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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)

Monday 29 June 2026

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

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

*The term “Independent” may denote—

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

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

House of Commons

Monday 29 June 2026

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: In March, I announced to the House that Tom Goldsmith, current Clerk of the House and head of the House of Commons service, had given notice that he will be leaving Parliament in the autumn. I am pleased to announce that, following a competitive recruitment process, Eve Samson, current Clerk of the Journals, has been appointed as the 53rd Clerk of the House of Commons, following the approval of His Majesty the King. I am sure that Members will join me in congratulating Eve, who has many outstanding qualities to bring to this important role. Having worked in the House with great dedication for almost 40 years, she brings a wealth of experience and insight and will be a distinguished successor to Tom Goldsmith.

Arrangements will be made for a comprehensive handover period before Eve formally takes up the role in November. Until then, Tom will continue to carry out his duties as Clerk of the House. There is always a lot of work to do, and we will make sure that Tom works hard. *[Laughter.]* There will also be an opportunity before then for colleagues to recognise more formally Tom's contribution to the House and to wish him the very best in the future.

Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Unemployed Young People

1. **Steff Aquarone** (North Norfolk) (LD): What estimate he has made of the number of unemployed young people. [900662]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): More than 1 million young people are currently not in education, employment or training. Youth employment in the UK has not reached its pre-financial crash level in any year since, and there has been a sharp rise in recent years in the number of young people not in education, employment or training. That is why we are investing an additional £2.5 billion over the next three years into the youth guarantee and the growth and skills levy.

Steff Aquarone: The Transport Committee's "Buses connecting communities" inquiry heard about the significant impact that public transport connectivity has on unemployment. That is especially the case for young people in North Norfolk. It is a vicious cycle: poor connectivity creates poor prospects, and young people leave to start their careers elsewhere. How will the Secretary of State work with his colleagues across Government to make sure that young people in rural communities do not face extra barriers to unemployment compared with their urban peers, and will he commit to making sure that rural young people have a fair opportunity to thrive?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member raises an important issue. Whenever I discuss youth unemployment and opportunity with MPs, they often identify transport links as a barrier. We are capping single bus fares at £3 on thousands of routes in England outside London until March 2027, but I believe that there is more that we can and should do, because he is right that connectivity is really important and is linked to opportunity.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for his answers and the work he is leading on for young people. I recently visited a Jobcentre Plus office to meet the team and see some of the fantastic work they are doing to get our young people into work, but what struck me was that I had to visit a neighbouring constituency, because Battersea does not have its own office like that. Some of my constituents are having to take not one or two but three buses to get to that jobcentre when there is a perfectly good jobcentre in Wandsworth. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that we remove all barriers so that transport and travel is not a challenge for our young people in getting into work?

Pat McFadden: I thank my hon. Friend not only for her question but for the wonderful work she has done and the advice she has given me on closing the disability employment gap and championing the rights of partially sighted people. She asks about access, which is important. Alongside our jobcentre network, we have mobile jobcentre vans, and over the next few years we will be opening 360 youth hubs to get services to where young people are in the local community.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Over 700,000 young people are now out of work. That figure is up 100,000 year on year, and the youth unemployment rate is now at over 16%—higher than at any point during the pandemic. As this is likely to be the ministerial team's final question time, will the Secretary of State reflect on the damage that the Employment Rights Act 2025 and national insurance increases have had on youth unemployment? Behind all those figures are stories of young people not earning or learning. They do not need yet more billion-pound Government schemes. They need a growing economy with businesses that want to hire them. Will the next Government finally deliver that?

Pat McFadden: We have the second-fastest growing economy in the G7, we have 400,000 more people in work than we did last year and the number of young

people in employment is up by 74,000 since the election. In the whole 14 years in which the hon. Member's party was in power, it went up by only 1,000.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): In deprived coastal communities such as Torbay, the NHS and the Department for Work and Pensions can make up a significant part of the job offer, including entry-level jobs for young people. It was therefore disturbing to hear last week that almost 5,500 jobs could be moved or be at risk of redundancy across the United Kingdom. In Torquay, there are 130 jobs at Cotswold House with no prospect of being moved to another DWP location. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss those office closures and how young people can be helped into employment through employment with the DWP?

Pat McFadden: I appreciate that the DWP plays a role as a local employer, but it is important that we deliver our service as efficiently as possible on behalf of the taxpayer and that we get the maximum value for money for that. With regard to the hon. Member's request, there has been an offer of a meeting with a Minister from the Department; I hope that he will take that up.

Job Opportunities: Rural Areas

2. **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of trends in the level of job opportunities in rural areas. [900663]

The Minister for Employment (Dame Diana Johnson): The employment rate is 78.4% in rural areas, compared with 74.8% in urban areas, with job opportunities in agriculture, forestry, fishing, and scientific and technical sectors. Under this Government, economic inactivity among people aged 16 and over in rural areas has fallen by 0.8%, and through the new jobs and careers service we are providing more outreach in rural areas, including jobcentre vans, bringing employment support directly into rural communities.

Bradley Thomas: The picture that the Minister paints is not one that I recognise, and it is not one recognised by businesses in my constituency. Rural job opportunities have gone down, rural unemployment is up, and businesses routinely tell me that the increased cost of employment under this Government has directly contributed to their inability to continue recruiting. Does the Minister recognise that? Will she impart on the next Prime Minister the importance of a change of course?

Dame Diana Johnson: The question was about rural areas. It might be interesting and helpful for the hon. Member to reflect how under the last Government the number of jobs in agriculture—a key sector in rural areas—fell by 50,000 while under this Government it has risen by 5,000.

Benefit Cap

4. **Paula Barker** (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): What steps he is taking to ensure that people affected by the benefit cap are not in poverty. [900665]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): Being in work is the best way to avoid poverty. The benefit cap gives a modest but significant incentive to start work and then to progress in work. Some people cannot work, so the cap does not apply to people out of work on disability or caring benefits, but for others it remains in place.

Paula Barker: The abolition of the two-child limit by this Government was a key step in cutting child poverty, but some of the poorest families still see their benefit capped, and there are shockingly high levels of child poverty in parts of my constituency, with 70% of children in Arundel ward and 61% of those in Princes Park ward growing up in poverty. The cap hits families with high needs: two thirds are single-parent families, more than half of whom had a child under five and over a quarter had a child under two. They are often forced to turn to food banks to survive as a result. The Trussell Trust provided 1,300 food parcels to children in Liverpool Wavertree last year. Will the Government build on the abolition of the two-child limit and review the benefit cap to ensure that families with very young children are protected from poverty?

Sir Stephen Timms: We will certainly keep the policy under review, but at the moment too many people are in poverty through being out of work, and the cap does help by increasing the incentive to work. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the scrapping of the two-child limit—2 million children will gain overall from that. There are 50,000 capped households who will not see a gain, but a large number will. One other point I should make is that childcare support within universal credit is not affected by the cap, so that is of further help.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): The House of Commons Library, quoting the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, reports that child poverty rates in Scotland are much lower than in England, at 23% compared with 31%, due at least in part to the Scottish child payment. In the light of this Government's mission to tackle the scourge of child poverty, can the Minister describe what measures the Government are planning, in addition to the abolition of the two-child cap—for example, scrapping the infamous bedroom tax?

Sir Stephen Timms: The hon. Member is right that the scrapping of the two-child limit is the key measure and will lead to 450,000 children moving out of poverty. Other measures in our child poverty strategy that we published last year will increase that number by another 100,000. That is going to be very welcome progress in Scotland as well as in the rest of the UK, and we will be keeping policies under review.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Well, there we heard it a moment ago: a Labour Back Bencher calling for yet more money to be spent on benefits. What we should be doing is talking about all the households who are avoiding the cap, when 100,000 households get over—

Paula Barker: Shame on you!

Mr Speaker: Order. We have to be very careful with our language, especially when you are on the panel of Chairs.

Helen Whately: Some 100,000 households get over £50,000 in benefits, and 16,000 households get over £60,000 in benefits. That gives them the same income as the top 10% of earners in this country. British people are sick and tired of footing the bill for “Benefits Street” and seeing welfare claimants living lives of luxury at their expense. The right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) has called for more collaborative politics, so will the Minister adopt our plan to toughen up the benefits cap and save £1 billion off the benefits bill?

Sir Stephen Timms: If there is a plan, I would be very interested to see it. We certainly have not seen any details of it. The hon. Member’s comments are a further example of her expressing dissatisfaction with the system left behind by her Government after 14 years. We are reforming the system and making sure it is doing the job we need it to do, and we will carry on with that programme of reform.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): Question 4, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: It is question 5.

Youth Hubs

5. **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on the expansion of youth hubs. [900666]

9. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress he has made on the expansion of youth hubs. [900670]

16. **Josh Dean** (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on the expansion of youth hubs. [900679]

17. **Jim Dickson** (Dartford) (Lab): What recent progress he has made on the expansion of youth hubs. [900680]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (**Pat McFadden**): We are making strong progress on expanding youth hubs, with around 130 already in operation across Great Britain. In March, I announced the locations that we want to open in this year, and I have just announced a further 180 locations for the following two years. The areas involved, including Harlow, Cardiff, Dartford and east Hertfordshire, will see new youth hubs opening in local sports clubs, libraries and other venues. Wherever MPs get a youth hub, I encourage them to work with their jobcentres and with local organisations to confirm venues and begin delivery of these important services.

Mr Barros-Curtis: I thank my right hon. Friend for that brilliant news, and I hope that they will focus on mathematics skills as well—I could do with some of that. Young people were left behind by the previous Conservative Government, with 13.2% in south-east Wales not in employment, education or training. Youth hubs offer personalised wraparound employment, skills

and wellbeing support in targeted areas, so does the Secretary of State agree that the new youth facilities in Cardiff football club and Ely in my constituency, with proper consultation, are a clear demonstration of Labour fixing the mess left by the Conservatives and giving young people the best opportunity in life?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is right, and I thank Cardiff football club for being a partner. We are supporting nearly 1 million young people and creating up to half a million opportunities for jobs and training. We are doing that by providing incentives for employers to hire, promoting apprenticeships and delivering a whole range of targeted programmes. Another important point about youth hubs is that they are not just available to people already signing on and on benefits; a significant proportion of young people not in education, employment or training are not claiming benefits, and the youth hubs are open to all of them, too.

Chris Vince: As you will be aware, Mr Speaker, my Harlow constituency is full of incredibly talented young people, some of whom I had the pleasure to meet at a recent Harlow college awards ceremony. Alan Milburn’s report makes it clear that young people are being let down by a broken system and deep-seated barriers, rather than by their own ambition, so will the Secretary of State outline how a youth hub in my constituency will make a massive difference to young people in Harlow, ensure that they get the skills that local employers are looking for, and build on the great work done by Harlow college?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend is a great champion of Harlow and the people of Harlow, and I believe he will make maximum use of the youth hub to advance opportunities for young people in his constituency. We are committed to giving the young people of Harlow the best possible chance in life. I recently visited the Netherlands, which has a youth inactivity rate significantly lower than ours, and youth hubs are an important part of its effort.

