal settlements—but it is concerning when Israel is singled out for scrutiny in a way that no other country is.

When donors who happen to be well—

Iqbal Mohamed: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mike Wood: The hon. Gentleman did not have the courtesy to give way to me, but I will give way to him.

Iqbal Mohamed: I apologise for not giving way earlier. On the point about Israel being singled out, the Rycroft review focused specifically on Russia and China, and did not mention Israel once. It was correctly carried out and nobody had any objections. What is the difference?

Mike Wood: The difference is that every day of every week of every year there are concerted attacks from Russia and China on our democratic system, on communities around the country and across online media, to try to set one part of our community against another, and they do not care who wins.

When the hon. Gentleman spoke earlier about donors—mostly about donors to the Labour party, but I know there are donors to other parties—he described them as pro-Israel because they happened to be Jewish and had not questioned the actions of the Israeli Government. It is hard to find a clearer breach of the international definition of antisemitism than to hold Jewish people in the UK accountable for the actions of the Israeli Government, which is what the he appeared to do.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): Anti-Israel hatred creates a scourge of antisemitism against our Jewish community. They suffer for doing nothing other than being British Jews who happen to live in this country, and are caught in the middle of the conflict for no other reason than their ethnic and religious background. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is simply unfair and racist?

Mike Wood: I could not agree more strongly. Let me be entirely unambiguous from the outset: His Majesty's Opposition firmly reject the premise of the petition and any suggestion that Israel—or any British organisations expressing solidarity with it—represent a malign or covert influence on British politics and democracy.

Jim Shannon: I commend the hon. Gentleman, who is speaking exceptionally well, for his very strong words. Does he agree that the Government were right to take action against Palestine Action? The Government went to the Court of Appeal and won that case. Palestine Action has stepped over the line of what is acceptable when it comes to protesting, so it should be condemned for being an illegal organisation.

Mike Wood: The hon. Gentleman gets to the heart of the issue, as he so often does. Protest stops being peaceful protest when it involves using weapons to harm and intimidate those who hold a different view. To suggest that open and transparent advocacy by British citizens and established communal organisations constitutes an improper or malign conspiracy is not only factually incorrect but treads into deeply troubling territory. As I have said, the petition is not supported by credible evidence. Instead, it invites vague suspicion of covert—

Ayoub Khan: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mike Wood: I have given way a number of times; I need to make a little progress.

The petition invites vague suspicion of covert, improper activity by unnamed organisations and we must call it out for what it is. The use of terms such as "the Israel lobby" to describe British Jewish communal bodies combines unfounded claims of disproportionate backroom influence with the ancient insidious trope that Jewish citizens are inherently disloyal or untrustworthy.

Ayoub Khan: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mike Wood: I give way briefly.

Ayoub Khan: The hon. Member is clearly very emotional in delivering his points. Would he agree that, whichever nation is concerned, our responsibility to the millions of British citizens is to be transparent? Would he support transparency when it comes to donations of any kind?

Mike Wood: Of course. One of the reasons why those donations have been highlighted and publicised as thoroughly as they have is that they are recorded and published. I myself have not taken any donations to which that applies, but there is nothing inherently wrong with them.

The Leader of the Opposition has repeatedly warned that we are witnessing a deeply concerning normalisation of rhetoric towards British Jews that would once have been unthinkable. Far too often, individuals use their political views on Israel as a convenient cover to display blatant antisemitism. We cannot allow a moral and political vacuum to be filled by a hatred of Jews. We must be vigilant that parliamentary procedures, including the e-petition system, are not inadvertently weaponised to legitimise those harmful tropes.

Our political system is built on open, transparent advocacy. Members of this House regularly engage with a wide variety of groups to understand complex international issues, and we recognise and value the long-standing, transparent activities of groups such as Conservative Friends of Israel and Labour Friends of Israel, which work openly to foster strong bilateral ties, trade and security co-operation between the United Kingdom and a democratic ally.

At the same time, our parliamentary democracy benefits from a diverse range of perspectives. Organisations such as the Conservative Middle East Council and other advocacy groups play an invaluable role in ensuring that Members of Parliament receive a comprehensive understanding of the region. They work diligently to ensure that parliamentarians receive detailed information and insights from a range of viewpoints, including pro-Palestinian and pro-Arab perspectives. That is how healthy, transparent democracy should operate: through open debate, visible briefings and competing arguments presented clearly in the light of day. There is no secrecy here, no hidden hand and certainly no malign infiltration.

[Mike Wood]

While this petition asks us to chase shadows and investigate legitimate domestic advocacy, it distracts from the very real, pressing and deeply dangerous threats of foreign interference that our security services warn us about every single day. The greatest threat to British politics and democracy comes not from democratic allies or British community groups, but from hostile foreign state actors, most notably China and Russia. That is why they were at the heart of the Rycroft review.

Our intelligence agencies have been explicit. In October 2025, MI5 issued urgent guidance to Parliament warning that Russian hackers had actively stolen data from Members of Parliament, leaked sensitive UK-US trade documents ahead of the 2019 general election, and even impersonated foreign embassies to contact Ministers directly. We have seen the tangible consequences of that subversion in our legal system, such as the sentencing in November 2025 of Nathan Gill, the former leader of Reform UK Wales, to more than 10 years in prison after he was found guilty of accepting bribes from a pro-Russian Ukrainian politician to peddle Kremlin narratives.

Equally alarming is the sustained, calculated campaign of espionage and democratic infiltration orchestrated by Beijing. MI5 security alerts have warned of covert attempts to recruit individuals with access to sensitive information within the Palace of Westminster. We have seen a string of high-profile cases, including espionage involving the UK Border Force and Hong Kong trade officials, and deeply concerning allegations involving political advisers and researchers. China is actively seeking to pass information on parliamentarians and undermine our sovereign affairs. It continues to spy on our colleagues and to target Hong Kong activists, many of whom remain British citizens and who have sought refuge on our shores, and actively works to weaken our democratic resilience.

The Opposition believe that we must go much further to protect the integrity of British politics and our wider democratic framework, which is why the shadow Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), has called for China to be formally placed on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. That would require strict monitoring of any political activity taking place in the UK at the instruction of the Chinese state. The Government must publicly accept that China is already acting in a matter opposed and hostile to the core interests of the United Kingdom.

David Taylor: The hon. Member rightly mentioned Russia and China. Does he agree that Iran also poses a massive threat, is interfering in our democracy and is behind some antisemitic attacks and the spreading of some antisemitic conspiracy theories?

Mike Wood: We have seen that Iran, seeing itself as not only a regional but an increasingly global power, is becoming increasingly willing to make physical attacks and also take sub-threshold action against our democracy.

In conclusion, we do not support a public inquiry into the imaginary threat of pro-Israel lobbying. To grant one would be to validate a petition that lacks credible evidence and fuels antisemitic conspiracies. Instead, the Cabinet Office and Government must focus their finite resources on the genuine systemic dangers that face our democracy. Let us strengthen our defences against the hostile state apparatus in Beijing and Moscow, protect our parliamentarians from actual espionage, and maintain a political culture where open, transparent discussion from all sides of the middle east debate can thrive without fear of malicious vilification.

Iqbal Mohamed: On a point of order, Mrs Harris. The hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood) referred to my remarks in answering a question. Maybe I was not very clear, but he mischaracterised my remarks as referring to all Jews or Jewish donors. My remarks clearly referred to pro-Israeli donors, whoever they are. To clarify, it is those who support the illegal actions of Israel or—

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. I think that your clarification has been made. Thank you very much.

5.37 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr James Frith): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mrs Harris. I bring the attention of hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for moving the motion. He does so on behalf of the signatories of the petition, which asks for

"a public inquiry into pro-Israel influence on politics and democracy".

I also thank hon. Members from across the House who have participated today. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) in paying tribute to the Prime Minister, who has shown his finest form in his six years leading our party in rooting out antisemitism. I pay tribute to how he has handled himself and took the fight to issues in the party.

On the specific request of the petition, the Government do not support a public inquiry solely on pro-Israeli influence—in fact, I would like to turn to and address what I believe to be the underlying premise of the petition and this debate. Before I do, I should say that we could have had another kind of debate today: a debate about legitimate concerns about foreign influence and interference in our politics and democracy, more wide-ranging than from any one country, and what the Government are doing about that. Instead, the premise of this debate is narrowly and deliberately targeted on Israel. To speak to the point of my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) about the need for education in this debate, the premise is that Israel—the world's only Jewish state—is an influence on British politics that stands alone and must be held to a standard different from that for any other democratic nation.

It is unfortunate that the petition behind this debate plays into the same old antisemitic tropes of hidden forces and malign control. I remind hon. Members that the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism lists the "double standards" applied to Israel as one of the hallmarks of contemporary antisemitism in public life. The definition also refers to the mendacious allegations of Jews having power as a collective, controlling the Government and other institutions. This e-petition invokes those very same stereotypes when

it talks of pro-Israel organisations shaping Government decisions. With that in mind, I want to be clear that we reject the premise from which this debate originates. The framing used risks reinforcing the narratives historically associated with antisemitism.

The UK and Israel have a deep and enduring relationship. Seventy-six years ago, we were rightly proud to recognise the state of Israel. Our commitment to the security of it and its people remains unwavering. My political party has long been an advocate for the Jewish state. More than 100 years ago, Labour's 1917 war aims declaration committed us to support for a Jewish homeland. In the 1960s and 1970s, when Israel found itself yet again under attack from its neighbours, it found one of its most passionate advocates in the Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson.

Criticism of Governments is democratic and proper. Within Israel itself, citizens regularly protest against and challenge the actions of their elected Government. As a Government, we have challenged and will continue to challenge the Israeli Government when we disagree, such as on recognising the state of Palestine and the expansion of illegal settlements, and to impose sanctions on their leaders.

There are those in the UK who wish to criticise the influence of a particular Israeli Administration or their policies, but we should acknowledge that there are individuals and organisations that support the Government of Israel: they engage in our democratic process and advocate for causes they believe in, just as countless other groups do. They are normal features of a democratic society, not evidence of malign control or undue influence.

Furthermore, donors who support Israel are singled out like no others, expected to defend their position on Israel: "Jewish donors' support for Israel equals malign influence" is the implicit and too often explicit rhetoric we see and hear. The premise of this debate gravitates towards a familiar inconsistency that even influence rooted simply in supporting Israel, or its legitimacy and right to exist, is somehow an improper or hidden force in British politics.

Ayoub Khan: Earlier, the Minister said that the premise of the petitioners and this petition falls foul of the IHRA guidance. He knows that this petition and its wording will have gone through the Petitions Committee. Does he agree that it does not fall foul, otherwise we would not be debating it?

Mr Frith: I agree that there is cause for concern that the premise of the petition is antisemitic. I have explained my reasons why. I commented earlier on the Prime Minister's leadership in rooting out antisemitism in the Labour party. For too long, the Labour party gave too much benefit of the doubt to explicit antisemitic tropes and antisemitism. I encourage all Members not to trip over tropes knowingly or unknowingly when considering this matter, as holding British Jews collectively responsible for the Government of Israel's behaviour is its itself antisemitic.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Frith: I will make some progress.

The premise of the debate veers into the unhealthy territory of antisemitic tropes and conspiracy theories: the double standard towards the only Jewish state, questioning the legitimacy of a democratic state's existence that is not applied to other countries, including those with authoritarian regimes.

The Government are clear that antisemitism is unacceptable in all its forms and that British Jews must never be held responsible for the actions of the Israeli Government.

Jim Shannon: I commend the Minister on his honest, truthful and forthright stand. He deserves credit for that, and he is right to underline the issue. The Prime Minister deserves credit for all he has done to change attitudes in the Labour party. He is about to depart, but we should put our thanks to him on the record for what he did to change attitudes and make sure that antisemitism was frowned upon.