Josh Dean: There is already much excitement in my community that East Herts will be home to one of the new youth hubs being rolled out by this Labour Government. I represent a semi-rural area where young people often have to make significant journeys across or even outside the constituency to access the services and support they need. Rurality can be a barrier to finding support and work, so will the Minister say a little more about how the Department’s model for youth hubs will account for it? Does a youth hub have to be in one location or can it be split across multiple venues if the interest is there?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend raises an important point. As I said, we recognise that transport can be a real barrier for young people in rural areas, so we have designed youth hubs to be flexible and to work with local partners on tailoring delivery for what works best in each area. That can include offering more flexible opening hours or choosing locations that align with local transport patterns. The whole idea is to meet people where they are in the community and make services as easy as possible for them to use.

Jim Dickson: Constituents in Dartford are also pleased that our area has been chosen as one of the local authorities to receive a youth hub. We have a growing population of under-25s, all of whom are talented and enthusiastic and want to get into the workplace. Will the Secretary of State set out when that hub is likely to open, what services will be available and what difference it will make to the lives of young people in Dartford?

Pat McFadden: The Dartford youth hub is scheduled to open in the next financial year, and it will bring together a range of support. Youth hubs include mental health support, housing support, and skills and career opportunities all in one place. The whole idea is that people do not live their lives according to departmental boundaries, and the way that we help them should understand that and bring these departmental boundaries together. Our evaluation shows that young people at youth hubs are more likely to progress towards employment, and two thirds report that the support met their specific needs.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I cannot help thinking that, with youth hubs, the Government are trying to fix a problem of their own creation. The amount of young unemployed people in my constituency has gone up 23% since the Government took office in July 2024. Can I just let that figure sink in? Twenty-three per cent. The Secretary of State should be ashamed of what he has done to young people in the Gosport constituency. How has he done that? He has done it by ensuring that all the businesses that give young people the first foot on the employment ladder—hospitality, childcare or hair and beauty—have been poleaxed by the actions of this Government. Only this morning we heard—*[Interruption.]* Thank you, Mr Speaker. We heard the Prime Minister-in-waiting talking about the importance of creating growth. When will they realise that only businesses create growth, so get out of their way and let them do it?

Pat McFadden: As Alan Milburn pointed out in his recent report, the UK's NEET crisis is much more long-term and deep-seated than any decisions taken in the last few years. There are 400,000 more people in work than last year. The number of young people in employment is up by 74,000 since the election. It only went up by 1,000 during the Conservative party's 14 years in power. From tomorrow, we will open a process of hiring incentives of £3,000 for any business that wants to take on a young person who has been out of work for six months or more. Shame is not the emotion I feel; it is passion for opening up work and opportunity to more young people, and that is what we are doing.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): With the impeccable timing of an Olympic medallist and world record beater, the inspirational Fatima Whitbread is in Parliament today in room U in Portcullis House till 4 pm, stressing the importance for people like herself brought up in the care system of wraparound local authority hubs working with and including the education, sport, police and charity sectors. Will a member of the ministerial team—preferably more than one—take the trouble to leave this Chamber when questions end and go over and talk to Fatima about her interesting and constructive ideas in this important field?

Mr Speaker: I am not quite sure about the question, though it was a good twist on getting there.

Pat McFadden: Congratulations to Fatima Whitbread—a great British and Olympic hero. The right hon. Member is right about the importance of opportunity for care leavers from wraparound care—we are keen to do that. We want not just to help young people into work, but to help them after they have found work. We will certainly try to ensure that a member of the ministerial team calls into the event that he mentioned.

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): One of the key routes into employment that youth hubs can provide is supported internships. Will the Minister congratulate Young Somerset on helping people who have been failed by the education system into secure employment through supported internships? Will someone from the ministerial team meet me and Young Somerset to discuss cuts in funding and the reduction of those supported internships?

Pat McFadden: I am happy to congratulate Young Somerset on supported internships. I am sure the hon. Member will get a meeting with somebody in the ministerial team. As for his call for more funding, that has to sit alongside the many calls we have for more funding in this House every day.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I recently met Voices for Impacts youth advisory group in Glengormley. Unfortunately, the funding for its youth centre has been cut to one night per week. What encouragement can the Secretary of State give those young people that the youth hubs he is talking about can be extended to Northern Ireland?

Pat McFadden: I believe that these youth hubs are applicable to every part of the United Kingdom. Well done to the organisation in Glengormley that the hon. Member mentioned. Of course, the Northern Ireland Executive has its own funding, too, and many matters are devolved. But wherever young people are in the United Kingdom, I want them to know that this is a Government that wants to see more opportunity and more work for them and a helping hand to get them on that first vital step on the career ladder, which is often a good first job.

Youth Guarantee

6. **Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab/Co-op):** What recent progress he has made on implementing the youth guarantee. [900667]

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): As I said, earlier this spring we announced the expansion of youth hubs to all planned areas and the launch of phase one of the jobs guarantee for the long-term unemployed, first in six areas and later to the whole country. From today, we are rolling out expanded employment support for young people on universal credit to all jobcentres in Britain. As I mentioned, from tomorrow, we are opening the youth jobs grant, which will give employers a £3,000 hiring bonus to take on a young person who has been out of work for six months or more.

Andrew Pakes: The youth guarantee will play a crucial part in a city such as Peterborough where for too long, too many young people have been starting their adult life on benefits without the necessary skills. Just this month, the Minister for Social Security and Disability, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Sir Stephen Timms), cut the ribbon on the BRDG, a new partnership between Peterborough College, Inspire2Ignite and businesses to create more opportunities for young people, but we want to go further. Working with Inspire2Ignite, we are bringing together businesses, civic sector charities and others to launch the 3% club to cut the NEET level in Cambridgeshire to 3% and give young people the opportunities they need. Will my right hon. Friend explain how the Department can support frontline innovation and partnerships like that one? Will a Minister meet me with Inspire2Ignite and listen to the voices of young people as we turn this situation around?

Pat McFadden: I thank my hon. Friend for his commitment to expanding opportunity for young people in his constituency and to reducing the NEET youth rate. As he knows, I was pleased to open the Peterborough youth hub some months ago, and my Department is working with the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough strategic authority on the youth guarantee trailblazer. I congratulate Inspire2Ignite. I value positive feedback from the Minister's visit to the BRDG site, and I will ensure that my hon. Friend gets a meeting with a Minister to discuss these issues further.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): My local businesses such as Labman in Stokesley, Barkers and Sam Turner & Sons in Northallerton, and Metcalfe Farms in Leyburn are all excellent at providing opportunity for young people through apprenticeships. I note that the Government have introduced a welcome hiring incentive for the smallest businesses to take on young people, so will the Secretary of State congratulate my local businesses that are doing just that? Will the Government learn lessons from the kickstart scheme, which I believe the guarantee is somewhat modelled on, because we discovered that it is better to have an easy application process for the smallest businesses, to speed uptake and to ensure that they are aware of such initiatives? Such schemes are very beneficial, but we must ensure that businesses are aware of them and take them up to benefit young people.

Pat McFadden: I thank the right hon. Gentleman and send him commiserations for whatever has left him reliant on his crutches today. I am happy to congratulate the businesses he mentioned in his constituency. He raises a serious point: it is important not only to come up with the right policy, but to make it simple for businesses to use. That is something I have stressed to my officials; it is important that this scheme is simple to apply for. The money will be given in two instalments—one in the second month, and one in the fifth month—to ensure that hiring is sustained, but I entirely agree that good policy should be matched by a simple application process.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I am not surprised that Labour Ministers and Back Benchers are patting themselves on the back for their youth guarantee, but it is a sticking plaster solution to a problem of their

own creation. Rather than U-turn on their triple whammy of increased business costs, higher national insurance, higher wages and higher business rates, the Government would rather use the state to subsidise jobs for the same young people who businesses can no longer afford to employ. Will the Secretary of State finally concede that no amount of Government work programmes can undo the damage that they have done to the labour market and to opportunities for young people?

Pat McFadden: In his review Alan Milburn considered that issue and said that,

“the UK's NEET crisis is much more long-term and deep-seated than any decisions taken in the last few years.”

As I said earlier, 400,000 more people are in work this year than last year, and the number of young people in employment is up since the election. Our policies are designed to help business rally to the cause of getting more young people into work, and I am pleased that we are introducing hiring incentives of £3,000 to help businesses take on a young unemployed person who has been out of work for six months or more. There is a good reason to target that group with opportunity, because the longer people are on those benefits, the greater the consequences that can have for their lives in the long term. Their whole future is in front of them, which is why it is right that we help them.

Identifying Local Vulnerability

7. **John Milne** (Horsham) (LD): What progress his Department has made on the “identifying local vulnerability” project. [900668]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): The Government are committed to improving data sharing with local authorities, as part of our endeavours to improve services. We are taking forward work with local authorities on the “identifying local vulnerability” project, and that work will support enhanced data sharing across local and central Government. Work has already taken place to establish customer needs and ways of working, and future stages will focus on ensuring that the best technological solution is deployed.

John Milne: As the Minister knows all too well, the DWP's shortcomings can end in tragedy. Errol Graham was a benefits claimant who starved to death without heating, electricity or adequate food. His local council, his housing association, his GP and the DWP all held information highlighting risk, and if only they had been able to share it he would be alive today. The ILV project can show the whole picture, but the trial has faced delay after delay. Will the Minister commit to a firm delivery deadline?

Andrew Western: The hon. Gentleman is correct to recognise the importance of this work. Data sharing with local authorities is essential, particularly working on homelessness prevention, on young people not in education, employment or training and on supporting families. There is a rich seam here if we get this work right, and we expect to see early benefits from the roll-out of the scheme by 2027.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): In January, Storm Goretta slammed into Cornwall, bringing down trees and phonelines, and cutting off individual communities. I was shocked to hear about the story of an elderly couple who were trapped in their bedroom because their stairlift had broken, so villagers had to winch food to them for the weekend. What lessons have been learned from Storm Goretta in relation to the vulnerability project?

Andrew Western: I share my hon. Friend's shock and horror at that particular episode. If he sends me further details of that specific case, I will ensure it is fed into that work. From the data sharing that will be available, I envisage that there will be an ability to recognise where there is a particular and urgent need for access to services, such as the crisis resilience fund. If he writes to me in more detail, I will ensure that any lessons that can be learned are fed in.

Universal Credit: People in Employment

8. **Ian Byrne** (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of trends in the level of people in employment claiming universal credit. [900669]

The Minister for Employment (Dame Diana Johnson): The Department publishes data on universal credit and keeps labour market trends under review. In January 2026, 3.1 million people were on universal credit in employment, representing 37.8% of all claimants. Universal credit is designed to support people into and in work, allowing individuals to move into employment while continuing to receive support as their earnings increase.

Ian Byrne: As the proud parliamentary lead for the Right To Food UK Commission, I have heard powerful testimony from workers employed by large, profitable companies across the UK who are paid so little that they are driven to hardship, hunger and dependence on universal credit just to put food on the table. The DWP assesses that 1.2 million people on universal credit are working to their capacity, with their income topped up by the state because their wages are so low. That figure has increased threefold in six years. Does the Minister agree that the taxpayer should not be left to subsidise poverty pay paid by companies that employ more than 250 people? Will the Government require those companies to report on how many of their workers rely on universal credit because their wages are so low?

Dame Diana Johnson: I acknowledge what my hon. Friend says and I commend him for his work on the Right to Food UK Commission. I know that many people who work very hard doing important work in sectors like retail and care do not earn enough, so at the end of the week there is insufficient money and they rely on foodbanks. I invite my hon. Friend to come and talk to me about this so that we can discuss what we might be able to do about it.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The University of Cumbria has shown that average hill farm incomes are less than the national minimum wage in our communities and beyond. Despite their poverty, farmers of all kinds and small businesses often cannot

claim universal credit at all because of the way that universal credit is assessed on the basis of monthly income, when they might have fluctuating annual income. Will the Minister meet me and farmers' representatives to ensure that farmers in poverty get the support that they deserve?

Dame Diana Johnson: Yes, I am very happy to meet the hon. Gentleman.

Universal Credit: Care Leavers

10. **John Whitby** (Derbyshire Dales) (Lab): Whether he has made an assessment of the potential merits of ensuring that all care leavers are entitled to the same standard universal credit allowance. [900671]

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): We have been reminded already this afternoon of the experiences of Fatima Whitbread. Work is under way across Government to give care leavers access to the skills and wider support for sustained employment and career progression. Lower universal credit rates for younger claimants strengthen work incentives and encourage increased earnings over time.

John Whitby: This Government are rightly committed to breaking down barriers to opportunity, but care leavers still face disproportionate challenges as they move into independent adulthood. Will the Minister commit to reviewing the universal credit age-related rates for care leavers, with a view to ensuring that all 18 to 24-year-old care leavers receive the same rate of UC as those aged 25 and over?

Sir Stephen Timms: It is very important that we do not weaken the incentives for care leavers to start work and to progress once they are in work. At the moment, 40% of young care leavers are not in employment, education or training. That is a horrific statistic, so our response is to provide tailored Jobcentre Plus support. We also have the new youth jobs grant of £3,000, which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has referred to, which will be available from tomorrow. Care leavers under the age of 25 are eligible for the one-bedroom local housing allowance rate, rather than the shared accommodation rate, so there is a financial benefit there, but our focus is rightly on support into work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his answers, as always. In Northern Ireland, care leavers are really untold heroes in the work that they do. Many of us, in all our communities, understand the delivery of care that is provided. In relation to young people, has the Minister had an opportunity to talk to the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland to ensure that we can move forward with the speed that he seems to indicate? I understand that there are 19,000 young people between the ages of 16 and 24 in Northern Ireland without any employment, so there may be an opportunity here to do better.

Sir Stephen Timms: I would be delighted to have that conversation. I speak regularly to the Minister in Northern Ireland about matters in my portfolio, and I would be happy to cover this matter in our next conversation.

Child Poverty

11. **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What progress he has made on reducing levels of child poverty. [900673]

The Minister for Employment (Dame Diana Johnson): I thank my hon. Friend for her interest in this area. Through our child poverty strategy, we are already taking substantial action, including the expansion of free school meals eligibility, the removal of the two-child limit and the introduction of the £1 billion crisis and resilience fund. Actions in the strategy will lift 550,000 children out of poverty in '29-30, and the removal of the two-child limit could benefit around 1,650 children in York Central.

Rachael Maskell: Lifting children out of poverty will be this Government's greatest legacy. However, we know that around 4 million children will remain in poverty, so it is really important to go further. Last year, the former Prime Minister Gordon Brown suggested a levy on the gambling and betting industry to raise £3 billion and lift another 500,000 children out of poverty. Will the Minister ensure we do even more so that we have a greater legacy and ensure that the lives of those young people are changed forever because of the decisions of this Government?

Dame Diana Johnson: Like my hon. Friend, I am very proud of what the child poverty strategy will deliver. It may be worth reflecting on what the Chancellor said about child poverty at the end of last year in the Budget. She said that

"because I am tackling fraud and error in our welfare system, cracking down on tax avoidance and reforming gambling taxation, I can announce today, fully costed and fully funded, the removal of the two-child limit in full from April."—[*Official Report*, 26 November 2025; Vol. 776, c. 397.]

I hope that reassures my hon. Friend that that was taken into account in the decisions taken by the Chancellor.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): It was interesting to hear the Minister's comments in relation to the last question. In assessing progress on reducing levels of child poverty, what assessment has been made of hidden pockets of deprivation in places such as my own constituency? Overall child poverty in Guildford after housing costs is 13.2%, but in some of the neighbourhoods in my constituency, including the one where I was previously a councillor, that number rises to 50%. I continue to find that deeply shocking, and it presents very specific challenges in areas such as mine. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that children living in these pockets are not overlooked by their own policy?

Dame Diana Johnson: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. The child poverty strategy is a 10-year strategy. We are very clear that, as Ministers across Government, we need to be looking at all areas of what Government can do to address child poverty, and there is a key measure around deep material poverty that we need to look at. It is really important that we work with local councils, combined authorities and mayors, because there is some really good work going on in local areas to address those pockets, which might be missed in the overall picture. Local areas are very well aware of where more work needs to happen.

Benefits System: Bereaved Families

13. **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): What support is available for bereaved families through the benefits system. [900675]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): Losing a loved one is deeply distressing. DWP provides support through the bereavement support payment—a tax-free lump sum with up to 18 monthly payments for eligible partners. Help with funeral costs is available through the funeral expenses payment for those receiving income-related benefits. Additional support that may be available includes the bereavement run-on in universal credit, which extends support after the death of a partner, child or another adult in the household.

Chris Bloore: As the Minister probably knows, a petition calling for reform of the bereavement support payment has now passed 100,000 signatures and is backed by Widowed and Young, Gingerbread, and Cruse. Many families in Redditch are among those affected. Before the parliamentary debate on that petition, will the Minister engage with Widows Fight UK to ensure that all families facing this unbearable heartbreak have the support they deserve?

Andrew Western: I recognise the strong interest in this issue. I was aware of the petition, as well as the campaigning work that my hon. Friend has done in this space. I am very happy to receive any information that that organisation wishes to send to me in advance of the debate on the petition, and I look forward to participating in it.

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): I recently met members of bereaved families in my constituency, including Joe. They told me about the distress of knowing, while they are grieving, that the bereavement support payment ends after just 18 months, and despite the rising cost of living since the payment was introduced in 2017, it has not been uprated for 2026-27. Will the Government commit to uprate the support payment in line with inflation and review the 18-month limit?

Andrew Western: The hon. Member raises an important point. BSP is reviewed annually as part of the wider uprating process, so it would not be appropriate for me to make that commitment today. BSP is limited to 18 months because it is designed to support the acute period following bereavement. Longer-term financial support is delivered through the wider welfare system to those who are eligible, including universal credit and child benefit, and through other forms of local support where appropriate.

Supporting British Pensioners

14. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Reform): What recent steps he has taken to support British pensioners. [900677]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): The Government are committed to supporting British pensioners to enjoy a comfortable retirement after a lifetime of work. That is why we are raising the state pension throughout this Parliament via

the triple lock. That saw the state pension increase by 4.8% in April, boosting the level of the new state pension by £575 a year.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the Minister for his reply, but he will know that my borough of Havering has the second largest number of older people in the entirety of Greater London. Nearly a quarter of my constituents are within that age bracket, and they are losing out. I know that the Government's policy on the winter fuel allowance has changed, but it frightened them and made them ask whether Labour is really on their side. Will the Minister assure my constituents that the next Labour Administration will not target pensioners, but will give them the respect they deserve, and ensure that they have a happy and healthy retirement?

Torsten Bell: I can give the hon. Member the assurance he asks for, which is that this Labour Administration, like all Labour Administrations, are on the side of pensioners. Of course, he only defected earlier this year, so he was a Conservative MP during all 14 years of the Conservative party's disastrous last Government—a Government who saw pensioner poverty rise and left one in five of those aged over 75 on NHS waiting lists. That is what letting down pensioners looks like.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): Can the Minister set out what plans he has to make sure that today's workers—tomorrow's pensioners—enjoy a decent retirement?

Torsten Bell: That is a very important question. We need to make sure that those who will retire in 2050 can look forward to the same kind of comfortable retirements that many—not all, but many—of today's pensioners enjoy, and the honest answer is that we are not on track for that at the moment. This Government are taking a two-stage approach. We are driving up returns on pension savings now—that is what the Pensions Schemes Act 2026 does—but we are also doing the longer-term work through the Pensions Commission to look at exactly the question of how we make sure that tomorrow's pensioners can enjoy comfortable retirements. I promise that the commission will bring forward its report early next year.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): The Pensions Minister likes to spend a lot of time criticising the previous Government for their actions on pensioners. He also spends an awful lot of time talking up his legacy on helping pensioners, but his actions simply do not reflect the narrative. So far, he has capped salary sacrifice, there have been delays to the pensions dashboards, we have had retrospective changes to inheritance tax on pension pots, and—as we have heard—the Government are chasing hard-up pensioners for their winter fuel allowance. All of this creates uncertainty among savers and pensioners alike, so I will repeat the question asked by the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell): is the Pensions Minister hopeful that his successor will do a better job of looking after pensioners?

Torsten Bell: I am incredibly hopeful that this Government are doing a much better job than the previous Government in supporting pensioners, not only by driving

up the state pension, but by getting on with the much delayed reforms to our defined-contribution pension system, which the previous Government left on ice. We are also coming forward with something much more important, because the biggest betrayal of older generations in Britain today is the state in which the Conservatives left our national health service.

Social Security: Fraud and Error

15. **John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): What recent estimate he has made of the level of fraud and error in the social security system. [900678]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): Overall levels of fraud and error are the lowest since the pandemic at 3.2%, compared with the peak of 4.3% in financial year end 2022. That reduction of a quarter demonstrates sustained progress with our fraud and error measures. Building on that success, we have set a new ambition to reduce the rate to 2.8% by 2028-29, which would be the lowest cross-welfare overpayment rate since tax credits were introduced in 2003.

John Cooper: In Scotland, benefit fraud has effectively been decriminalised; the number of prosecutions is vanishingly small. Given that the Department for Work and Pensions continues to have a role in Scotland—administering some benefits, despite devolution—what can the Department do to tackle fraud there? It is happening here, and we have a two-tier system in Scotland.

Andrew Western: If the hon. Gentleman has specific concerns about how benefits are being administered and fraud is being investigated through the powers of the Scottish Parliament, I would very much appreciate it if he could write to me. In some instances, the way in which the Department and our Scottish Government counterparts will be investigating fraud means that we are now teed up to intervene at an earlier stage, where a number of the issues can be less serious. We can detect and act at a much earlier stage. That is beneficial in reducing fraud and for claimants.

Topical Questions

T1. [900687] **Tom Collins** (Worcester) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): Since our last DWP questions, both Alan Milburn and the Pensions Commission have published their respective interim reports on young people and on the current state of saving for retirement. I look forward to receiving their final reports later in the year. Earlier this month, I visited the Netherlands to see the impressive work of the Dutch Government to ensure that youth inactivity is a last resort, and I think there is much that we can learn. Finally, I put on record my thanks and best wishes to Sir Peter Schofield, the outgoing permanent secretary of the Department. He leaves after more than eight years at the helm of the DWP. I look forward to working with his successor, Dame Sarah Healey, who will be joining us as the new permanent secretary shortly.