Mr Frith: I thank the hon. Member for his comments. The record will show his support, and I concur with it.

We have all seen the harm caused by the abhorrent rise in antisemitism, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). Antisemitism in the UK has been on the rise, and it has no place in our society. Since the appalling 7 October terror attacks, there has been an increase in antisemitic attacks in the UK, including in Heaton Park, near my constituency. That is just one example of the shocking fear, prejudice and anger directed towards the Jewish community.

The attacks cannot be divorced from the nature of the debate. We should condemn the readiness, ease and tendency to hold 300,000 British Jews collectively accountable for the actions of the Israeli Government. That standard is never applied to other communities in relation to foreign Governments.

Mr Adnan Hussain: Can I ask the Minister why so many in this House, including himself, conflate the Jewish faith and Jewish people with the actions of the state of Israel? The petition does not do that, and that is not what has been said in this House. No matter how uncomfortable it may be for some in this Chamber, the state of Israel stands accused of committing genocide in Gaza. Does he agree?

Mr Frith: I do not agree with that.

On 30 April, the Government announced £25 million of additional funding for 2026-27 to strengthen policing, protect Jewish communities and provide reassurance in response to the terrorist attacks in Golders Green and the recent spate of antisemitic attacks.

Instead of accepting the premise of this debate without question, I urge Members across the House to reject it, to remember the context and to question the notion of focusing any debate on Israel alone. Had this debate addressed the issue of foreign influence or interference as a whole, we could have focused on the range of actions that the Government are taking to address improper influence outside of the rules.

The Prime Minister has asked the Ethics and Integrity Commission to carry out a review of lobbying, disclosure and access to Government. The Government are working

[Mr Frith]

with Parliament to consider their own rules on lobbying. We are tackling foreign financial influence by improving transparency, closing loopholes and reinforcing legislation.

Iqbal Mohamed: I agree with the Minister that lobbying and donations across Parliament from any source must be investigated and that the rules must be reinforced. But on the specific point around Israel, Labour Friends of Israel, Conservative Friends of Israel and other friends of Israel groups—

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Order. I call the Minister.

Mr Frith: I refer the hon. Gentleman to an earlier answer I gave about misassociation, whether unintentional, explicit, deliberate or wilful. It is possible to be in Labour Friends of Israel without being a Labour friend of the Israeli Government's actions on a particular day, and it is the duty of allies and friends to point out where we disagree. If we were debating certain behaviours of the Israeli Government, I am sure that a mix of views would be expressed in the House, including on a strong common theme. But that is not this debate, so I urge the hon. Gentleman to pull back from wilfully or unintentionally using tropes.

Iqbal Mohamed: Will the Minister answer the question?

Carolyn Harris (in the Chair): Minister.

Mr Frith: Thank you, Mrs Harris.

The Prime Minister has asked the Ethics and Integrity Commission to carry out a review into lobbying. We have commissioned and are now responding to the Rycroft review of political finance rules, with immediate steps taken to cap total political donations from British citizens abroad and to put a moratorium on cryptocurrency donations. These measures are a first step, and the Government will have more to say.

The Government will always take legitimate concerns over foreign influence and interference in our politics and democracy very seriously, but I do not believe that the premise of this debate is to focus on those concerns. Criticism of Governments and policies is democratic, but the use of double standards in relation to Israel and conspiracy theories and tropes about the influence of Jews and the Jewish state take us into ugly, inciteful and deeply unhealthy territory. I urge Members to join me in rejecting this framing and rejecting the petition.

5.50 pm

John Lamont: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. As I said at the start, my job was to introduce the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, but it is not a petition that I have any sympathy with—I fundamentally disagree with it. When I was allocated this debate to introduce, I worried that I would be the only voice calling the petition out for what it is, but I am reassured that across the House and across parties—with a few notable exceptions, I have to say—there has been a unity of voice.

Parliament has demonstrated that we see this petition for what it is: we are not comfortable with it, and we do not like it. It is astonishing that a minority of hon. Members said things that, frankly, amounted to the expression of antisemitic views. I found that deeply uncomfortable, and we, as legislators, must call it out. That is the only way we will stamp out antisemitism.

I congratulate the Minister, the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart), on their strong words.

Richard Tice: Now that we have debated this appalling motion, is there a minimum timeframe before we have to debate it again?

John Lamont: Any further petition would have to attract more than 100,000 signatures, but the Petitions Committee has discretion, even when it reaches that number, on whether to grant another debate. When reflecting on how this debate has gone, and more widely on how the Jewish community in particular has reacted to the petition, I would certainly argue that it should not come back for another debate, even if it reached that threshold. We have had an opportunity to air our views, and we have collectively called it out for what it is. I am grateful to you, Mrs Harris, for chairing the debate, and to all hon. Members who have taken part.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 752646 relating to pro-Israel influence on UK politics and democracy.

5.53 pm

Sitting suspended.

Spinal Muscular Atrophy: Newborn Screening Test

[David Mundell *in the Chair*]

6 pm

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 755980 relating to spinal muscular atrophy and the newborn screening test.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Mundell, and a privilege to open the debate as a member of the Petitions Committee. I want to begin with two little girls. In May last year, twin daughters were born prematurely to the petitioner, Jesy Nelson, who is a constituent of the hon. Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking). Several months later, they were diagnosed with spinal muscular atrophy type 1, which is the most severe form. Their mother was told that they would, in her words, "probably never walk".

In January of this year, Jesy chose to share that diagnosis publicly, saying that it would be

"selfish to keep this to myself and not potentially save a child's life."

This petition is the result, and I pay tribute to her for the way that she has courageously told her story, using her own unique reach. As a result, the petition was signed by 149,692 people, including 225 of my constituents in Sunderland Central. I was grateful to meet Jesy earlier in Westminster Hall, and I thank her and every family who has turned the hardest experience imaginable into a campaign for other people's children.

In preparing for this debate, I also met Giles Lomax of SMA UK, Muscular Dystrophy UK, and Professor Francesco Muntoni of the Neuromuscular Centre at Great Ormond Street. I thank all of them for their time, and I also thank the Petitions Committee staff for their help as I prepared for this debate.

SMA is a rare genetic condition that attacks the motor neurones, causing progressive muscle weakness. Around 1,500 people in the UK live with it and about 48 babies are born with it each year—roughly one a week. With type 1 SMA, symptoms appear within the first six months and the effects are profound. Children cannot hold up their heads or sit unsupported; they may be tube-fed and need help to breathe. Until recently, up to 90% of untreated babies either died before the age of two or required permanent ventilation.

I used the past tense there deliberately and happily, because the important fact in this debate is that SMA is no longer untreatable. There are now three disease-modifying therapies in this country, including a one-time gene therapy that did not exist a decade ago. They are approved by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, and funded by the NHS. A condition that was too often a death sentence for babies is now one that we can treat.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for, as he often does, leading this debate on a petition that has generated a lot of interest. I understand that the one of the life-altering gene therapies for SMA, Zolgensma—I hope that I have pronounced it correctly—is available on the NHS, but such gene therapies only work if they are administered before irreversible nerve damage and muscle wasting occur. My hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (Carla Lockhart) has been at the forefront on this issue. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that perhaps what we really need is a UK-wide purchasing power for these heel-prick testing kits to be fully extended to all local health trusts without delay? That would make sure that those who have SMA are caught in time.

Lewis Atkinson: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and I will come on to talk about screening in just a minute.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr Mundell. My hon. Friend is talking about lifesaving treatments. One of my constituents has a niece who was born with SMA type 1 and previously would have been at risk of dying. My constituent was told that her niece was unlikely to live past the age of two, but because of the advances in treatment that my hon. Friend has just spoken about, she has just celebrated her ninth birthday. However, she did have to be fed through a stomach pump. Does my hon. Friend agree that for £3.1 million we can get full coverage across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and ensure that all babies are tested, so that those with SMA can be treated as early as possible?

Lewis Atkinson: I agree with my hon. Friend, though I think the issue is not mainly financial; I will come on to that in a minute.

As other Members have said, the key point is that treatments are dramatically more effective the earlier they are given: before symptoms appear and before irreversible damage is done. Once motor neurones are lost they do not come back.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member on his speech. I join him in paying tribute to Jesy Nelson and her campaigning. I also pay tribute to the parents of little Charlie in my constituency. In the words of his mother, he was

"very lucky to celebrate his first birthday last August."

He was treated with gene therapy after being diagnosed and following symptoms. He is now living his life, but in a wheelchair. Had he been screened at birth he might have had treatment sooner and he might be walking right now.

Lewis Atkinson: The hon. Lady is entirely right and I have heard a number of those heart-wrenching stories; she does well to speak so movingly on behalf of her constituent. That is a testament to the key intervention of getting a diagnosis as soon after birth as possible. Today, a baby with type 1 SMA is typically not diagnosed until around six months of age. By then, for many the window when treatment would have had the most impact has closed.

There is an alternative; screening at birth through the existing NHS heel-prick test, which is routinely done on day five of a baby's life. That already screens for 10 different serious conditions.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Mundell, for your chairmanship. I, too, pay tribute to the determination of Jesy Nelson and all the parents and young people who have been campaigning

[Amanda Martin]

for this. I was alarmed to discover from parents this weekend that Portsmouth will not be included in the roll-out of the SMA screening this October. That means that babies born in my city will miss that early diagnosis and will face potentially devastating conditions that early treatment might well have saved them from. My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan) and I have written to our integrated care board to find out why Portsmouth is not included and whether it will change its mind.

Lewis Atkinson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I will come on to talk about the potential postcode lottery. I do not believe it is a decision for individual ICBs to make, but a national decision that includes the UK National Screening Committee, which I will come on to.

The screening that I have described is already in place in dozens of countries. Across Europe, 75% of children are screened at birth and since 2024, every newborn in the United States and Canada has been screened. Ukraine managed to begin newborn screening for SMA in the midst of a full-scale Russian invasion. Given that, the petitioners simply ask, "Why is this screening not in place universally here too?"

Jim Shannon: On 23 March, Scotland rightly introduced routine screening. In October, babies born in England will benefit from the in-service evaluation framework. Yet families in Northern Ireland do not qualify whatsoever. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government must commit to working across jurisdictions with the Northern Ireland Department of Health to ensure that the evaluation framework is immediately extended to Northern Ireland so that a child's chances of walking, breathing and surviving are not dictated by the part of the United Kingdom that they are from?

Lewis Atkinson: I thank the hon. Member for making one of his excellent interventions. Clearly health is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland and Wales, where screening is also not available, but the hon. Member is absolutely right. It would be difficult to explain to parents anywhere in the UK why this screening is increasingly standard practice internationally but is not available in every nation of the United Kingdom.

The petitioners are clear that all the conditions necessary to begin screening have been met. The test exists, the treatments exist and the evidence tells us that screening would save both lives and money. In the UK, screening is overseen by the independent UK National Screening Committee, which gives recommendations to Ministers. I was unable to meet with the committee in preparation for the debate, but I am sure that the Minister has had the benefit of its advice.

I recognise, as we all must, that the committee's independence matters. However, its decision making and the way in which it balances risk, evidence and benefit must be subject to ministerial oversight. In this case in particular, there are questions about how those three elements have been balanced, and specifically about how far the committee seemingly required NHS-specific evidence when significant international evidence already exists.

When the National Screening Committee reviewed SMA for potential inclusion in the screening programme in 2018, the committee did not recommend screening, but campaigners like SMA UK did not walk away; they kept on doing the work. New cost-effectiveness modelling commissioned by the screening committee and published last year finds that screening for SMA is likely to be lifesaving and cost-effective.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on introducing this debate and welcome your chairmanship of it, Mr Mundell. My hon. Friend referred earlier to 90% of children who are untreated potentially dying before their second birthday. That is a sobering statistic, but it is not a statistic; it is the reality of the lives of children, families and parents. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to go faster sooner to roll out a comprehensive programme, as so many other countries have managed to do?