Tom Collins: This Government have set out to change culture across the DWP in order to make it far more focused on people, not faceless processes. However, in my constituency of Worcester, people are finding that when DWP services have made mistakes, the reaction continues to be delay, denial and sometimes outright refusal to fix errors. What is the Secretary of State doing to improve the attitudes, values and approaches of frontline client-facing services?

Pat McFadden: It is important to treat customers properly and fairly and to remember that the DWP deals with some of the most vulnerable people in society. The Department takes safeguarding seriously. We have increased training, particularly for those involved in health assessments. If there are specific cases that my hon. Friend wishes to draw to my attention, I encourage him to provide me with the details.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I associate myself and those on the Opposition Benches with the Secretary of State's comments about the outgoing permanent secretary of the Department for Work and Pensions. I am sorry that this may be my last exchange with the Secretary of State, as we await the coronation of the king in the north and the appointment of his new team. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman is not sacked for telling the truth about his fellow Labour MPs, who just want to put up taxes to pay for more benefits. Does he think that our next Prime Minister will have the courage to take on those Labour MPs and bring down the benefits bill, or will the new PM bottle it like his predecessor did?

Pat McFadden: I enjoy our exchanges, and I welcome the opportunity that the shadow Secretary of State has given me to point out that in the past year I have said time and again that we have to change the question that the system asks from "What benefits are you entitled to?" to "How do we help you change your life?" The debate on how we reform the system has changed to one in which we are putting opportunity and work at the centre of what we do. That is what we are doing with the youth guarantee, and that is what we will continue to do.

Helen Whately: I heard no commitment from the Secretary of State that the benefits bill was going to come down any time soon. Labour can change its leader, but it is still the same old welfare party.

The right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) told us this morning that he is going to bring "Manchesterism" to the whole country. In Manchester, he is spending nearly three quarters of a million pounds on helping asylum seekers to claim benefits. British people are tired of seeing their hard-earned money being spent on handouts to foreigners. We cannot be a cash machine for the world. Does the Secretary of State think that this is a good use of taxpayers' money?

Pat McFadden: Of course, people should only receive benefits if they are properly entitled to and qualified for them. All this has to be underpinned by our being as caring and as passionate about wealth creation as we are about fair wealth distribution. That is what unites Labour people. We are asking the right questions, while the hon. Lady is still asking the wrong ones.

T5. [900691] **Josh Dean** (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): The Child Maintenance Service has told one of my constituents that because the father of her children is claiming benefits, he can pay her only £6.73 a week, even though the CMS is aware that he has an additional hidden income of £97,000. Sadly, that is not an isolated case. Will the Minister set out, for my constituent, what the Government are doing to strengthen enforcement so that such cases can be treated as criminal matters?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): My hon. Friend has made an important point. The Child Maintenance Service is committed to ensuring that separated parents support their children financially, and to ensuring that the assessment reflects the parents' true income. I am not familiar with the specifics of the case that my hon. Friend has raised, but my general view is that while enforcement powers are adequate, case complexity is often the challenge when it comes to proving where money is owed. If my hon. Friend wants to write to me about that specific case, I would be happy to look into it further on his behalf.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I welcome the Government's acceptance of a finding from the Liz Sayce review of carer's allowance overpayments in respect of the underuse of waivers, given that the households concerned are often the most vulnerable in society. Has a review of the use of waivers been undertaken, and what changes have been made for frontline staff?

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): As the hon. Member knows, we are working through the cases of those who were required to repay an overpayment over recent years. I am receiving an update every week on the number of cases that have been gone through and the number of people who have had an overpayment reduced or cancelled, and I would be happy to give the hon. Member further information about the progress of that work.

T7. [900694] **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): Support for young people wanting access to the world of work has never been more crucial, but the success of youth hubs will depend on their ability to connect with, be useful to and understand the needs of employers. What steps will the youth hubs take to ensure that they are communicating with businesses and understanding their needs?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend has raised an important point. This has to be a joint effort between the Government and employers. We had a great roundtable at No. 10 this morning with employers who are committed to expanding youth opportunity, and I have visited Merlin, an important leisure and hospitality business, which has agreed to take on 300 young people through our youth guarantee measures. Other businesses are signing up as well, and I encourage as many as possible to do so.

T2. [900688] **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Reform): The Minister should know that although the triple lock remains in place, it is not as effective as it should be because of fiscal drag. A lot of pensioners are now paying tax, as the threshold has not been increased

since 2021. Will he please do something for the hard-working pensioners of this country, who deserve better in their retirement?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): I recognise the hon. Gentleman's point, and we need to fund the NHS to stop letting down older generations. Taxes have consequences that affect the whole population, including pensioners. The Chancellor has set out that the level of the personal allowance will remain above the level of the new and the basic state pension—the headline rates—throughout this year. In future years we will ensure that we ease the administrative burden for pensioners who have small amounts of tax due.

T8. [900695] **Dame Nia Griffith** (Llanelli) (Lab): In the consultation on surplus flexibilities for defined pension schemes, the Pensions Minister explained that trustees could offer employers surplus extraction of pension funds on condition of restoring the value of pre-1997 pensions. In drawing up the regulations, will he ensure that trustees are required to commission an independent assessment of pre-1997 pension erosion, ringfence funds to restore full pension value, and restore pension value to members ahead of any surplus extraction by employers?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend and I have discussed this issue on a number of occasions, and she has been an important campaigner for pensioners in her constituency who have been affected by it. Although three quarters of schemes provide some degree of pre-1997 indexation, there is a very real impact on members of schemes that do not—indeed, we have discussed that with local pensioners in south Wales. The surplus reforms that this Government are bringing forward will make it easier for some trustees to negotiate for additional indexation. We launched a consultation on this issue on 10 June, and it runs until 2 September. I will take my hon. Friend's comments as input for that consultation.

T4. [900690] **Sarah Olney** (Richmond Park) (LD): One in 50 Londoners, including one in 21 children, are homeless and living in temporary accommodation. London boroughs are spending £5 million a day on temporary accommodation. Although housing costs have skyrocketed in the past 15 years, the temporary accommodation subsidy gap has remained frozen since 2011. Some councils are now struggling to fund other important areas, such as social care. Will the Minister commit to urgently reviewing the temporary accommodation subsidy gap, to ensure that councils are fairly reimbursed?

Sir Stephen Timms: I can assure the hon. Member that my Department is working very closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to look at what we need to do between us to address the problem of homelessness. I note the point she raises, which is one of the points for discussion.

T9. [900696] **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): The number of young people not in employment, education or training should concern us all, so I was delighted to see the announcement earlier this month of a new youth hub for Adur. Can the Secretary of State set out how it will set young people up for success in my constituency?

Pat McFadden: The youth hub will be able to help young people by treating them as human beings and bringing together holistic support to get them into employment, including in mental health, housing, and essential and vocational skills. As I said, it is about breaking down the barriers between Departments and seeing youngsters as people. So far, 67% of young people using youth hubs report that the support has met their needs.

T6. [900693] **Adam Dance** (Yeovil) (LD): The universal credit team have admitted that they made the wrong decision on whether my constituent had to pay the bedroom tax for a room to care for his son, but they have only backdated payments to 25 May 2025, rather than 1 July 2024. Can the Minister ensure that my constituent gets a full refund, and set out how we are going to stop future errors on universal credit decisions?

Sir Stephen Timms: There is a limit on how far back applications can be backdated, but if the hon. Gentleman would like to drop me a line with the details, I will make sure that we have a good look at the case he raises.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): The Pensions Minister knows that there is no retirement on a dead planet, so will he commit to writing to the 50 largest UK pension funds to ask them to set out their timetable for divesting from fossil fuels?

Torsten Bell: My hon. Friend is a consistent campaigner on these issues in this place and in our regular meetings, and I always learn something from those conversations. I am not going forward with exactly the suggestion he brings forward, but I agree that there is more we can do, not least to provide clarity for trustees. We are working with industry to develop guidance clarifying that fiduciary duties allow trustees investing in members' best interests to consider systemic risks, including climate change, and we will consult later this summer.

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): The increased PIP costs are expected to add an extra £5 billion to the welfare budget this year. As the TaxPayers' Alliance has highlighted, the number of households earning over £100,000 and getting PIP has doubled to 200,000 claimants. Will the Minister make an assessment of the potential merits of means-testing PIP to ensure targeted support?

Sir Stephen Timms: Together with disabled people, we are co-producing a review of PIP to ensure that it is fair and fit for the future. The review's terms of reference reflect the view of successive Governments that PIP should be a non-means-tested cash benefit for people both in and out of work, because anybody can incur additional costs as a result of long-term ill health or disability.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Sadly, Dudley borough was named in Alan Milburn's "Young people and work" report as the worst performing borough in the country for tracking 16 and 17-year-olds—for over a thousand 16 and 17-year-olds, it was unknown whether they were working, in school or in college, or what they were doing at all. Can the Secretary of State outline what the Department is doing to ensure that we do not lose sight of these young people, as we have done in Dudley, so that we can give them the opportunities they need?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. We cannot allow young people to drop out and to drop out of sight of the system. It is really important, especially for 16 and 17-year-olds, because we want to see participation in education or training up until the age of 18. On my visit to the Netherlands, I saw how it takes this really seriously, with effort after effort to stop young people dropping out. I think we can learn from that and about tracking young people more closely.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): There are now over 1 million young people not in education, employment or training, which is the highest number in more than a decade. When the history books are written on this period of Government, does the Secretary of State agree that the story will be of a lost generation?

Pat McFadden: When the history books are written about this, they will show that this number rose by a quarter of a million in the last three years during which the hon. Member's party was in power, and the Conservatives did precisely nothing about it. That is what the history books will show. We are responding with a youth guarantee that puts work and opportunity at the heart of welfare reform. I wish they had done it—they did not—but we are.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): One of my constituents is a former care leaver who is facing immense health conditions and he can no longer work. Given the lack of family and social support that many care leavers experience, they are uniquely vulnerable to financial insecurity. Can the Minister confirm that the experiences of care leavers are being considered as part of the Timms review?

Sir Stephen Timms: If the care leavers are PIP recipients—I think that is probably the case in the example my hon. Friend has given—we are certainly considering that point. If this issue is one that she thinks we need to reflect on in the review, I would be keen to hear about such experiences.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Bereavement benefits have not been uprated for 10 years, and they simply do not recognise the lifelong impact of early bereavement on children and surviving parents. Will the Minister look again at uprating bereavement support benefits in line with inflation?

Andrew Western: I appreciate the point the hon. Lady is making. I am not in a position to confirm an uprating from the Dispatch Box, but this will be considered in the usual way as part of the annual uprating process. There is a forthcoming debate in Westminster Hall in response to a petition on the adequacy of bereavement support payments, and I am sure she will participate fully in that debate, if she is able to, to make the case further.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): Many young people and children on disability living allowance end up going on to PIP very readily. While it is of course important that people get support, what work is the Secretary of State doing to ensure that those young people are not written off, but given every opportunity to work?