Lewis Atkinson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This is a matter of pace and of asking, "When?" not "If?" or "How?" because both those questions have already been answered.

I turn to the Government's response. The previous Secretary of State for Health, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), met Jesy Nelson, the petitioner, in January. The Government accepted the case for an in-service evaluation and brought the date for that live NHS trial forward from January 2027 to October this year, when screening will begin to be rolled out. I, the petitioners and others welcome that, though there is a sadness that it has taken so long to get to that point.

We must, however, be honest about where that decision leaves us. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) alludes to, the real argument now is about pace and fairness. The evaluation is funded. It will run at seven of England's 13 screening laboratories, covering around 72% of births. The remaining six sites, which include the site that covers the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), and which account for the remaining 28% of babies born in the UK every year, are not at present in the plan. That does not seem to be an accident but the design.

Put in human terms, of the 48 babies born with SMA in England each year around 35 would be diagnosed by the introduction of SMA screening in this evaluation but 13 would not: there would be 13 babies a year born with the same condition but on the wrong side of an arbitrary line that they did not choose who will go undiagnosed until damage is done. A baby born in one postcode will be screened, treated early and may walk, but a baby born in another postcode in the same week will not, and by the time anyone knows it may be too late. That is the postcode lottery that Jesy told me about, and which deeply concerns her, in its starkest form.

It is not about a difference in waiting times but about whether a child walks, breathes unaided or feeds normally for life. That is why Professor Muntoni's assessment needs to be heard. He asked me specifically to put this on the record: he described a trial that deliberately leaves some babies unscreened to serve as a comparison group as—his word—"unethical". We are withholding from some children a diagnosis that we are fully capable of

making and that we know will help to shape their lives in order to gather data on something that Professor Muntoni considers already internationally proven. That is the view of not just one eminent clinician, I am told, but the wider SMA clinical community.

Amanda Martin *rose—*

Munira Wilson *rose—*

Lewis Atkinson: I will make a little progress and finish my point; I can see the time getting away and I want to make sure that other Members can speak.

The question is why, when so much of the world has acted, the United Kingdom is moving so slowly. That caution sits oddly with the Government's welcome ambition elsewhere. The generation study is sequencing the whole genome of 100,000 newborns for more than 200 rare conditions, and the Government have committed to offering whole genome sequencing to every newborn within a decade, which is a welcome part of their 10-year health plan. That is a world-leading vision, and I welcome it, but there is some irony in promising to read every baby's entire genome within 10 years while not rolling out today across the whole of England one well-established, internationally proven test for a single treatable condition.

Screening decisions must, of course, be taken with care. A national programme that affects 650,000 babies a year must be safe, accurate and deliverable across many laboratories. I recognise that the therapies are relatively new and therefore their lifespan impacts require ongoing evaluation. There are legitimate grounds for further research, but the evidence that we have now on its impact should sharpen our urgency, not dull it. I am told that the research the screening committee commissioned estimates that each year, screening could prevent around two babies needing permanent ventilation, prevent around three early deaths and allow around 37 babies to live relatively normal lives.

The economics are striking, too: the typical direct costs of caring for a child severely disabled by SMA—not the drugs costs, but the care costs—are around £450,000 per year. Most of that would be avoidable through diagnosis and treatment at birth. Here, the compassionate course and the fiscally responsible course point the same way.

I gently raise the point—the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has already made it—that there is a geographical discrepancy across the United Kingdom on this matter. Let us welcome the fact that, in Scotland, screening is now being rolled out for every newborn, though that is not the case, and there are no plans that I am aware of, in Northern Ireland or Wales.

I began my speech with two little girls—Jesy's girls—and I return to them now. The delays to their diagnosis were not inevitable. Had the UK adopted screening on a timetable comparable to that of other countries, Jesy's twins might have been diagnosed before symptoms appeared. We cannot change that, but we can stop it being true for the next family.

SMA is only the first of many rare genetic conditions where an early, treatable diagnosis will likely become possible in the coming years. If we cannot move at a reasonable pace on screening for SMA, which is proven, costed and adopted across the world, what does that say for the children with other rare genetic diseases, the screening tests for which will be developed in the coming years?

I put the following questions to the Minister, and I hope—and I know the petitioner hopes—for answers that are as specific as she is able to give. First, will the Minister push for conclusions to be drawn more quickly from the in-service evaluation than the 18 months that are currently planned? Every month of delay in roll-out to the 28% of the population not covered by the evaluation will likely delay the diagnosis of one baby, with serious consequences.

Secondly, what does the Minister say to the families of the 13 babies a year who, on the current plans, will be born outside the evaluation's reach? Are there any interim safeguards against a delayed or missed diagnosis? Thirdly, will the Minister respond directly to the concern shared across the SMA clinical community that knowingly leaving some babies unscreened when the test and treatments already exist raises serious ethical concerns?

Finally, will the Government commit to ensuring that every baby in England is screened for SMA as quickly as possible? Will they continue to roll that out to all remaining screening centres, even if that is on a provisional basis while we wait for the in-service evaluation? By what date can that be achieved?

I conclude with a reflection that, as it stands, the science on this disease has changed faster than our health system has. The condition was, within living memory, untreatable, but now a test at birth can make the difference between a wheelchair and a childhood spent running around. The petitioners are not asking us to abandon evidence or caution; they are asking us to act with the urgency that international evidence now permits, and to make sure that no baby is left behind simply because of where they are born. I look forward to contributions from other Members and to the Minister's response.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

David Mundell (in the Chair): Order. I do not intend to apply a time limit to contributions. Members will note that the clocks in Westminster Hall are not functioning. If someone speaks for longer than might be reasonable, I will call them to order. I call Ed Argar, who I am sure will not do that.

6.20 pm

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Mundell. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I will seek to speak relatively briefly.

The hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) set out the case behind this petition eloquently, reasonably and with passion. Every year in the UK, 48 babies are born with SMA, with 60% of those having the most severe form: SMA type 1. I was moved to speak in this debate not only as a former Health Minister, but particularly after hearing from my constituent Charlotte. She told me about her son Harvey, who sadly passed away at just shy of seven months old. She very movingly set out her experience to me, and has kindly allowed me to share it with the Chamber today.

I pay tribute to Charlotte and her family for their courage and willingness to share something so personal not just with me as their Member of Parliament, but with

[Edward Argar]

hon. Members and more widely. I hope hon. Members will bear with me; I want to quote Charlotte fully, because what she relates is extremely important:

"On 15th March 2017 I gave birth to my first child. A beautiful blonde haired, blue eyed boy—Harvey. He was perfect. He was also unbeknown to us born with SMA Type 1.

As first time parents, having navigated the difficult journey of IVF, we were like rabbits in the headlights and had no idea anything was wrong—but in hindsight the signs were there quite early on. It was only through the concern of a Health Visitor when Harvey was 10 weeks old did the journey to his diagnosis begin. She had sadly come across another baby with SMA 1 earlier in her 30-year career and recognised the signs.

What Harvey went through to be diagnosed via multiple tests and what we went through as his parents was traumatic. Three weeks later we were then told by a room full of medical professionals that he had SMA Type 1 and at the very best he would live to two years old.

I will never forget that meeting, or the box of tissues that were slipped through the door just in case we needed one. I will never forget the walk out of Leicester Royal Infirmary that day, the day our 'happy bubble' burst & our lives changed forever. Nor will I ever forget the subsequent times when we had to go back to LRI when Harvey had stopped breathing and I resuscitated him, or to be trained in how to feed him via a nasal feeding tube.

In 2017, treatments were still at trial stage. We as Harvey's parents decided not to treat Harvey with drugs that hadn't been approved by NICE, nor did we want to put him through anymore trauma. An unimaginable decision to make, but we decided to focus on him and his needs as they changed whilst making memories together.

Harvey died on 14th October 2017, he was a day shy of being 7 months old."

Charlotte told me that she and others in her situation were told that change was coming—that there would be an advancement in treatment, and that gene therapy and better diagnosis were on the way. As the hon. Member for Sunderland Central set out, those treatments do exist. There are three effective treatments for SMA in the UK, but as with so many health conditions, and as I saw during my tenure as a Health Minister, all too often, speed of diagnosis is everything.

The disease needs to be caught early, hence the benefits of newborn screening. I pay tribute to the former Health Secretary for bringing forward the ISE to October of this year, and I am grateful to him for that, but as the hon. Member for Sunderland Central set out, only 72% of babies in England will be included, so a large proportion—160,000—will not be screened. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has now left, highlighted the divergence in access across different parts of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as did the hon. Member for Sunderland Central.

Until and unless the National Screening Committee makes recommendations on routine screening, many of those babies will miss out. I have seen how systems within the NHS work, often for good reasons—safety and rigour—but sadly that suggests that routine screening will not happen until 2030 or 2031. That is an awfully long time to wait and an awful lot of newborns who will be left unscreened and therefore potentially vulnerable to SMA.

In conclusion, and in paying tribute to Charlotte and her family, I have a question for the Minister, whom I know and have stood opposite on many occasions, both in government and now in opposition. I know that she cares, takes her brief extremely seriously and is a very diligent and caring Minister. My question to her, in Charlotte and Harvey's name, is very simple: what steps can the Government take to speed up the process to add SMA to the NHS newborn heel-prick test for all newborns in this country?

6.27 pm

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) for his impressive eloquence. Watching this debate today is my fantastic communications officer, who has spinal muscular atrophy and whose insight on this issue has been incredibly valuable. SMA is a life-threatening genetic condition where timing is everything. Without early diagnosis and treatment, irreversible damage occurs within the first months of a baby's life. Left untreated, around 90% of babies born with severe SMA will die before their second birthday or require permanent ventilation just to survive.

However, when SMA is caught through newborn screening before symptoms even appear, that trajectory can change completely. Early treatment can halt the disease in its tracks and provide children with opportunities they would not have otherwise had. That is why I welcome the news of the screening that will begin in parts of England this October.

Under the current plan, however, screening will reach only two thirds of England, which leaves some newborns in England excluded. Many of my constituents in North Somerset rely on Bristol hospitals, such as Southmead, where my two children were born, which are not among those rolling out screening. Babies born there will belong to the 28% or so missing out.

This really is a postcode lottery, plain and simple. A baby's chance of early diagnosis should not depend on their parents' address. As we heard, Scotland has now launched a full national programme, and I believe that the Republic of Ireland has done the same. We are falling behind our neighbours while our children's futures are decided by geography.

I spent nearly 20 years working as a pharmacist. In that time, I developed a particular instinct: if a disease can be treated, you treat it, and if a harm can be prevented, you prevent it. That instinct does not leave you. I agree that the current trial raises serious ethical concerns. When I consider this issue, the question I keep returning to is straightforward: where is it possible to prevent irreversible disability, why would we not act for every child without delay? Every baby, wherever they are born in the UK, deserves the same chance at a healthy life.

6.29 pm

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): It a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I welcome the fact that we are having this debate. I do not know what to say, other than that if I was one of those amazing parents and advocates in the Public Gallery, I would be absolutely seething with rage, not because of the beautiful, cherished, much-loved and incredible children who have been born, but because we have determined that it will take a significant number of years to get in place something that already works, as evidence shows, and, more importantly, saves a child.

I want to talk about something a little wider than spinal muscular atrophy, because this could be any condition. I have written to the Minister about any number of childhood conditions, and the common factor—it is the same with SMA—is that we deem them not important enough. That is the message to the families behind me today—those incredible people who advocate so strongly, even when their hearts are breaking. We should not expect them to go through this. Whether it is SMA or childhood cancers, the theme is the same.

Back in January of this year, as a result of the incredible advocacy and work that Jesy did on behalf of her two beautiful children, Ocean and Story Monroe, I tabled an early-day motion that carried the support of 34 Members from across the House, which was really significant. The one thing that people wanted to say whenever they reached out to me—not just in Lagan Valley or Northern Ireland, but across the UK—was, "Enough is enough. We need to be heard. Our voices matter and our stories matter."

I want to share some remarks from an incredible young woman I know from Northern Ireland. She is not my constituent, but if I did not say this, there is no way that she would forgive me. The incredible Michaela Hollywood is from Northern Ireland. She is not that young—I will not say her age, because she will shout at me—but she is living an incredible life. She says:

> "Honestly, I won't take a break until every family gets what they need. It's a strange feeling this week: I'm glad we have the exposure we need to save babies but I also want the world to know life is just as rich and full if you can't walk".

Those powerful words from a long-term disability advocate and campaigner are at the heart of this as well.

The hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) spoke about the emotional and psychological cost to families, and also about the long-term physical and other impacts. We work all the time on improving PEG feeding for families, and families feel that they have to bash down a door just to feed their children, but here we have an option sitting in front of us that is proven to work. It will save lives and, whether it will be 2030 or 2031, we do not need to waste extra time having a debate about whether it is worth doing. We agree that it is worth doing and that it saves lives; we just need to get on urgently and do it.

6.32 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Mundell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) for opening this vital debate on behalf of the nearly 150,000 people who signed the e-petition. I am glad that, with the help and promotion of Jesy Nelson, who brought the petition forward, we are able to highlight the need for preventive action to protect children from the impact of SMA.

In my work with the all-party parliamentary group on genetic, rare and undiagnosed conditions, I closely supported the campaign for newborn screening for spinal muscular atrophy for many years. I praise the work of SMA UK and Muscular Dystrophy UK, which led the "Every Moment Matters" campaign along with Genetic Alliance UK to press for newborn screening for SMA. It is absolutely fabulous that Jesy Nelson has been able to put focus on the issue and to press the former Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), to take real action, although it is very sad that she had to learn about the devastating impact of SMA from her own heartbreaking experience.

With SMA, time is muscle. The condition causes rapid and irreversible neurodegeneration. By six months of age, an untreated baby with SMA type 1 will lose 95% of their lower motor neurons. Transformational treatments are available on the NHS, but we are diagnosing babies too late for them to receive the maximum benefit. I have seen the life-changing difference that early diagnosis made for a family in my constituency.

I want to talk about two brothers, Freddie and Louis. Freddie is a happy, social and determined young man who has hugely benefited from access to the lifelong treatment nusinersen. His family say that it saved his life and independence, but they still face challenges and costs in securing equipment to allow Freddie to have the freedom he needs and deserves, including by fundraising with the community for an all-terrain wheelchair that allows him to take part in as many activities as possible with his peers. Because Freddie was diagnosed with SMA, his younger brother, Louis, was screened for SMA and diagnosed before birth. As a result, Louis became the youngest pre-symptomatic baby in the UK with SMA type 2 to receive Zolgensma, a groundbreaking new gene therapy, at just 18 days old. Since getting that treatment, Louis has done well and is able to live his life free from the disease. That completely transformational treatment was available only to siblings, creating, as we have heard, an unacceptable health inequality where the wider population is denied the same chance of a healthy life.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I was recently contacted by a constituent whose daughter was diagnosed with SMA type 1 at five months old and, in her own words, five months too late. Her child is now two and needs a wheelchair. She cannot sit or stand unaided. She depends on specialist equipment and multiple weekly visits and appointments. That is no way for a toddler to live. Does the hon. Member agree that families like my constituents urgently need the Government to fast-track the roll-out of a testing programme to all children in all areas to ensure the best possible outcomes for children affected by the condition?

Liz Twist: I certainly do agree. The test should be made available to everyone to prevent people from living with the effects of SMA that could have been diagnosed and treated.

As I was saying, it is important that we now have testing, but we must expand it to the whole of the UK very quickly.

Amanda Martin: Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to ask the Government why babies born in Portsmouth matter less than babies born in other parts of the country? If we are one of the six areas that will not have testing or screening, the babies born in my city have less chance and are therefore less valued.

Liz Twist: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend's point, which was also made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central. All babies should have access to treatment. We know the clinical consensus is absolute.

[Liz Twist]

In February 2025, leading clinicians published a letter in *The Lancet* contrasting the UK with countries that have screening programmes. In Belgium, babies born with SMA are ambulant. In the UK, babies with the exact same condition are still dying or remaining permanently reliant on ventilatory support and tube feeding. On the wider issue of newborn screening, a range of conditions could be the subject of testing, but we are behind the world on testing. Genetic Alliance UK and the APPG on rare, genetic and undiagnosed conditions are asking for a clear timeline for a systematic review of the NHS newborn screening programme from each of the four Governments across the UK to ensure that we do not miss the opportunity to give more children a better and a healthier life.

Returning to the issue of SMA screening, the UK National Screening Committee's updated model from August 2025 confirms that introducing screening would prevent three early deaths and stop two babies from requiring permanent ventilation every single year. Crucially, it would also prevent about 30 babies from being confined to sitting and enable 37 babies annually to live largely normal lives.

There is a rigorous financial case for acting now. Treating SMA pre-symptomatically reduces the need for lifelong mechanical ventilation and round-the-clock care. Introducing newborn screening would result in lifetime savings to the public purse of over £62 million and 529 quality-adjusted life years for each annual cohort of newborns diagnosed.

I was relieved by the Government's announcement last month that the in-service evaluation for SMA screening will finally begin in England this October. However, the Government confirmed on 16 June that the evaluation will cover only part of the country. Specifically, it will launch in only the seven newborn screening laboratories that already have the required equipment. There must be a way of getting around that problem so that all our babies can be tested and receive appropriate treatment if necessary. The Scottish Government began a national screening pilot for all newborns earlier this year, and Ireland announced the introduction of its own screening programme in April.

We cannot accept a health system in which a baby's chance of typical neuromuscular development depends entirely on the hospital in which they happen to be born. Will the Minister confirm whether the evaluation will be extended immediately to cover all of England, as well as Wales and Northern Ireland, for the sake of those children? We have the treatment, economic case and diagnostic tools; we must stop denying babies the chance of a healthier future.

6.42 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) for opening this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, of which I am proud to be a member.

I am grateful to everyone who signed this petition and I pay tribute to the lead petitioner, Jesy Nelson. She has used her personal experience and public platform to raise awareness of spinal muscular atrophy. We know that it is a rare neuromuscular genetic condition that causes muscle weakness, movement problems, and difficulties with breathing and swallowing, as well as tremors, and bone and joint problems. Although those symptoms are most often noticed in babies and toddlers, they can also start in teenagers and adults. This extremely cruel disease has touched many people across the country and beyond. That is evident, given the simple fact that the petition has nearly 150,000 signatures, including that of my constituent Nasser Iqbal.

Nasser's daughter was diagnosed with SMA type 1, the most severe form, three months after birth. She is unable to walk or eat due to nerve damage caused by her condition being left undiagnosed and therefore untreated in the first few months of her life. We know that every year in the UK, 48 babies are born with spinal muscular atrophy, with 60% having SMA type 1.

Once symptoms begin, damage to motor neurones cannot be undone. However, there is clear evidence that babies diagnosed before symptoms appear have significantly better health outcomes, with many able to reach developmental milestones that would otherwise not be possible. Earlier intervention would have made a huge difference to Nasser's daughter. I am proud to speak in this debate on her behalf, because she and many other young people are impacted by the absence of early screening. That is why the petition calls on the Government

"to fund and help fast-track the process to add SMA to the NHS newborn heel-prick test"

so that every baby is

"screened at birth to allow early diagnosis and access to life-changing treatment."

Although screening for SMA in newborn babies is currently not recommended by the UK National Screening Committee, it has confirmed that an in-service evaluation of newborn screening for SMA will start in October 2026. However, the plans will include only seven of the 13 regions, which, as many Members have said, leaves approximately 163,000 babies without screening until as late as 2030 or 2031.

I am disappointed that one of the areas not included in the ISE of newborn screening for SMA is West Yorkshire, and I am extremely concerned that it will leave my constituents across Keighley and Ilkley without access to this potentially lifesaving screening, despite the ever-growing need for it. Yorkshire has 1.5 times as many patients with SMA compared with national figures; in the last three years alone, the regional neuromuscular service in Leeds has diagnosed 10 infants with the most severe form of SMA. Two tragically died within their first year of life and two have survived, but are living with significant and lifelong disability. Neither child can stand or walk independently. They require night-time respiratory support and are unable to feed themselves without assistance. In comparison, the children diagnosed and treated pre-symptomatically have achieved their expected motor milestones, and they are sitting and walking as expected for their age.

I pay tribute to the Leeds teaching hospital for reaching out to me before this debate. In particular, I thank Dr Anne-Marie Childs and her team of paediatric neurologists, who asked me to tell the Minister that we cannot be in a scenario where not every new-born baby in the UK has access to early diagnosis and life-changing treatment. I therefore call on the Minister to make sure

that West Yorkshire and my constituents across Keighley and Ilkley are included as part of the early screening process.

Munira Wilson: The hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) have eloquently and powerfully laid out the ethics of leaving out some children from screening, as well as the deep unfairness those children face in not being screened. Is there not also a question of evidence? When we are talking about a rare disease, the numbers are so low that it makes sense to include the whole of England in what is essentially a clinical trial being run by the NHS. If we need a control arm to compare data against, there will be historical data for the children who were not screened and treated too late. I am genuinely perplexed why the Government have not included every testing centre or every laboratory in this trial in the in-service evaluation. Does the hon. Gentleman agree?

Robbie Moore: I absolutely agree with the hon. Member. The reality is that, when dealing with such rare diseases, we are better casting the net far and wide to get as much data as possible. That was one of the points made to me by the Leeds teaching hospital. Dr Anne-Marie Childs is advocating for West Yorkshire to be included as part of the early screening process because, at the moment, it is a postcode lottery. Whether someone has access to early screening depends on wherever they happen to be born. The data collection would feed into national reassurance that the Government should be focusing on this issue. It pains me to say that right now a child born in my constituency of Keighley and Ilkley in West Yorkshire does not have access to early screening.

SMA is a debilitating condition and, although it cannot be prevented, the outcomes are significantly better for babies who are diagnosed early. Looking at the progress made in Scotland, which began screening new-born babies for SMA in March based on in-service evaluations, I urge the Government to ensure that no child is left behind and that we roll out screening for every child, no matter where in this country they are born.

6.49 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) for leading this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, and I thank the 306 residents of Newport West and Islwyn who signed the petition. I am delighted to have spoken with the chief executive of SMA UK, Giles Lomax, a number of times, and I pay tribute to his tireless advocacy. I also thank Jesy Nelson for her work raising awareness of SMA following the diagnosis of her twin daughters.

SMA is a serious but rare genetic decision that causes progressive muscle weakness and deterioration, as we have heard. I should declare that, in my previous life, as a paediatric physiotherapist, I treated a number of children and babies with SMA, so I know a bit about the struggles that families go through in coming to terms with the diagnosis, the treatment, the child's ongoing needs and the aids and adaptation that are required throughout their life.

Currently there is no cure but, thanks to transformative research, treatment can slow symptoms and even stop progression. As a result, early detection and treatment of SMA due to newborn screening can dramatically improve the wellbeing of patients. That includes the significant benefits that have already been highlighted to respiratory health, motor function and, critically, life expectancy.