Pat McFadden: My hon. Friend raises a really important point. There should not be an automatic transition. We also have to consider the life chances of people on long-term sickness benefits. So this is worth considering, while always making sure that people in need of disability benefits get the help and support they need to lead as full a life as possible.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I recently visited Grimsby jobcentre and met Nick Gregory and Jo Corney, two excellent officials. One piece of information they gave me was about the opening of a youth hub in Scunthorpe, which will serve many parts of my constituency, but many of the young people who go will be from rural areas. What new initiatives are the Government planning to help provide work for young people in rural areas?

The Minister for Employment (Dame Diana Johnson): I agree with the hon. Gentleman's comments about the excellent DWP officials in our area. Youth hubs will be in areas where we are working with, say, sports clubs and other organisations. We are also looking at whether we can use buses to get mobile youth hubs out to rural areas in particular, so perhaps that is a conversation we can carry on outside to see what we can do.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): Before being elected to this place, I spent many years looking at how we can tackle the NEET crisis. Does the Secretary of State agree that we should be ambitious for our young people and aim to have 0% NEETs?

Pat McFadden: I have discussed this with my hon. Friend. There are great schools I have visited that have a record of NEET zero. They do that by paying attention to employability and work right from year 7, so I believe there is more that can be done to reduce the figure and put work and opportunity at the heart of the reform of the system that we are bringing forward.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Reform): Unemployment is soaring and nearly 1 million young people are not in education or training. It is a terrible waste of human potential and an economic catastrophe. Reform is proposing that we scrap the damaging jobs tax and pay for that with a new levy on migrant labour, which would make it much, much easier to employ British workers. Will the Secretary of State consider this and put British workers first?

Pat McFadden: If the right hon. Gentleman has just noticed that there are 1 million young people not in education, employment or training, one has to ask what was he doing when he was a Minister in the last Government when the figures went up by a quarter of a million and he said nothing at all about it? We have brought forward a youth guarantee that will put work and opportunity at the heart of the reform of the system. That is in stark contrast to his record of complete inaction on this issue when he was in a position to do something about it.

Damien Egan (Bristol North East) (Lab): Baroness Morris's inquiry into white working-class children has identified how, from early years to future jobs, white British boys on free school meals are falling well behind. How will Ministers, with all the reviews going on and all

the work under way, review and incorporate this inquiry's findings into their work, particularly in relation to jobs and skills?

Pat McFadden: I welcome my hon. Friend's question. The report published today is really important, and it shows the lack of opportunity for white working-class children at schools. Our agenda of maximum opportunity for young people and of not letting people drop out and be left behind is really important in getting more opportunity for this group of young people.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Local businesses in Bognor Regis and Littlehampton tell me that they are not recruiting due to the additional cost and uncertainty created by the Employment Rights Act 2025. Has the Secretary of State assessed the impact of Government policy? Employment rights count for little if people cannot get a job in the first place.

Pat McFadden: I encourage local businesses in the hon. Lady's constituency to look at the new incentives available from tomorrow. They can access a hiring incentive of £3,000 to help them with the cost of taking on a young person, provided that person has been out of work for six months or more. We want to do that in partnership with business. It is an important policy and I look forward to her being a champion of it in her constituency.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Last week I attended the Warwickshire employer and stakeholder conference, where we heard from students, alumni and businesses who are providing time to young people so that they can gain the skills they need—it was very inspiring and moving. Does my right hon. Friend agree that more needs to be done to encourage businesses to provide even more hours? Warwickshire College has said that this is a real challenge.

Pat McFadden: I agree with my hon. Friend that we need to work with businesses. I want this to be seen as a national cause, a national endeavour, and a good partnership between business and Government, because it is in the whole country's interests to make maximum use of the very best resource we have, which is the talents of the British people themselves.

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): Sadly, Leicester South is not immune to the unemployment figures for young people—1,000 young people and counting. My concern is that AI is about to make it even worse, especially as CEOs are citing lower human capital value as justification for replacing workers with AI. What is the Secretary of State's Department doing to ensure that technological advancements create opportunity, rather than unemployment?

Pat McFadden: The hon. Member raises an important question, which young people themselves are alive to. AI is an all-purpose technology; it will both destroy and create jobs. The leadership task is to ensure that this country is best placed to use the technology and is a good home for investment in it, as well as ensuring that AI adds to the skills of our people.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): On 17 July, I am hosting the Journey to Work expo in Stafford, bringing together successful major employers and local businesses, with the focused aim of getting young people into work. Last year, we had more than 300 people attend. Can the Minister tell me how the youth guarantee will reach young people in towns such as Stafford, and what support is available to communities already doing that kind of work?

Pat McFadden: I congratulate my hon. Friend on being a fantastic champion for Stafford and her constituents. The youth guarantee will help young people in her constituency through hiring incentives, apprenticeship changes and more work experience placements. I know that she will work with me and the rest of Government to be a champion of opportunities for the young people of Stafford.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): Given that benefit fraud is estimated at around £9 billion, and that the WASPI women are apparently willing to have the cost of their just compensation claim capped at around a third of that figure, can someone from the ministerial team confirm that the Government are willing to change course and negotiate with the WASPI women?

Torsten Bell: The hon. Member will know that a judicial review claim has been filed, and that we cannot comment on live litigation. There are legitimate views on raises in the state pension age, particularly the 2011 acceleration put in place by the coalition Government, but the investigation that is being considered by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman is not about those increases; it is purely on the narrow point about communication. The Government have made their position clear on that and set it out in the decision document placed in the House of Commons Library.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): Safeguarding has been a key focus of the Work and Pensions Committee, so I was shocked to hear that my constituent Barbara Skedd received a letter to her executors, incorrectly notifying them of her death. This resulted in Barbara's benefits being stopped, including the personal independence payment and all her pensions. My team have been working hard to get those reinstated. Can the Secretary of State outline what steps he is taking to ensure that those kinds of errors are minimised, and that the appropriate package of support is put in place so that when errors do occur, they are dealt with quickly?

Andrew Western: I thank my hon. Friend for raising what is an incredibly important case to highlight. I appreciate that it will have been a deeply distressing experience for her constituent and I apologise for that. I can confirm that all payments, thanks in part to my hon. Friend's ministrations, have now been fully restored and any arrears owed have been issued. Given the seriousness of the investigation, the case remains under active consideration so that we can look into the circumstances that allowed it to arise and ensure that nothing like it happens again.

Prisoner Early Release

3.48 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Justice if he will make a statement on the early release of rapists and child groomers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): Those who perpetrate heinous crimes must face the full force of the law. Under this Government, convictions for child sex offences are at a record high. At the end of this Parliament, more criminals will be behind bars than ever before. However, this Government inherited a prison system on the brink of collapse—at one point, fewer than 100 places were left in the whole estate.

Without the Sentencing Act 2026, which received Royal Assent in January, the courts would be at risk of grinding to a halt, preventing sex offenders and others from being brought to justice. No space in prisons would mean no trials, no justice for victims and no punishment for offenders. That is the choice: strict licence conditions in the community for those who have already served time in prison under our reforms, or the entire collapse of the system, leaving sex offenders and others acting with impunity.

The previous Government added just 500 prison places to the system in 14 years, in stark contrast to this Government, who are delivering the largest prison expansion since the Victorian era. We have delivered 3,100 additional places in under two years, and are on track to deliver almost 11,000 more by 2031.

Under our reforms, dangerous offenders will continue to be locked up for a long time. More than 18,000 offenders serving life or extended sentences will not be affected by changes to release points and will remain subject to Parole Board decisions. Offenders who are released will face strict licence conditions, closer probation supervision for the most dangerous offenders, exclusion zones, tagging, 24/7 tracking and curfews. This is the biggest expansion of tagging in history, ensuring that dangerous offenders are monitored and the public are protected. If risk in the community becomes unmanageable, those offenders can be recalled to prison.

The previous Government left prisons on the verge of collapse. This Government are safely delivering the reforms needed to end the cycle of capacity crises and protect the British public.

Dr Mullan: Imagine being the victim of a serious crime—as serious as rape or child grooming—and receiving a letter saying that the perpetrator who harmed you is going to be let out of prison early. Appallingly, that is the experience right now for thousands of victims of crime, including the victims of some of the most serious crimes imaginable, thanks to the changes that have been made to our sentencing laws by this Labour Government, helped by the Liberal Democrats.

Before Labour MPs and the Minister tell us again, as he has already done, that this is being done as a result of prison overcrowding, I want every Member of the House to be crystal clear about the actual choice that this Government are making. The previous Labour Government released 80,000 prisoners early; the previous Conservative Government also operated early release programmes, as this Government have—that is not new. However, those

schemes excluded serious sexual offenders. Do Labour MPs really want to tell their constituents that they support the early release of rapists and child groomers when there are existing schemes that could be used to avoid that?

I pay tribute to grooming gangs campaigner Fiona Goddard, who, like many others, refused to be silent when she received her letter. Fiona's abusers were sentenced to between 16 and 20 years in prison in 2019; now, she says that the justice she got in that courtroom is being snatched away from her, and she is right. What did the Labour Government say to the journalist who raised her case? They said that the most serious offences would be excluded. Labour told a victim of rape, sexual assault and grooming that her offenders were not serious enough to be excluded from early release—disgraceful.

We are just a matter of weeks away from these serious offenders coming out, and we still do not know how many are being released and what crimes they have committed, so thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. The Government cannot cover up what they are doing to victims any longer; they must tell us today how many criminals—how many rapists and child groomers—are going to be released early, when they are going to be released and exactly what crimes they have committed.

I am confident that when the public understand what is being done in their name, there will be an outcry. Our incoming Prime Minister will have a choice: to act in the interests of rapists and paedophiles or to stand up for victims. What will it be?

Jake Richards: I have listened to the hon. Member speak about this issue a lot, and I must again remind him of his party's record in government and why the Sentencing Act was an absolute necessity to keep the criminal justice system functioning.

When we came into office, prisons were at bursting point. Only 500 prison places were added in 14 years. Some 10,000 offenders were released by the previous Government, largely in secret. That is the key point, Mr Speaker. The hon. Member has quite rightly and understandably asked how the scheme will be delivered and how victims will be kept informed. Under the Conservatives, it was pure chaos. They lost their grip on the system and did not have a long-term plan for stability in the prison estate, which meant that when they did have to operate early release mechanisms, they gave the victims just a few days' notice, if any at all. There was complete secrecy and complete chaos. We will not let that happen to the British public again.

There is a choice. No alternative has been offered by the Opposition to the prison crisis that they created. There is a choice: strict—

Mr Speaker: Order. We do not need to worry about what the Opposition's position is. The question is to the Government—it is about what you are going to do. I also have a constituent who received a letter; I have to say, this is a very serious issue across the country.

Jake Richards: Let me be very clear, Mr Speaker. The Sentencing Act, which received Royal Assent in January, sets out some provisions that will come into effect in September. We are determined to ensure that victims receive due notification in good time, not just because

[*Jake Richards*]

we believe that the Government have a responsibility to let them know, but because we know that victims need to play a role in the licence conditions that we set.