To be totally hard-hearted about it, catching SMA early via screening saves not only lives, but taxpayers' money. Without presymptomatic treatment, *The Lancet* estimates the annual health cost for a single child at about £75,000—not including the wider mental health issues, equipment, carer costs, housing adaptations or disability benefits. Those costs can run into hundreds of thousands of pounds per family. It is therefore not only morally right to roll out the screening to all children straight away; it is also financially prudent.

I am pleased that the Scottish Government have recognised the public case for newborn screening, becoming the first nation in the UK to add SMA to their universal screening programme. If they can do it, why can the rest of us not? It is really important. I am pushing for all constituent nations of the UK to learn from that example and urgently explore how we roll out universal screening for SMA. We cannot risk the postcode lottery mentioned in this debate. Children with SMA should not have their life chances determined by which part of the UK they live in.

I welcome the progress made in England to extend access to newborn screening, although we know it does not go far enough. Around 72% of babies born in England will be screened, but we obviously must go further. The previous Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), committed to expanding the ISE to ensure that more children could be screened, so I would be grateful if the Minister could update us on the progress on delivering that.

While significant progress has been made in England, Wales still has no plans for a screening roll-out, despite being uniquely well positioned to participate in the ISE. Screening facilities at the Cardiff and Vale University health board are currently being upgraded and have the capacity to facilitate newborn blood spot screening for every child born in Wales. A single, one-off and modest investment of around £1.5 million could therefore deliver 100% coverage and certainty for the parents of the 27,000 children born in Wales every year.

Given that unique opportunity, the decision thus far by the Welsh Government not to participate in the ISE is extremely frustrating. I wrote multiple times to the previous Welsh Cabinet Secretary for Health and Care, urging him to reconsider that short-sighted decision. Although the NHS in Wales faces many challenges and competing demands for future investment, I will continue to press the new Welsh Government to participate in the ISE. Waiting until the ISE concludes risks no babies being screened until the National Screening Committee makes its formal recommendations in 2030—four years more of missed opportunities for Welsh babies.

Given the clear benefits of cross-border working across our Union, could the Minister outline what conversations she and her colleagues have had with their Welsh Government counterparts about the ISE and how Wales could participate in it? If she cannot answer tonight, I would be grateful if she would write to me.

[Ruth Jones]

To conclude, although the effects of SMA can be dramatic, screening and early treatment offer us the opportunity to transform these children's lives. We need to ensure that all babies across every nation of the UK receive blood spot screening for SMA, so that no child's future is determined by their postcode.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Our final Back-Bench contribution will be from Chris Vince.

6.54 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Mundell. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) for opening and framing the debate. I also thank the right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar) for sharing Harvey's story with us. It was really powerful, and I hope that Harvey's memory will live on for us through this debate.

One of the reasons I want to speak in this debate is that I am a new father, who celebrated his first Father's Day yesterday, and I know how important it is for all new parents to know that their baby is healthy. I am very proud that so many of my constituents in Harlow, which borders Broxbourne, feel so passionately about this issue and signed the petition. Spinal Muscular Atrophy UK and Muscular Dystrophy UK have asked for SMA to be included in the newborn screening programme, and I thank those charities for their work. As Members will know, this issue came to the fore at the beginning of this year when Jesy Nelson's twin daughters were diagnosed with SMA, and I thank the then Health Secretary for meeting her. The petition was launched subsequently and led to this debate.

I recognise that the Government have started to roll out an in-service evaluation in NHS screening services in response to this petition, but I add my voice to those of the campaigners, the Members who have spoken in this debate and the many Harlow residents who signed the petition to urge the Government to go further and faster. The quoted 18 months for evaluation is just too long, and so many babies will not be diagnosed because of it.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central said, the sooner this treatment is administered, the less these young people will be impacted. I also welcome his comments about screening not becoming a postcode lottery. Both those points are really important. I hope the Minister heard the passionate words of Members from across the House, in particular those of my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), who is obviously hugely passionate that her constituents are not left out—I would feel the same if it was my constituency.

Having worked with children, particularly young people with lifelong disabilities and their parents, for pretty much all my life before I came to this place, I know that the trauma they face never really goes away. The more we can do to support them and their children, the better.

6.57 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) for opening this debate so well. I am grateful to the petitioners for securing this debate, including the 287 constituents in my own patch, and to the many families, clinicians, charities and campaigners who have worked so hard to raise awareness of spinal muscular atrophy and the importance of newborn screening. I would like to say a big thank you to them, and I truly mean that.

This issue goes to the heart of what our health service should be about: identifying serious conditions as early as possible, ensuring equal access to life-changing treatment and giving every child the best possible start in life. Spinal muscular atrophy, or SMA, is a devastating genetic condition, as the right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar) so eloquently set out when he shared that letter. It causes progressive muscular weakness and can have a profound impact on almost every aspect of a person's life. Many people with SMA face significant mobility challenges, difficulties with breathing, and bone and joint complications such as scoliosis.

An SMA diagnosis can be life changing for whole families. It brings uncertainty, anxiety, and in many cases, the prospect of intensive and lifelong care needs. Historically, SMA was one of the leading genetic causes of infant mortality. Before effective treatments became available, up to 90% of babies with the most severe forms of the condition would die or require permanent ventilation before the age of two. That stark statistic reminds us just how serious this condition can be.

Thankfully, the picture today is different. Thanks to years of scientific research, medical innovation, and the determination of patients, families and campaigners, we now have treatments that can dramatically alter outcomes for children diagnosed with SMA. These advances represent one of the great success stories of modern medicine, but there is one crucial factor that determines how successful those treatments can be: timing. The earlier SMA is diagnosed, the better the outcomes. In many cases, treatment before symptoms develop can prevent irreversible damage to motor neurones and dramatically improve children's future quality of life. Earlier diagnosis can mean the difference between a child learning to walk independently or their never achieving that milestone. That is why newborn screening matters, as all hon. Members who have taken part in today's debate have made so clear.

The debate is about ensuring that children can benefit from treatments at the point when those treatments are most effective; it is about giving families the opportunity that comes with early intervention; and it is about ensuring that where a child is born does not determine whether they have access to life-changing care. That is why there is understandable concern about the current rollout of the in-service evaluation for SMA screening. The principle behind the evaluation is sensible, and gathering evidence and ensuring that the NHS is prepared for wider implementation are important objectives. However, the rollout to date has been inconsistent and incomplete. Some parts of the country have been included, while others, as we have heard, have not.

Families living in areas such as Oxfordshire currently have no access at all to the programme. My hon. Friend the Member for Henley and Thame (Freddie van Mierlo) has campaigned tirelessly on behalf of his constituents affected by this issue. In response to a parliamentary question that he submitted, it was confirmed that the

current in-service evaluation will offer screening to about 400,000 babies. By comparison, a national screening programme would cover approximately 650,000 babies every year. In other words, under the current arrangements about one third of babies born each year will not be covered by the evaluation.

That inevitably brings up questions, and not just those asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), who rightly said that services for rare conditions should cast the widest net possible. Why should access screening depend on geography? Why should one family benefit from early detection, while another family living elsewhere does not? If the evidence increasingly points to the importance of early diagnosis, how can we possibly justify such uneven access? Too often in our NHS, patients and families face postcode lotteries. Whether it is on access to dentists, GPs, mental health services or specialist treatment, geography can end up determining outcomes.

The Government and NHS England have acknowledged concerns about the rollout. We welcome indications that NHS England is considering whether implementation can move faster, and whether the evaluation could potentially be extended more widely. That is encouraging, but families and clinicians need greater certainty. At present, there is a lack of clarity about how long the evaluation will run, when additional sites may be added, and when a final decision on a national screening programme can be expected. Those are issues that it is reasonable to ask questions about, and people deserve answers to such questions.

The Minister might point to the need for robust evidence before national implementation. Of course evidence matters and of course changes to screening programmes must be safe, effective and carefully planned, but if the stated purpose of the in-service evaluation is to gather evidence, surely there is a strong case for gathering that evidence from as broad and representative a population as possible. A wider rollout would not only improve equity of access; it would also strengthen the evidence base on which future decisions will be made.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): A couple of my constituents with direct experience of SMA got in touch with me. The thing that they identified as being most difficult about the current arrangements with the in-service evaluation is the lack of detail about how long it will take. Does the hon. Lady agree that if the Minister could provide a level of clarity about the length of time that the ISE will run, that might give us the sense that there is forward momentum on this issue?

Alison Bennett: The hon. Member makes the good point that often the uncertainty and the unknown length of time for which people are in limbo matter, and I hope that the Minister can address his question when she responds to the debate.

In conclusion, the story of SMA over recent years is ultimately one of hope. Medical science has transformed what was once considered an overwhelmingly bleak diagnosis. Children who previously would have had very limited prospects now have opportunities that simply did not exist a generation ago, but those opportunities depend on timely diagnosis. The treatments exist, the evidence is growing and the need is clear. The challenge now is to ensure that every child has the same chance to benefit from those advances, regardless of where they happen to be born. Families affected by SMA deserve urgency, clarity and, above all, a system that acts as quickly as science now allows. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

7.5 pm

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) for opening this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. The debate is an example of Parliament at its very best.

I also acknowledge Jesy Nelson and her tireless efforts to raise awareness of spinal muscular atrophy following her twin daughters' diagnosis with the condition. Little Mix have long used their platform to support a wide range of charitable causes, and I express my sincere thanks for their continuing to do so. However, to open up about something so deeply personal goes a step further. I also pay tribute to all the other families who have opened up to so many Members of Parliament.

I have often spoken about my time working in children's hospices, and it was always the families' stories that made compelling cases for the extra support that was needed. I acknowledge the work of Spinal Muscular Atrophy UK, whose dedication to supporting individuals and families affected by SMA continues to make a meaningful difference in countless lives. In this country we are lucky to have so many wonderful charities that help families through difficult times.

As we have heard, SMA is a progressive condition that causes muscle wasting and weakness. It is a most awful condition that is not reversible with treatment and, as we have heard, there are several types. SMA type 1, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar) talked about Harvey having, is a severe form that develops between birth and six months of age. Without intervention, life expectancy is often less than two years. Type 2 develops between six and 18 months of age; children usually cannot walk unaided and may suffer respiratory complications into adolescence. Type 3 develops after 18 months of age; individuals can usually walk independently, although that may become progressively more difficult over time.

Before 2019, there were no effective drugs available on the NHS to treat the condition. However, over the last seven years, three transformative treatments that can stop SMA in its tracks have become available on the NHS: one is administered by a lumbar puncture every few months; the second is gene editing infusion; and the third is a treatment that patients must take orally for the whole of their lives. There is encouraging evidence that those treatments really are helping.

We have heard that SMA cannot be reversed, but NHS data from 2023 shows that children with SMA 1—the most severe form of the condition—are now surviving for longer. For families affected by an SMA diagnosis, time is everything, so that is an important start. When I worked in children's hospices, I saw so many families go through incredibly difficult times. As the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) mentioned, it is not just about caring for a child; there is the impact on relationships, family finances and even sleep. I remember one father saying to me that if he got up eight times in the night, he considered that a good night's sleep.

[Stuart Andrew]

We had a saying in the children's hospices: while we cannot add days to their lives, we can add life to their days. However, in this case we can literally add days to their lives, and we really should do so. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Melton and Syston that the Minister is very diligent and clearly cares, but will she tell us how many babies and children are currently receiving the drugs I mentioned from the NHS? Will data continue to be collected to give us fresh insights into the effectiveness of those drugs over time? While the damage inflicted by SMA is irreversible, if treatment is given before symptoms begin, that damage can be prevented. Screening can therefore be an absolute lifeline for babies and families if SMA is caught early. That is why we welcome the UK National Screening Committee's recommendation to introduce in-service evaluation, which will see newborn screening for SMA trialled in the UK, and the role that the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), played in all that. It is a positive step forward.

I want to add my voice to those of other Members today, and put some questions and points of clarification to the Minister. The ISE, recommended by the National Screening Committee, will evaluate newborn screening for SMA for some newborns in England, commencing in October 2026. However, as we have heard, reports suggest that about one third of newborns will initially not be included. Will the Minister explain the logic behind the choices that have been made?

As I understand it, the seven NHS newborn screening laboratories in England that will undertake screening are in Birmingham, Great Ormond Street, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, south-east Thames and south-west Thames. Government statistics do not suggest that babies born in those regions are more likely to have SMA, and there appears to be no correlation at all between instances of SMA and the location of the centres chosen to screen newborns for the condition. I could also find no correlation with the efficiency of delivery for the screening programme. That begs the question: what is the rationale for choosing just those centres, and why have others not been chosen?

A baby born today who is screened and treated straight away is likely to walk at three years old. One born in a non-screened area, who is treated only when they become symptomatic, is very unlikely to walk and may not even be with us for very long. NHS England is responsible for organising the screening, but we know that the Government are going through with its abolition, along with the reorganisation of integrated care boards, so what assessment has the Minister made of the impact the restructuring may have on the capacity to deliver screening? That is an important point to bear in mind.

There are other conditions that are excluded from newborn screening, such as metachromatic leukodystrophy. I met a mother who has been campaigning hard on that, along with other campaigners. Will that condition and others also be included in newborn screening in the UK? Surely we should help if we can, because, as I say, the impact is really difficult for those children and their families. I am a huge fan of early intervention, so if we can do something about it early on we should—I cannot remember which hon. Member said this, but even if we just look at it through the hard lens of finances and public money, we would save a huge amount of money over the years.

It is desperately sad to see babies and their families affected by SMA. I hope that the Minister can provide some reassurance to those families that the forthcoming screening that they have long been fighting for will be fair, effective and accessible to all newborns in the UK. As I mentioned, the families I used to work with in children's hospices would often say that, when their child was born or diagnosed with whatever condition it may be, their hopes and dreams for their child changed. When the baby was first born, they thought about the first day at nursery, primary school or secondary school, and then doing exams, going on to get married and have children and so on, and suddenly those dreams had to change because their life would be different. If we do this screening, some of those families, can keep their original dreams and we can add days to the lives of those children.

7.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mrs Sharon Hodgson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Mundell. I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson), for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. It is very heartening to see so many Members in the Chamber and so many families in the Public Gallery, all united by a shared concern for children and families affected by spinal muscular atrophy.

SMA is a cruel and devastating condition. It can steal from a family the carefree future they had imagined for their child. It can take away a child's mobility and, far too often, it can take away a child's life far too soon. I pay tribute to children living with SMA for their courage, to their families for their strength, and to campaigners for working tirelessly to ensure that their voices are heard. Their message to us is clear: where there is a chance to identify affected babies earlier, and where treatment may have its greatest effect, we must pursue that chance with urgency, care and resolve.

I particularly thank Jesy Nelson, who is in the Public Gallery and is very welcome. She is so brave to share her experience of the condition, which affects her twins, Ocean and Story. She has given a public voice to all those going through a similar experience. This petition has rightly gained significant support—150,000 signatures—in such a short space of time. I am so pleased that we can take the time to have this debate and raise awareness of SMA.

I assure everyone that this conversation will not stop today. I will continue to listen to the voices of those speaking for children with SMA. Tomorrow, for example, I am due to meet with members of Muscular Dystrophy UK to continue this very conversation. I know that many families and advocates feel that the Government have moved too slowly towards a decision on screening for SMA. I understand that frustration, but decisions about national screening programmes must be made with great care.

We must be confident that screening will do more good than harm, that it can be delivered safely and fairly, and that we are making the best possible use of NHS resources for the babies and families who depend

on them. There remain many unanswered questions about the benefits and practical delivery of screening for SMA. That matters because the answer we seek must be robust enough to support a lasting national programme.

We were pleased that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence published final guidance earlier this year accepting both nusinersen and risdiplam as treatments that could be routinely offered to SMA patients for whom gene therapy has not worked. The finding that those treatments can improve survival rates and slow the progression of disease is welcome and significant. For families living with SMA, even slowing that progression can mean more time, more independence, more moments together and more hope.

Ruth Jones: The Minister says that screening must be safe and fair. We know the benefits of screening—the people in the Public Gallery have articulated it so clearly. The benefits are undeniable, so is it fair that the whole of Wales and a third of England does not have such screening?

Mrs Hodgson: I was going to come to the point about labs, but let me address it now. My hon. Friends the Members for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) and for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin); the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore); the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew); and others have made that very point. The trials will be rolled out to seven of the 13 labs, which leaves six labs outside the trial. I am told that the reason is that, as it is such a rare condition, the trial has to be broad enough to ensure a robust evidence base. The six not included do not currently have the requisite equipment. If that changes, more labs could be included.

Amanda Martin: I thank the Minister, who I respect her massively, for her comments. Portsmouth hospital is part of the generation study, so it is already able to test for the condition and could have rolled out the evaluation had it been included in the trials. It seems very strange that we are able to test babies in the generation study but not across the board.

Mrs Hodgson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central also mentioned the generation study. There are lots of questions around this, and, as I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North is aware, in preparing for this debate, I have been asking lots of those questions. I will take that point away and get back to her.

As we have heard, spinal muscular atrophy affects every part of daily life for the children and families involved: their routines, milestones, plans and the hopes that families hold for their children. Any progress against it matters deeply. At the same time, NICE has been clear that important questions remain, including around longevity and how long the benefits of these relatively new treatments may last. Those questions, alongside important issues of feasibility, must be answered before a national screening decision can be made.

That is why my Department has worked with the National Institute for Health and Care Research and NHS England to establish an in-service evaluation. That evaluation will run within the routine newborn blood spot screening programme to gather the evidence that we need, help answer difficult questions and fill the gaps that stand between us and a confident national decision. Crucially, the Department has worked alongside patient advocate groups, including the SMA NBS Alliance and SMA UK. I commend both groups for their excellent support and advocacy. They help to ensure that families' voices are not an afterthought but are at the heart of decisions.

I acknowledge that, as we have heard, many have been frustrated by the pace of planning for this large-scale scientific evaluation. I hear that frustration—I really do—but we must get this right, because only a strong evaluation will give us the answers that families deserve and the evidence that a national programme requires.

Ruth Jones: I appreciate what the Minister says about getting evaluation right, but Ukraine can install such an evaluation across the whole country during a war, and Ireland is doing it, too, so why aren't we?

Mrs Hodgson: Again, I have heard my hon. Friend's remarks. They are not falling on deaf ears, as I am sure she is aware.

The previous Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), met Jesy Nelson, along with Giles Lomax from SMA UK, and I know that that had a massive impact on him. They spoke at length about what is needed; he listened and we acted. That is why I was very happy to announce just last month that the planned start date of January 2027 would be brought forward by three months. The new start date for the in-service evaluation will be October 2026. From that date, babies will begin to be screened for SMA, and we will begin collecting the essential information needed to help many more children in the years ahead.

Robbie Moore: I am pleased that that announcement was made, but, as I reiterated in my speech, that provision does not include West Yorkshire or my Keighley and Ilkley constituents. The Minister said that a broadbrush approach was needed to gain data, and that has been rolled out to the areas that the Government have already announced, but surely it is necessary to include all areas, as many Members said. Will the Minister meet me or write to me about what steps can be taken to include areas such as West Yorkshire, Leeds, and Keighley and Ilkley as part of the screening programme?

Mrs Hodgson: I have asked those very same questions. As it is such a broad trial, the small number that is not covered does lead me to ask those questions. I have not given up asking those questions, but for today, the answer is the same as the one I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn.

Peter Dowd: A group of SMA experts wrote an article in *The Lancet* in February 2025 entitled "The human toll of slow decisions". They recommended that

"expert opinion and international evidence should be more thoroughly integrated into the decision-making process of NSCs"

and that

"the decision of independent bodies such as the NSC should be subject to scrutiny by the Ministry of Health, given the substantial effect of failing in the duty of care."

[Peter Dowd]

The evidence and experience are there, but we are lagging behind. I hope the Minister agrees that we must stop taking a conservative approach to this. Children's and families' lives are at risk, and it has to stop.

Mrs Hodgson: I thank my hon. Friend for his passionate intervention. I say again that it does not fall on deaf ears.

The right hon. Member for Melton and Syston (Edward Argar) asked what steps can be taken to speed up the process. We will be working at pace. Again, I will be paying very close personal attention to that.

Let me refer to a few other comments that I have not touched on yet. My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central asked about the unscreened community being used as a control or comparison group. I want to be very clear that those not included in the trial are not being used as a control or comparison group. Labs taking part in the study start to screen newborns for SMA in phases, and the labs act as the control before they start to screen.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist) asked when coverage will reach the whole of England. Again, this is about the six labs that are not covered. The Secretary of State is actively considering that, which is why I said that we are listening and working at pace.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Isl—*[Laughter.]* She asked whether we had spoken to Wales. It is a good job they do not send me to speak to Wales, because I cannot pronounce all the names! We work in close collaboration with the devolved Governments, who were all included in discussions about setting up the ISE.

The shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Daventry, asked a number of detailed questions. I will endeavour to write to him on those points. We have chosen areas with labs with the equipment needed to do the analysis, which is why I will write to my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North about the generation study.

We must move forward with compassion for families, rigour in the evidence and determination to give every child the best possible start in life, and that is what will do. I thank all hon. Members for their excellent speeches and for the challenge about the pace and coverage of the clinical trial. I hear them all and feel their pain deeply. The House should believe me when I say that I asked all those questions while preparing for the debate. I commit to them all that I will continue to ask those questions on their behalf. Where we can go further and faster safely, I will push for that to be the case. This debate has played a very important part in that push. I thank Jesy, all the petitioners and all hon. Members for ensuring that this debate took place today.

David Mundell (in the Chair): Mr Atkinson, you have one minute to wind up.

7.29 pm

Lewis Atkinson: I thank the Minister for her remarks. As others have said, she is a diligent Minister, and I know that she will push this carefully with the Department. Would she consider meeting me, Jesy and SMA UK after she has had a chance to push some of those points? I thank all Members for their contributions today.

Most of all, I thank Jesy for bringing this petition to life, telling the story of her twin girls, being so clear and rightly challenging us about the fact that there should not be a postcode lottery in the UK. We should have screening provision as good as anywhere else in the world.

7.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Monday 22 June 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

CPTPP Accession: Entry into Force with Mexico

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): From today, the terms of the UK's accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership have entered into force with Mexico. This follows Mexico's recent ratification of the UK's accession, and it means that UK traders are now able to trade with Mexico under the terms of the CPTPP for the first time. This supports the Government growth mission by providing tariff benefits, new digital provisions and additional market access beyond the current bilateral UK-Mexico FTA, with benefits for UK traders and consumers.

Benefits for UK traders and consumers

British farmers and food and drink manufacturers will benefit from improved opportunities to trade with Mexico. For example, chocolate producers will benefit from zero tariffs when exporting to Mexico, compared with tariffs of up to around 25% at present.

In addition, cheese exporters will receive tariff-free access to Mexico through a shared quota, with further shared duty-free quotas also available for other dairy products.

There will also be opportunities for pork sectors, with duty-free access for pork from day one.

Lower tariffs on Mexican exports, including honey, chocolate, asparagus, sweetcorn and orange juice, may also benefit British consumers if those reductions are passed on through lower prices.

The UK's current trading arrangements with Mexico contain only limited commitments on temporary business travel. By contrast, CPTPP includes more comprehensive commitments for UK businesspersons, including the ability for dependants to accompany intra-corporate transferees, as well as commitments covering investors, independent professionals and contractual service suppliers for the first time.