It is vital that victims' voices are heard. That is why we have already begun communication with victims' groups and, indeed, with victims who are party to the victim contact scheme. We will go further and ensure that all those who are party to the scheme receive precise information on their case—not just because we want to let them know, but because we want to hear from them to ensure that when we put in the most robust licence conditions in the community, victims' voices are at the heart of the decisions we make. That is absolutely right, and that is not what happened under the Conservative Government.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham Yardley) (Lab): I recognise that very few rapists went to prison under the previous Administration and that the increase in rapists, especially child rapists, going to prison under this Government has been huge. I congratulate the Government on that. It is, however, my opinion that there should be more exemptions within the release scheme, and we should all be working together to see if child rapists can be included in that, should the numbers allow it, because we also cannot let the prison system end.

I would like to ask a really specific question about the risk assessments that will be done on these cases before release. I have to say that my experience of risk assessment in these cases is not great. It does not take account of the victim or public safety more broadly. Can we have an assurance that there has been a change to the risk assessments regime from how it was under the previous Administration, so that any risk assessment done on the release of any prisoner will ensure that we are actually safe in public?

Jake Richards: Let me first pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work she did both in government and in opposition on these issues. She has raised with me outside the Chamber the issue of pre-sentencing reports, in particular in relation to domestic abuse. As she knows, I have spoken with Lord Timpson and we will come back to her on those specific measures.

My hon. Friend is right to raise the issue of community safety. We have invested £700 million into the probation system—the biggest investment in probation for a generation—and recruited more probation officers than ever before. For the first time in several decades, the caseload of the average probation officer is coming down, in contrast to the record highs reached under the Conservatives.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I pay tribute to the victims and survivors of some of the most appalling, heinous crimes for their bravery in speaking out about the fear they have felt after receiving letters from the Ministry of Justice informing them that their perpetrators might be let out early. I understand that the purpose of the letters is to ensure that victims have the opportunity to engage with licence conditions, but what other support will be available to those victims who understandably feel retraumatised and let down by the justice system?

In the other place, the Prisons Minister made a commitment that those released early would be subject to intensive supervision, supported by a significant programme of electronic tagging. The Liberal Democrats were clear that the Government could bring forward those measures only if the Probation Service was adequately resourced to achieve this in the community. The Prisons Minister agreed to an annual review of the state of probation and its ability to cope with the changes. When can we expect the first review?

Finally, the Government inherited a prison system that was running so hot that they were at risk of losing the ability to lock up any offender. Can the Minister guarantee from the Dispatch Box that no victim will ever again be given just two days' notice, or in some cases no notice, of their perpetrator being released, as they have suffered in recent years?

Jake Richards: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I will deal with her three points. As I said in my earlier response, we are determined to ensure that victims' voices are heard. We have invested £15 million in victim support services, and victim liaison officers will clearly be involved in many of those cases. The Victims Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson), is beside me on the Front Bench and will have heard her very important point.

The hon. Lady is right that public safety can be ensured only by investing in probation. That is why we have made the biggest investment in a generation—£700 million—and that investment is now beginning to bear results, with caseloads coming down significantly for the first time in a long time.

The hon. Lady is absolutely right that we need to give due notice to victims of what is happening with their perpetrators so that they are informed and are involved in the process. Under the last Government that did not happen, but it will happen now. I gently remind Members that some victims have opted out of the contact service. We cannot say today that all victims will be contacted, but all those who are involved with the contact service will receive that notice.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): We all accept that the prison capacity crisis requires difficult decisions to be made, but when Parliament passed the Sentencing Act, Ministers assured the House that the most serious and heinous offenders and those who commit the gravest crimes will continue to face the toughest sentences. Does the Minister not accept that most people would regard the actions of members of grooming gangs who have sexually abused, raped and exploited children—and child sex offenders more generally—as falling within the ordinary meaning of the most serious and heinous offences? If so, why are those not excluded from the release scheme?

Can I say, as a local Member of Parliament, that I am disgusted that according to local news reports—the Government have not informed local MPs—Shabir Ahmed, the leader of the Rochdale grooming gang, who was an Oldham resident, is due to be released this week? He was convicted of crimes in relation to Rochdale victims, but we all know that for every victim who went through the court process other victims did not, so the idea that Oldham is somehow not affected by the evil of this person is ridiculous. May I urge the Minister please to

look at that case in particular as well as the rules that are allowing this to be normalised? It cannot be allowed to be normalised.

Jake Richards: Let me thank my hon. Friend for his question. I will of course not just look into that case but meet him urgently to discuss it. I gently say that the provisions in the Sentencing Act, which was passed in January, have not come into effect yet; they begin in September. I do not know the details of that case—I will look into them urgently and meet him—but on the face of it the case falls outside the new legislation that we have passed. I will certainly make sure to meet him urgently.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I welcome the news that Keighley and Bradford is finally getting an independent grooming gangs inquiry. It has been a long fight, but for survivors like Fiona Goddard, who I spoke to again last night, the news has been bittersweet. The fact that Fiona and many other victims and survivors of the most horrific sexual violence have been written to by the Government to inform them that the very rapists and paedophiles convicted of abusing them could be released as early as September is an absolute disgrace. Fiona's life has been turned upside down, and she and many others live in fear right now, and they also fear being retraumatised by a system that is diminishing the horrors that happened to them. I ask the Minister directly: will he guarantee now from the Dispatch Box that Fiona's perpetrators will not be released early?

Jake Richards: Let me thank the hon. Member not just for his question but for the work he has done in good faith on this issue for a number of years. I gently say to him, as I have said before—this is difficult, no doubt—that the Sentencing Act is only on the statute book because of the failure of the Conservative Government over 14 years to build appropriate prison places.

Before coming to this place, I spent a large part of the previous decade working with victims of grooming gangs. I take this issue incredibly seriously, as I know the hon. Member does, and I respect him for the work he has done on it. But in 2022 Professor Jay's report offered a series of recommendations on this very important issue for the hon. Gentleman's community, my community and those across the country, and he will know, as he sits on the Home Affairs Committee, that when she gave evidence to that Committee at the beginning of 2025, she spoke of how she was ignored month after month by successive Conservative Home Secretaries. So we will not be taking lessons on this issue from the Conservative party.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for coming to the Dispatch Box and answering questions on a particularly important issue. I join my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips) in being concerned not only about rapists being released early, but about the low conviction rates in rape cases. What are the Government doing to deal with that? What specifically can the Minister do to assure me that if any prisoners are released early—for whatever crime they have committed—they are being effectively monitored so that residents in Harlow feel safe, particularly given the mess and the two-tier probation service we were left with by the Conservative party?

May I also ask the Minister about tagging? We have all heard stories about tags not being fit for purpose, with people able to take them off. What can we do to ensure that if people are tagged on release, those tags cannot be taken off?

Jake Richards: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. As I have said, under this Government convictions for child sexual offences are at a record high. There is more work to be done in this area, and I know that my hon. Friend the victims Minister and others are working to ensure that we have even more robust investigation and punishment of those who commit these serious offences. As we set out in the Sentencing Act, we have also implemented the most robust community package ever, including exclusion zones, tagging, 24/7 tracking, curfews and the biggest expansion of tagging in history, to ensure that dangerous offenders are monitored and the public protected. We must ensure that the tagging system is robust, and we will do so.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): In June, 20 grooming gang perpetrators were jailed for offences in West Yorkshire, which included the rape and abuse of three girls of whom the youngest was aged just 12. Abbas Kaji was sentenced to just seven years for rape, and Mohammed Ishtiaq Hussain to just eight. All too soon, these vile men will be back on the streets of the very communities that they terrorised, and the idea that the Government could cut their sentences to be even shorter is terrifying. This is not about the past but about the present and the future, so can the Minister please assure the House that everybody involved in grooming and rape gang offences will, at the very least, serve the entirety of their already too-short sentences?

Jake Richards: Once again, I am happy to meet the hon. Lady or indeed the appropriate Member of Parliament to look at the details of that case. We need to make sure that we have enough prison places to ensure that those who commit these serious offences serve time at all, and that is what the Sentencing Act, complemented by the biggest prison building programme since the Victorian era, will do.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): I was contacted by a constituent who had received one of these letters earlier this week. The offender in question was a vile monster responsible for decades of sexual abuse, and he was sentenced to 30 years for 31 counts of sexual assault, rape and processing indecent images. He has served less than five years. Can the Minister explain how these are not the most heinous crimes, and how an offender like this is still eligible for this scheme? Can he also reassure residents that they will be written to as soon as possible to set their minds at rest, if their abusers are indeed going to be part of this scheme?

Jake Richards: I am very happy to meet the hon. Member—and indeed his constituent, if helpful—to discuss those cases. As I have set out before, 18,000 offenders serving life or extended sentences will not be affected by the changes at all, but I am happy to look into the particulars of that case.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): The Minister has heard quite clearly from Members on both sides of the House the real concern

[Sir Gavin Williamson]

about what was said at the Dispatch Box about those who had committed the most serious and heinous crimes not actually being released under this scheme. That is where the biggest dispute is in relation to this. Could the Minister please pledge to the House that he will go back to the Department and review this, and ensure that all those who have committed rape or been convicted of child grooming and who look as if they are getting early release are excluded from this scheme?

Jake Richards: We will always do what we need to do to ensure that we have a functioning criminal justice system and a prison system that can keep the public safe, and that is what we will continue to do.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The British people will be absolutely disgusted and revolted that these child grooming gang perpetrators and rapists might be released early. Reform's position is clear: they should receive mandatory whole of life sentences. If the excuse from this Government is that there is a shortage of places, why do they not get on and deport the 10,000 foreign nationals clogging up our jails?

Jake Richards: Deportation of foreign national offenders is at record highs under this Government and we will continue to work to ensure that we deport those foreign national offenders who should not be here. I think the justice spokesperson for Reform is the hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin). She recently said that 1.2 million people should be put in prison every year. There is no serious plan from Reform that keeps our country safe.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): Last week, the Government announced the first areas to be investigated as part of the rape gang inquiry, yet under their new Sentencing Act, rapists and child groomers will be released early from prison. The Minister must see that putting these criminals on the streets not only makes an absolute mockery of Labour's rape gang inquiry but goes to prove that Labour was never serious about having one or locking up those perpetrators.

Jake Richards: As I have said, there was an inquiry into these issues, which was begun by the last Conservative Government. The chair of that inquiry, Professor Alexis Jay, said that their response was

"inconsequential, insubstantial, committed to nothing."

Victims waited years for action and got nothing. There were briefings that it was "hysterical and half baked", and highly emotional, and the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson said that money spent on child sex abuse inquiries was being "spaffed up the wall". I will not take any lessons from the right hon. Lady or the Conservative party on this issue.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr, Lefarydd. Richard Tung of Penisa'rwaun, Caernarfon, is in prison after being found guilty of historical rape and sexual offences against a child in Nottingham. He was reported to Nottinghamshire police in 2022, but his first police interview was not until June 2023. Concerns have been raised with me that

Tung remained at liberty and free to work in a restaurant in my constituency until he was sentenced to 12 years in prison on 17 April this year—four years later. Will the Minister advise me on how to find out why Tung was not remanded to custody prior to the court case and, given that this is a cross-border police force issue, what child protection and public safety measures should be put in place between Nottinghamshire police and North Wales police?