UK financial services firms will also benefit from greater legal certainty when trading with clients based in Mexico, including when providing portfolio management and e-payment card services.

For UK traders exporting to Mexico, CPTPP introduces new digital trade and supply chain benefits which do not exist in our current bilateral agreement. It supports cross-border data flows, protects source code and cryptography, and prohibits unjustified data localisation requirements, giving businesses greater certainty, security and lower compliance costs.

It also allows cumulation of content from other CPTPP countries, increasing flexibility and strengthening export resilience for industries with complex supply chains, including in the automotive industry.

Other CPTPP updates

Mexico is the tenth country with whom the UK's CPTPP accession has entered into force, out of a possible 11. The UK also welcomes the progress Canada is making on the legislation required to implement the UK's CPTPP accession protocol. The UK currently expects this to be completed later this year, and we look forward to the agreement entering into force with Canada at the appropriate moment.

As the trade strategy outlines, CPTPP is a "living" agreement, intended to evolve with the wider global economy. Earlier this month, on 6 May, CPTPP parties substantially concluded Costa Rica's accession negotiations following 18 months of negotiations, demonstrating that CPTPP remains open and dynamic. The UK also remains closely engaged in the recently launched accession process for Uruguay.

I look forward to keeping you updated on future CPTPP developments.

[HCWS127]

Digital Trade Agreement Negotiations: Malaysia

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): The UK and Malaysia have today announced the launch of negotiations on a new digital trade deal that will support growth and back British jobs.

Digital trade agreements can provide the benefits of digital trade chapters in free trade agreements while remaining agile, flexible and fast to agree and implement. In this case the UK and Malaysia already enjoy the free trade benefits of membership of the CPTPP so this would add a new set of benefits.

Today's announcement marks the next step in making the UK a global hub for services and digital trade. Digital trade can open new markets for businesses by reducing the costs of delivering goods and services, supporting jobs and productivity.

The UK is a world leader in digital trade and has a growing trading relationship with Malaysia, worth £6.4 billion in 2025. In 2023, the UK exported £730 million digitally delivered services to Malaysia. The OECD estimates that in 2022, exports to Malaysia supported 31,100 UK jobs.

Its rapidly expanding digital economy makes Malaysia an ambitious, like-minded partner, with opportunity to support UK growth.

The DTA aims to make digital trade with Malaysia easier, cheaper and more secure through cross-border data flows. Other potential benefits include reducing paperwork and border friction through digital systems, and guaranteeing strong protections for personal data, intellectual property, online consumers and cyber-security.

The deal could strengthen international digital and tech co-operation by supporting responsible innovation in areas like AI and data. It could also create new partnerships that boost efficient supply chains, infrastructure and global competitiveness.

[HCWS130]

Critical Minerals Programme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Chris McDonald): Today I am announcing the scope of the Government's new £50 million critical minerals programme, first announced in the UK's critical minerals strategy last year. In line with the strategy, this programme will help strengthen the UK's supply chain resilience and security and support economic growth across the UK.

Critical minerals are essential to modern industry and to many of the growth-driving sectors identified in the industrial strategy, including clean energy, advanced manufacturing and defence. The Government's strategy sets out clear ambitions to increase domestic production of critical minerals, boost recycling, and reduce our dependence on concentrated international critical mineral supply chains. This new programme is an important part of delivering against our ambitions and will complement wider Government support, including through the National Wealth Fund, UK Export Finance and other existing funding routes, as well as more competitive energy costs and streamlined planning and permitting to support industry.

The programme is structured around three pillars. First, we will provide up to £20 million for a magnet hub to establish a national facility to develop and support the scale-up of rare earth permanent magnet manufacturing capability in the UK, while also supporting skills and training in this specialised and crucial field. Secondly, we will provide up to £25 million through a critical minerals accelerator to support collaborative projects across extraction, processing and recycling of critical minerals, helping innovative businesses move towards commercial scale. Thirdly, we will take forward a demand aggregation platform, designed to help industry consolidate demand, unlock investment and secure supply through strategic partnerships.

Taken together, these measures will help grow domestic capability and optimise domestic production across the UK critical minerals value chain, harnessing our competitive advantage in recycling and midstream processing alongside our distinct pockets of mineral wealth. The programme aims to accelerate commercialisation, create high-value jobs, and attract investment in areas where the UK has these competitive strengths.

Further programme details and guidance will be published on gov.uk as the individual pillars open and progress. The magnet hub competition will be launched first, followed by the critical minerals accelerator, and market engagement on the demand aggregation platform later in the summer.

[HCWS129]

CABINET OFFICE

Public Procurement: Protecting National Security and Strengthening Economic Resilience

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Ward): On 19 June the Government announced the publication of new policy guidance to protect the UK's national security through public procurement.

In March, I announced plans to ensure Government Departments make use of the national security exemption in the Procurement Act 2023, where lawful and appropriate, to ensure procurement protects our national interest. Today, we move from policy intent to delivery.

This new guidance targets four critical sectors where global shocks can directly threaten national security: steel, shipbuilding, artificial intelligence, and energy infrastructure.

At a time when our national security and economic security are inextricably linked, true resilience requires supporting critical sectors and securing supply chains so they can be relied upon during times of crisis. This means understanding that foundational assets like steel and shipbuilding are critical capabilities essential to the UK's national security, and treating them as such. It also means recognising that emerging essential assets like artificial intelligence and energy infrastructure must not be left vulnerable to supply chain disruption.

For far too long, public procurement has been too narrowly focused on short-term requirements and with too little regard to long-term resilience and national and economic security. This has, over time, eroded our national capability, exposing the UK to increasing national security risks. To fix this, HM Treasury is updating guidance to accounting officers to frame value for money as a balanced judgement of strategic alignment, long-term resilience, and risk.

To co-ordinate commercial pipelines and intercept vulnerabilities in the four critical sectors identified, the Government have also appointed departmental sector leads across the Department for Business and Trade, the Ministry of Defence, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero.

This guidance provides central Government practitioners with the clarity and confidence to lawfully deploy the national security exemption under the Procurement Act 2023 in these four sectors in order to safeguard essential capabilities, boost resilience and protect national security. Relevant private utilities in energy infrastructure and wider public sector bodies are also strongly encouraged to apply this guidance.

These measures are targeted at procurements in these sectors which are indispensable to our national security. Our priority is to ensure an existing legal exemption is used appropriately and consistently with our international trade agreements.

We recognise that our global trading partners and close allies will often have suppliers well-placed to help us meet our security needs. Our approach is built on collaboration; trusted international partners and global suppliers are at the heart of our procurement strategy, bringing the innovation and resilience we need to stay secure. However, national security requires constant vigilance and an active Government.

We will keep this guidance under active review, and this Government will always act in the wider, national interest to back our critical industries, protect our supply chains, and keep the British people safe.

[HCWS128]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

OSCE: UK Delegation Appointments

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The hon. Member for Swindon North (Will Stone) has been appointed as a full representative of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for

Security and Co-operation in Europe in place of the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson).

The right hon. Baroness Winterton of Doncaster DBE has been appointed as leader of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

The hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) has been appointed as a substitute member of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe in place of Stephen Gethins.

[HCWS134]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Pathways Clinical Trial

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (James Murray): I refer hon. Members to the oral statement I made in the House today, 22 June 2026, on the Pathways clinical trial.

[HCWS135]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Home Buying and Selling: Reform Roadmap

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): My noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing and Local Government (Baroness Taylor of Stevenage) has today made the following statement:

> Buying or selling a home should be one of life's most important milestones, yet for too many people the process is frustrating, uncertain and deeply stressful. For too long, people have had to navigate a system where they lack clear information and have little visibility of progress.
>
> That is why I am delighted to announce that Government are reforming the broken home buying and selling system to reduce delays, cut costs and stop sales falling through. The fundamental changes we are introducing to fix this broken system will allow people to move into the right homes at the right time, put down roots in their communities, and relocate more easily for work. They will also save critical time and reduce the costs involved in what is already an emotional process for those buying or selling a home. These reforms will bring benefits not only for families, but also property professionals, the housing market, and the wider economy.
>
> The Government have published a landmark road map setting out how we will transform the home buying and selling process over the course of this Parliament. Alongside this, we published our response to two key consultations—on home buying and selling reform, and on material information in property listings. Together, these publications mark a decisive shift from consultation to delivery, underpinned by strong and widespread support for reform from consumers and professionals across the sector.
>
> The case for change is clear. The current home buying and selling process is slow, costly and uncertain. It takes around 120 days on average to complete once an offer has been accepted, and around one in three transactions fall through, costing buyers and sellers around £400 million each year in wasted costs. These failures create unnecessary stress for households, reduce confidence in the market and impose wider economic costs.
>
> Our reforms will create a system that is more streamlined, less stressful and fit for the future. At a time when households are feeling the squeeze, new changes will cut home-buying times by around four weeks, save first-time buyers an average of £650, and stop the nasty surprises that cost time, money and heartbreak. Overall, first time buyers are set to save more than £200 million a year, and the reforms will support a housing market in which people can move with greater confidence and with less risk of late surprises and failed transactions. They will also support the Government's wider agenda of unlocking housing supply, improving affordability and supporting the delivery of 1.5 million homes.
>
> The road map sets out a phased programme of action to ensure that change is practical, enforceable and built to last. We will act now where we can, while preparing carefully for more complex changes that require legislation or further market development. This phased approach reflects what we heard through consultation and our continued engagement with industry, and will help ensure that consumers and professionals can have confidence that the system will change in a meaningful and sustainable way.
>
> The core principle at the heart of our reforms is simple: people should know what they are buying before they commit money and time. Sellers and estate agents will have to prepare a sales pack, providing key information before a property is even listed. This will cover the condition of the home, leasehold costs, the status of the chain, flood risk and planning history. Buyers will see the reality up front, before they spend a penny, reducing the risk of transactions being derailed by problems that are uncovered too late.
>
> We will also raise standards and build trust across industry. A new code of practice and our proposed consultation on mandatory qualifications for estate agents will set clearer expectations for this sector.
>
> Alongside this, we will bring home moving into the 21st century, requiring the wider use of digital property logbooks and digital sales packs. These tools store current and historic information on properties, reduce transaction risk by verifying data provenance, and provide consumers with digital property information up front in the sales process.
>
> A modernised system must make full use of digital tools, trusted data and secure information sharing. We will publish a call for evidence this year to identify barriers professionals face when sharing data, and will consult next year on a smart data scheme for property data. We are also taking forward work to support the adoption of digital identity services and qualified electronic signatures to reduce reliance on paper-based and disconnected processes, and will continue to work with HM Land Registry and partners to modernise services and improve access to key datasets.
>
> We are preparing the ground for earlier binding agreements in property transactions. After sales packs are embedded, we will require the use of binding conditional contracts, so that once both sides have committed, they cannot simply walk away without consequence. In the meantime, we will work with industry to support readiness for this change and raise awareness of existing voluntary reservation agreements.
>
> To support leaseholders and homeowners on privately managed estates, we will use powers in the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 to make it quicker, cheaper and more predictable to obtain the information needed to sell their homes. This will end the practice of third parties delaying home moves by taking too long to respond, or charging unreasonable amounts for information.
>
> In parallel, we will publish non-statutory material information guidance later this year, so that estate agents understand their responsibilities to provide potential buyers with critical property information. This will be supported by a standardised form and clear, user-friendly guidance.

Taken together, these measures represent a once-in-a-generation programme of reform to create a housing market that works better for all and supports the dream of home ownership.

[HCWS132]

Temporary Accommodation: Tackling Poor Conditions

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): I am grateful to the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee for their report published on 22 April 2026, and our response, laid and published today, sets out the actions Government are taking to improve the quality and supply of temporary accommodation. My long-term priority remains to prevent homelessness and tackle the root causes, but where temporary accommodation is necessary, it must be safe, decent and stable. Today I want to set out the wider steps Government are taking to ensure this is the case.