Jake Richards: As the right hon. Member knows, questions as to whether a defendant should be remanded are a matter for the judiciary. I am happy to look into the particulars of this cross-border issue and the matter of local protective agencies working together to keep the public safe, and will get back to her.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): One reason that the present Prime Minister has lost the trust of the public is his refusal, time and again, to give straight answers to straight questions. My Front-Bench colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan), asked a straight question: how many rapists and how many child abusers are scheduled for early release? Either the Minister is not answering because he does not know the answers, in which case he should tell us that, or he does know the answers but is refusing to give them. Which is it?

Jake Richards: When the Sentencing Act went through Parliament, we had a number of debates, and an impact assessment was published. The numbers are contained in there.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Any victim of rape or child sexual abuse will know that securing a conviction is almost impossible. I am absolutely astonished that those incarcerated for raping children are not excluded from this early release scheme. However, given that the Government are including them, and given the absolute mess made of the Probation Service by the previous Conservative Government's reforms, will the Minister guarantee from the Dispatch Box that the Probation Service is now adequately staffed, funded and equipped to closely monitor these awful perpetrators, who are being let out of prison way too early?

Jake Richards: Yes, Lord Timpson, the Minister in the other place who is responsible for the Probation Service, has undertaken huge reforms to how the Probation Service operates, which are backed up by investment. I am confident that we have a robust probation system that is ready for the challenge ahead.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): During the passage of the Sentencing Act, we were told that the perpetrators of the "most serious, heinous crimes" would not be included in these measures, so can the Minister explain why the Government do not think that the rape of children is one of the most serious and heinous crimes, and how many individuals who committed it will be coming out early?

Jake Richards: As I have already said, more than 18,000 offenders serving life and extended sentences, including rapists and those who have committed the most heinous offences, are not affected by the Sentencing Act provisions

at all. I need to be abundantly clear that we will never let happen what we inherited from the Conservative Government, which is that there were no prison places. We were running out of prison places, which meant that the whole criminal justice system was on the verge of collapse. Never again.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): My constituent was recently told that the person who was found guilty of grooming his child on social media could be released as part of the early release scheme. Does the Minister recognise the distress that that sort of news causes victims? Will he also tell the Yeovil constituency what progress the Government have made on increasing prison places and strengthening the Probation Service in the south-west? Victims do not just want to feel heard; they want to feel safe.

Jake Richards: The hon. Member is absolutely right to raise the concern among constituents who have received these letters, but the purpose of the letters and the engagement is to ensure that we work with victims so they are informed of the situation and their voice is heard. That did not happen under the previous Government, who had to rush out communication because they had completely lost control of the system.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I would expect the Minister to know the numbers, and this question has been asked many times, so I am going to give him another attempt: how many rapists and sexual offenders will be released early under the Sentencing Act?

Jake Richards: As I said, the impact assessment published during the Sentencing Act's passage through Parliament set out very clearly that 7,500 prison places would be saved as a result of the Act.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Minister talks a good game about prison numbers, but he will know very well from the many exchanges we have had on the issue that there are a lot of prison places that this Government have yet to deliver. Prison contractor ISG went bust in September 2024, and because the Government sat idle for 18 months without appointing new contractors, 3,500 prison places were not delivered—places that would have meant that the Government did not need to release prisoners early now. I have a male sex offenders prison in my constituency. I appreciate that he will not have the numbers to hand, but can he write to let me know how many rapists and child sexual abusers will be released from that prison?

Jake Richards: I seem to spend half my life writing to the hon. Member, who asks a lot of questions on this issue. Let us be clear about the facts here: under the Conservative Government, only 500 places were built in 14 years. In two years, we have built 3,500 net places and we will have 14,000 by 2031. The hon. Member makes the point, "Well, some of those were apparently planned for or envisaged by the last Conservative Government." Unless I am hallucinating, I am the one who is opening these prisons under a Labour Government.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Soft-touch fever is spreading across the land because in Scotland, the SNP Scottish Executive are about to start releasing rapists as much as 2.5 years early. Do the Ministers on

the Front Bench not realise that they are so out of touch with the public on this issue that they risk the very fundamentals of the justice system?

Jake Richards: The hon. Member is right that faith in the justice system is absolutely crucial. That is why the situation we inherited—the criminal justice system teetering on the brink of collapse, meaning no trials and making arrests impossible—was completely unacceptable, and we will never let that happen again.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Surely the Minister must agree that sustaining and instilling confidence in victims is essential to securing and sustaining prosecutions, and therefore any indication that there could be early release of such a person is bound to undermine a victim's confidence. Last week in Northern Ireland, through the bravery of two young women, we saw Jeffrey Donaldson convicted as a child rapist—a man who passed himself off in this House and elsewhere as a statesman, demonstrating that no one, thankfully, is above the law. But if we get into the business of early release for child rapists, how do we ever hope to sustain victims coming forward?

Jake Richards: Let me put on the record my gratitude for the bravery of those victims that the hon. and learned Gentleman identified for what they undertook to ensure that there was justice. What undermines confidence in the criminal justice system is a system that completely unravels. Without the appropriate prison places and without getting down the Crown Court backlog, which my hon. and learned Friend the Courts Minister is busy doing, we undermine faith in the system completely. We cannot let that happen. That will mean difficult decisions, but we will not shy away from them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers to the questions. My constituents are horrified by the early release of rapists and child groomers. If a criminal is sentenced to 15 years for destroying a child's life or committing a horrific rape, they should serve every single day—indeed, every single hour—of that sentence behind bars. Opening the prison gates early does not fix the justice system; it actively endangers women and children across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Will the Minister urgently review these catastrophic legal changes and guarantee that no convicted rapist or child groomer will be given a get-out-of-jail card by this Minister's Department and this Government?

Jake Richards: We will not shy away from the difficult decisions needed to save the criminal justice system to ensure that we have prison places to put criminals behind bars. By the end of this Parliament, more criminals will be behind bars than ever before. This is not a matter of being soft on crime; it is a matter of ensuring that we can put criminals away in future.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I genuinely seek your guidance and support. I have submitted multiple written questions and freedom of information requests. We have a named day question on this matter that was due to be answered on Friday, which the Government have

[Dr Kieran Mullan]

refused to answer as they should. The Minister said that the information we are after is in the impact assessment, but that is not true. There is not the information on the number of offenders in terms of rapists and child groomers being released. How do we and the public get answers to these very basic, incredibly important questions?

Mr Speaker: I am sure that Ministers on the Front Bench have heard that an outstanding question should have been answered. I am quite disappointed if that is the case—it should be answered. Members of Parliament put questions down to Ministers, and Ministers are answerable to this House—not when they feel like it or when they get around to it. That is totally unacceptable. I hope that they will go back and check the records to ensure that letters and questions have been answered. But named day questions—it is in the title—should be answered on the named day.

The point of order has been heard, and I am sure this issue can be rectified today. If it is not, there are many avenues, including coming back to this House. I believe there are questions to be answered, and all MPs should be told not who will be released, but how many people may be released within their constituencies. I say to the Minister that this is bad for all MPs, and MPs rightly need to represent their constituents. The sooner we help them, the sooner this House will be in a better place. I will leave it at that for now.

Asylum Accommodation

4.20 pm

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Alex Norris): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on asylum accommodation.

It is important to remind the House of the wider context, and in particular the events that have brought us here today. In the years before the general election, the number of people arriving in the United Kingdom illegally, particularly via small boats across the channel, rocketed. The dismal consequences of that abject failure to secure our country's borders are grimly familiar to us all: individuals risking their lives to come here via dangerous means, criminal gangs growing rich from the proceeds of organising those journeys, community cohesion placed under severe strain, and public trust in the state's ability to perform one of its most basic functions shredded.

Over the last two years this Government have taken concerted action to turn the situation around. We have begun by implementing major asylum reforms to reduce the incentives that draw people to this country. We have cut overall asylum costs by nearly £1 billion, while asylum decision making, which effectively ground to a halt under the previous Government, is at a 24-year high. More foreign criminals and illegal migrants are being removed than at any time in many years, and in partnership with our French counterparts we have stopped more than 44,000 crossing attempts. We have also put in place a groundbreaking scheme that means that small boat arrivals can, for the first time, be returned to France.

All that work is important and it is making a difference. However, perhaps the most totemic and tangible manifestation of the failing system that we inherited is the continued use of hotels to house asylum seekers. That issue has, quite understandably, been a source of widespread concern and anger. The Government recognise those frustrations, and we share them. Hotels ought to be local assets serving their communities, not propping up the asylum accommodation system. When hotels are used for that purpose, there are significant implications for local services, community cohesion and public safety. Clearly, that unsuitable, unsustainable and costly practice must be stopped, which is why this Government made a commitment to end the use of asylum hotels in this Parliament. We are well on track to deliver on that aim.

In April we announced that 11 asylum hotels had been closed and given back to local communities. We were clear at that point that more would follow in the subsequent weeks, and so that has proved, with a further 20 now having closed. That means that just under 170 asylum hotels remain in use, which is a reduction of more than half compared with the peak of around 400 under the previous Government. The number accommodated in hotels has also seen a significant fall from 56,000 in 2023, to around 21,000 now. Progress is being made but we must go further, and that means scaling up our use of larger, more basic facilities.

There are currently two such sites in operation: Wethersfield in Essex and Crowborough in East Sussex. Those sites began housing asylum seekers in 2023 and January this year respectively. Across both sites there is, at present, capacity to accommodate up to 1,340 individuals,

with additional contingency capacity at Wethersfield of 400. In the meantime, work has continued to identify further viable locations.

Today I can confirm to the House that three new ex-military sites are now under consideration: Barnham in Suffolk, Bicester in Oxfordshire and Linton-on-Ouse in North Yorkshire. Together, those sites could eventually provide accommodation for around 3,750 asylum seekers, subject to feasibility assessments, planning permission and the necessary approvals. Those caveats are important, because while our commitment to the promise we have made on hotels is absolute, we must ensure that we get this right and carry out all relevant due diligence, so that if we decide to proceed with an alternative site, our plans are as strong as they can possibly be. Let me assure hon. Members that we have learned from the previous Government's forays into this arena. No final decision will be taken on any site until, in each case, all necessary arrangements, assessments and approvals are in place and have been properly considered.

Work on those three potential sites is ongoing, in conjunction with local and national partners. To further support the exit from hotels, we are exploring the possibility of extending the use of the site at Crowborough, which is currently due to end next January. At Wethersfield, we are exploring both an extension and the best use of capacity. Finally, following detailed assessments, the Government have decided not to proceed with Cameron barracks in Scotland as a potential site for asylum accommodation, and it will be returned to the Ministry of Defence.

Before I finish, I assure the House that we understand our responsibilities in this space. With any decision on asylum accommodation, public safety is and will continue to be a critical consideration. We will always take every possible step to minimise the impact on communities. To be clear, wherever asylum seekers are located, they should be in no doubt that if they break our laws, they will be caught, face justice and, like the thousands of foreign offenders already removed under this Government, made to leave our country.

To conclude, it was always going to take time to fix the mess we inherited, but as the measures I have set out today clearly demonstrate, we are acting decisively to achieve the change the country voted for at the general election by closing asylum hotels for good, by securing our borders and by restoring order and control to the immigration system. That is what the public rightly expect and that is what the Government are working relentlessly to deliver. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

4.26 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement, which confirms what we have suspected since last week: this Government are planning to put more illegal migrants into sites across the country.