We are making encouraging progress against commitments we set out in December 2025 in our cross-Government child poverty strategy and national plan to end homelessness. First and foremost, we will continue to focus on the most harmful forms of homelessness, and particularly the unlawful use of B&B accommodation for families where essential facilities, such as kitchens and bathrooms, are shared. We have achieved a 63% fall in families with children staying in B&Bs beyond six weeks, compared to the same time last year, and remain on track to eliminate this by the end of the Parliament. More widely, the latest homelessness statistics show some signs of stabilisation, with numbers of households in temporary accommodation falling for the first quarter since 2022. We are also helping councils invest in good-quality temporary accommodation, through delivery of the £950-million fourth round of the local authority housing fund, and through exploring options for partnerships with social impact and institutional investors.

Councils work extremely hard to find suitable accommodation, but we know performance varies between different councils. Through the national plan to end homelessness, we are establishing routes to escalate and intervene to address poor performance. We will not shy away from calling out councils if they are not taking adequate steps to improve. To aid this, in May we published the first of the toolkits committed to in the national plan on local performance and accountability. This includes detail on the requirements, via grant conditions, for local authorities to produce a policy to ensure temporary accommodation is suitable, and to set out how the local authority will mitigate disruption and avoid multiple moves, ensure access to support services (particularly where safeguarding issues exist), and ensure access to key facilities—including cooking and laundry facilities, storage and wi-fi. Action plans must be published by December 2026, and will be an important tool to identify and tackle poor practice.

But we are not waiting until December. In our national plan, we committed to engaging with the sector to assess what urgent action is needed to address the worst outcomes in the short term. During this engagement, we have heard about a wide range of issues, including poor physical quality, multiple moves, a lack of facilities, out-of-area placements and overcrowding.

Our progress on B&B reduction shows what we can do with a clear national focus. Today I have announced allocations for the first year of our newly expanded £30 million emergency accommodation reduction programme. In year one, the vast majority of the £10-million funding will be targeted on reducing B&B use, but we will then expand the programme to address wider poor practice. We are also taking wider action to improve quality, suitability and support for households, while also improving the evidence base to inform future policy.

We are improving quality and increasing protections against poor housing conditions. Our guidance is clear that accommodation must be free of the most serious category one hazards, and local authorities must now set out in their temporary accommodation policies how they will ensure this is the case. We will soon be consulting on extending the scope of Awaab's law from the social rented sector, so that it includes temporary accommodation occupied under licence and tenancies in the private rented sector. We intend to apply the reformed decent homes standard to temporary accommodation wherever possible, and will publish guidance by the end of 2026 to help landlords prepare for this. We have recently achieved Royal Assent to the Renters Rights Act 2026, which introduces a new power for local authorities to issue fines of up to £7,000 where a category one hazard is found in private rented homes, and are considering extending this to other forms of temporary accommodation.

In keeping our focus on moving families out of B&B, we must not see them moved into other unsuitable alternatives. I have heard concerns about unsuitable out-of-area placements, and of failure to provide notifications to receiving areas. Requirements to notify are clear in law, and we are actively engaging with stakeholders to improve practice and make expectations on placing and receiving local councils clear. Safeguarding risks must be minimised across all forms of accommodation. This is why eliminating B&B has been our core focus, but we will review wider models of shared accommodation, and consider whether further action is needed as part of our wider work to improve quality. Our guidance is clear: local authorities must provide adequate space for cots and support where families do not have one. Concerns have been raised that this is not happening, and we will work with local authorities to ensure this is the case.

We are making progress on our cross-Government commitments to improving the health and education outcomes of families in temporary accommodation. I am delighted we have now reached Royal Assent on the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, which, from September, introduces a new duty on local housing authorities to notify health and education bodies when a child is placed in temporary accommodation. We will provide guidance on this in the coming weeks. We committed to ending the practice of discharging newborns into B&Bs, or other unsuitable housing, and are working with the NHS on safe and robust pathways.

To complement this action on improving suitability, we are working with the sector over the coming months to develop and share a consistent evidence base to support local authorities in making risk-based assessments based on suitability for specific household needs. This includes wider work to review child mortality data, and working with the NHS on their commitment to improve clinical data collection for children in temporary accommodation, to ensure we understand risks and take the right preventative

action. My Department's local artificial intelligence division are also using data to explore how an AI tool could be used to assist in the matching of homeless families with appropriate accommodation, using a transparent weighted-scoring algorithm. If taken forward, Match[1] would join a suite of AI-backed tooling for case workers in local government across England, including Local Transcribe[2] and upgrades to StreetLink[3]. We hope to say more on this work in the autumn.

I am committed to continuing to work together to protect households and improve their experience in temporary accommodation while our long-term strategy enables us to get back on track to ending homelessness for good.

[1] https://mhclgdigital.blog.gov.uk/2025/12/12/how-collaboration-and-innovation-came-together-to-tackle-homelessness-and-rough-sleeping/

[2] https://mhclgdigital.blog.gov.uk/category/local-ai/

[3] https://thestreetlink.org.uk/

[HCWS133]

TRANSPORT

Draft Heathrow Expansion National Policy Statement: Relevant Period

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Further to my statement of 18 June, I am today updating the House that, as required by the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025, the draft revised airports national policy statement, now renamed the Heathrow expansion national policy statement, has been laid today. A period of parliamentary scrutiny—the "relevant period"—now begins from 22 June and will end on to 26 November 2026.

Next steps

I will update the House on the outcome of the consultation and parliamentary scrutiny process in due course.

[HCWS131]

Petition

Monday 22 June 2026

OBSERVATIONS

TREASURY

Banking facilities in Cupar

The petition of residents of the constituency of North East Fife,

Declares that everyone should be able to access cash and banking advice when they need it; further declares that this should not be restricted by poor mobile or broadband connectivity, not having easy access to a phone, or preferring to do transactions face to face; further declares that although almost 14,000 people live in the area surrounding Cupar and the town serves many more in the surrounding villages, Cupar is served by just one building society following the closure of multiple local bank branches; further declares that it is not feasible for many people to travel outwith Cupar to neighbouring towns such as St Andrews in light of cuts to bus routes; and further declares that a cash hub would allow consumers and businesses to access and bank cash safely and a banking hub would provide vital face to face services and advice for the community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to work with the banking industry to deliver a cash or banking hub for Cupar.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Wendy Chamberlain, Official Report,* 19 May 2026; Vol. 786, c. 516.*]*

[P003199]

Observations from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Rachel Blake): The Government thank the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) for submitting the petition on behalf of her constituents regarding access to cash and banking facilities in North East Fife and their request for the establishment of a banking hub in Cupar.

The Government understand the importance of in-person banking to communities and high streets and are committed to ensuring sufficient access for those who need it. This is why the Government are working closely with industry to roll out 350 banking hubs across the UK. The UK banking sector has committed to deliver these hubs by the end of this Parliament. Over 275 hubs have been recommended by Link, and more than 235 hubs are open and delivering vital cash and in-person banking services.

The Government also recognise that cash continues to be used by millions of people across the UK, including those in vulnerable groups, and are committed to protecting access to cash for individuals and businesses.

Regarding the petition for banking hubs in North East Fife, it is important to note that the locations of banking hubs are independently determined by Link, the industry co-ordinating body responsible for undertaking access to cash assessments.

When receiving a community request or notification of a branch closure, Link will first assess what will be left in a community after a change to the cash services on a high street. Then Link undertakes an assessment of the impact on the local community, looking at the proximity to the nearest branch; size of the community (population and number of small and medium-sized enterprises); and the extent of community vulnerability, old age and digital skills. Link also assesses local needs via an in-person visit. This gives the opportunity for Link to take into account specific aspects of the local area such as a steep hill or poor transport links.

Link publishes the outcomes of its assessments on its website. If as a result of an assessment, Link has not recommended a banking hub, the decision can be appealed within 28 days of the assessment. More information on the appeals process is available on Link's website here: https://www.link.co.uk/our-assessments/appeal-an-assessment

Everyday in-person banking services can also be accessed via the Post Office. The Post Office banking framework allows personal and business customers to withdraw and deposit cash, check their balance, pay bills and cash cheques at over 10,500 post office branches across the UK.

The Government have commissioned an independent review into access to banking services, to assess whether changes in access to in-person banking services are causing consumer detriment, the scale of any detriment, and who it affects. The review will consider access to in-person banking services for both personal and business customers. HM Treasury launched the access to banking services review on 8 June, with the publication of the call for evidence. The call for evidence will run for six weeks and will close on 20 July. Input is sought from consumers, businesses, charities, community organisations, local authorities and industry across the UK. Evidence gathered will shape the review's recommendations, with the chair, Richard Lloyd OBE, due to publish his findings in October.

More information about the call for evidence can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/access-to-banking-services-review-call-for-evidence

Those wishing to submit via email, including supplementary evidence, research or data can do so at: accesstobankingservices@hmtreasury.gov.uk

The evidence collected by the review will inform future decisions on whether further action is needed. Alongside the review, the Financial Services and Markets Bill includes a power to allow the Government to take action in future to protect access to banking services, should this be necessary. This power ensures the Government can act swiftly and proportionately, including through future regulation, if the evidence from the review supports intervention.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 22 June 2026

	Col. No.
EDUCATION	1
Antisemitism on University Campuses	16
Apprenticeships	4
Children of Military Families: Educational Support	6
Further Education Pathways	13
PE and Sport Premium: Primary Schools	17
School Food Standards	1
School Rebuilding Programme	15
School Rebuilding Programme: Sefton	8
EDUCATION—*continued*	
Schools Funding	4
SEND: Improvement	9
SEND Improvement Plans: Multi-academy Trusts	3
SEND Provision: Finance	14
Small Rural Schools	7
Teacher Recruitment and Retention	12
Topical Questions	18

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Monday 22 June 2026

	Col. No.
BUSINESS AND TRADE	1WS
CPTPP Accession: Entry into Force with Mexico	1WS
Critical Minerals Programme	2WS
Digital Trade Agreement Negotiations: Malaysia	2WS
CABINET OFFICE	3WS
Public Procurement: Protecting National Security and Strengthening Economic Resilience	3WS
FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE	4WS
OSCE: UK Delegation Appointments	4WS
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	5WS
Pathways Clinical Trial	5WS
HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT	5WS
Home Buying and Selling: Reform Roadmap	5WS
Temporary Accommodation: Tackling Poor Conditions	7WS
TRANSPORT	10WS
Draft Heathrow Expansion National Policy Statement: Relevant Period	10WS

PETITION

Monday 22 June 2026

	Col. No.
TREASURY	1P
Banking facilities in Cupar	1P

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

not later than
Monday 29 June 2026

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

Volume 788
No. 19

Monday
22 June 2026

CONTENTS

Monday 22 June 2026

List of Government and Principal Officers of the House

New Members [Col. 1]

Oral Answers to Questions [see index inside back page] [Col. 1]
Secretary of State for Education

G7 Summit [Col. 27]
Statement—(Deputy Prime Minister)

East Midlands Railway Collision [Col. 43]
Statement—(Heidi Alexander)

Pathways Study: Puberty Suppression [Col. 55]
Statement—(James Murray)

Private Members' Bills [Col. 71]
Bills presented, and read the First time

Armed Forces Bill [Col. 83]
As amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

British Coal Staff Superannuation Scheme [Col. 155]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
UK Politics: Pro-Israel Influence [Col. 1WH]
Spinal Muscular Atrophy: Newborn Screening Test [Col. 25WH]
E-petition debates

Written Statements [Col. 1WS]

Petition [Col. 1P]
Observations