Some of those sites are due to host illegal migrants until 2030, yet the Government did not think that it was worth alerting the hon. Members who represent those communities and live nearby ahead of the announcement in the press. Rather than subjecting the plans to proper scrutiny here in Parliament, the Government tried to

sneak the news out quietly before the weekend, without discussion here in this place by those people's democratically elected representatives. That is exactly the same playbook that the Government have tried to use in places like Inverness where, thanks to the work of the Conservative group on the Highland council, the Home Office's plans to house illegal migrants at Cameron barracks were blocked.

We have seen in far too many cases the risk that illegal migrants, most of them young men, pose to the public, particularly to women and children. If the Government are planning to force communities to live alongside people who have shown complete contempt for our laws and norms by the very act of coming here illegally, the least that they can do is to allow those plans to be subject to proper scrutiny.

Now that we finally have an opportunity to scrutinise the plans, we can perhaps see why the Government were so keen to hide them. For all the talk of smashing the gangs, they reveal that this Government do not have any faith in their own ability to fix the problem. If they are so sure that they are ending illegal channel crossings, why are the Government making plans to host illegal migrants in this country until 2030? What does that tell us about their confidence in their own approach?

The truth is that this Government have no intention of fixing the problem: they care only about managing people's perceptions of it. While they talk up the reduction in illegal migrants living in hotels, they conveniently leave out the fact that thousands more migrants are being housed in so-called dispersal accommodation: homes in the middle of our towns and cities where illegal migrants pose an even greater risk to the public.

Since the last election, 75,000 people have crossed the channel. In the past few weeks alone, 3,000 have made the crossing. For all the Government's talk of removals, nearly all of them—some 93%—are being allowed to stay. The Minister boasts about a reduction in outstanding decisions, but they have achieved that reduction by granting asylum to thousands upon thousands of illegal migrants.

The Minister said in his statement that to stop the use of asylum hotels for good

"we must go further, and that means scaling up our use of larger, more basic facilities."

He is right that the Government must go further to stop the use of asylum hotels for good, but he is utterly wrong that the problem is solved by instead spending huge resources to create other places to live for those who arrive here illegally.

As Conservative Members have made clear time and again, the only real solution to the crisis at our border is to remove illegal migrants as soon as they arrive. People must know that if they try to break our laws, they cannot stay. For it to be possible to remove people as soon as they arrive, we must leave the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights that prevents us from doing so, but the Government refuse to recognise that. They are in hock to activist lawyers in this country and unaccountable judges in Strasbourg, and keeping those people happy takes precedence over keeping the British people safe and delivering on their democratic will.

The plans before us are another sorry example of that. More illegal migrants will enter the endless cycle of appeals and legal challenges, allowing them to stay here for years at the taxpayer's expense. More people

[Katie Lam]

will be put at risk because of these plans and because of the Government's unwillingness truly to solve this problem for good.

Alex Norris: We see the contrast there clearly. While the Government have a serious plan on how to accommodate a significant number of people and change that reality, the hon. Lady offers just "Hail Marys" and long shots. Her colleagues had 14 years, but sat through them and did not make any of those decisions. It is hard to believe.

The hon. Lady started by asking why, and that is a very important point, because these sites are part of our theory of change. At the moment, the traffickers say, "Come to the UK. Live in a hotel. You will be able to work illegally, dead easily." We have to change that reality if we want to reduce pull factors. This plan does so; it says, "You will not live in a hotel. You may well live on a military site." That is about reducing numbers and reducing the impact on the British taxpayer, and that is the right thing to do.

The hon. Lady mentioned dispersal accommodation. The previous statistics release in May shows a 32% reduction in the number of people in hotels, but there was a reduction of less than 1% in the number of people in dispersal accommodation, so the reality is not quite as she put it. On decision making, she knows that the grant rate has not changed significantly at all, so I simply cannot accept her case that by making more decisions we are letting more people through.

The reality is that we have a choice between another hopeful attempt at culture war by an Opposition who have no ideas, and a serious plan to reduce numbers. Let us face it: asylum applications are three times what they would have been 10 years ago. From us, it is serious action; from the Opposition, it is empty calories.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): This is deeply concerning news for my constituency. The boundary fence of RAF Barnham adjoins the market town of Thetford, which I represent; the town centre is a short walk away from the base.

I strongly support the right of people to claim asylum, and I am proud that we are able to offer refuge to those fleeing war and persecution, including those who have supported our armed forces abroad, but that is not without risk and impacts on community relations. In the absence of openness and transparency and a proper plan, malign forces will fill the void, stoking greater fear and division. Whether it is a Conservative Government or this Government, these announcements should be sensitively handled and thoroughly planned, but that has not happened in this case, where there has been secrecy and confusion. It is my community who pay the price for that failure.

While such news will never be welcomed by a community, the worst could be mitigated by a stronger commitment to transparency, engagement and reassurance. Alongside this announcement, where is the engagement plan? Where is the communication strategy? Where is the commitment to addressing community cohesion concerns in these areas?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I will be paying close attention to these answers.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for those important questions. Let me start where he started; everything is local somewhere, and the impact of our proposals is significant on those local communities. I recognise that, and that is important, but we are developing plans to mitigate the impact. There is a reason that we do not wait until the very end and announce the decision just as it is taken. At some point, we vet sites; we have vetted all sorts of sites around the country ahead of being able to bring these ones forward.

There comes a point, however, when we need to get onsite and start peeling back the layers and engaging with the local authority, police and health services, and that point is now. My hon. Friend is right; there needs to be sensitive handling of plans. I appreciate that the burden is on me and the Government to demonstrate that we will do so. I believe that we can do this while mitigating the impacts on his community and surrounding communities, but, as I say, it is up to us to demonstrate that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): I regret that the Labour Government still have not set out a credible plan to restore fairness and control in our immigration and asylum system. This announcement is another sideways step that fails to address the root cause of the problem.

Simply moving asylum seekers from one form of expensive and unsuitable accommodation to another is not good enough, particularly when the costs are going up. At the Crowborough MOD site, which is currently in operation, accommodation costs around £160 per asylum seeker per night. That is more than the cost of the average asylum hotel place. The Government are choosing a more expensive option, adding an estimated £60,000 every night to the bill faced by taxpayers. How does the Minister justify that? Will he confirm whether this decision is driven by a desire to be seen to be closing asylum hotels, rather than securing the best value for taxpayers? The Government should instead be focusing on reducing the asylum backlog and ending the limbo that many asylum seekers are in. The overall asylum caseload is now higher than when Labour took office, while the appeals backlog has reached record levels. Will the Minister set out what he and his Department are doing to reduce that backlog and ensure that the Home Office gets more decisions right first time, avoiding unnecessary appeals?

Finally, if we are to deliver the controlled and compassionate immigration and asylum system that my constituents in Woking and the whole of the British public want, it is essential that we tackle dangerous channel crossings. Will the Minister work with our European partners to establish a genuinely effective returns agreement that ensures that we can have controlled, legal routes and that those who arrive in small boats can be returned swiftly?

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his questions. He has heard the plan from me and my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary before: co-operation abroad, quicker and better decision making, and more returns. All those things are going much better than they did under our predecessors. It is also about tackling illegal working, but crucially, it is about reducing pull factors too. I sometimes feel that Opposition colleagues

have given up on the idea that the numbers might go down. Actually, the numbers are significantly elevated from what we are used to, and with sensible attempts to tackle pull factors—including tackling illegal working, but also this proposal—we can reduce them.

The hon. Gentleman talked about costs. He cited the per night figure for Crowborough; that figure will of course fall if we stay at Crowborough longer, because some of that is up-front capital investment. Pro-rated over a longer period of time, the nightly rate will come down, but again I say gently that we are doing this because we want less of this activity. We are not merely asking, “We expect to house the same number of people, so where is the cheapest place to put them?” but, “What is the best use of our estate to promote a number of goals, one of which is reducing those numbers?” That is how we get costs down. I might add that we speak with a degree of credibility, given that we have already taken £1 billion out of taxpayer spending in this area. That is progress.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned appeals. He knows very well why the appeals backlog has grown—we have had a huge backlog of initial decisions, because the previous Government stopped making them. Of course, that cohort is now in the appeals system. As he will have heard in the King’s Speech, important reforms to appeals are coming, and I hope the hon. Gentleman will support us in that venture.

On his point about co-operation abroad, that is of course crucial. We engage all the time with our European and EU neighbours, working together on a shared problem. The fruits of that can be seen in our much-enhanced deal with France. That work is crucial, and it will continue to grow.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): As the Minister has repeatedly mentioned Crowborough, which is in my constituency, I assume he will be meeting me this week to clarify the position for my constituents.

Dr Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Norfolk (Terry Jermy) for mentioning RAF Barnham, which is in my constituency—it is adjacent to the border of Thetford, and within easy walking distance of it. It was formerly a base that housed mustard gas during the first world war, and in the cold war it was the home of the RAF’s strategic nuclear weapons, so it has an interesting history.

The people of Suffolk are a kind and compassionate people, and they understand the need to house those who are fleeing war and persecution. However, I saw a protest at RAF Barnham this weekend, so how will the views of local people be taken into account, and what exactly is the role of the local planning authority?

Alex Norris: I thank my hon. Friend for his questions. To answer your question from the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will of course be very happy to meet you, as I always am—indeed, I am often summoned to do so. You are in the inimical position of not being able to clearly state on the record just how opposed to Crowborough you are, but I am in no doubt about that, given that you tell me basically every single day via the telephone or face to face, or through whatever tortures in this Chamber you can imagine. I may have more of that to come.

The points made by my hon. Friend are very important. I appreciate that local communities will want to do one of two things, and I encourage them to do both of them at the same time. I understand that many if not most people in my hon. Friend’s community, like others, will oppose the Government doing this, which is a perfectly noble endeavour in a democracy. There are also questions about how this can be done best—how do we limit the impact, be it on health services, the police or local amenities? I believe we can pass that test clearly, and I hope communities will also engage with those questions.

As for planning, my hon. Friend knows that we have previously used a number of different planning devices for different sites. We have not made final determinations for Barnham or for the other sites—we will be doing that over the course of this work.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Linton-on-Ouse, in the heart of my constituency, is a small rural community and is very much isolated. Four years ago, this plan was rejected on technical grounds. Three times the local population would be put into the area, with no means to secure people within that site. They could roam into the village, which has no amenities and does not have a village shop. The area would be overwhelmed.

I wanted to question the Minister on Thursday, but it was not possible. I have had many constituents ask some of these questions over the weekend, and I would like the Minister to answer them now. Northern Powergrid previously indicated that the system would not be able to cope and that the electrical upgrade needed for supply was not possible. Does that mean that industrial generators will have to be brought in, creating noise pollution in this quiet rural village? Yorkshire Water spent millions of pounds upgrading the sewage works to ensure that it correctly met effluent discharge requirements, based on a threefold increase in the area’s population under the proposal, so will there have to be effluent trucks, or would the water drains be polluted? On that note, people who closed down the Linton-on-Ouse base tell me that the drains were concreted in at the time.

The Minister has said that some of these sites have already been vetted, but I find that hard to believe, when the issues on the base have not changed. The highway network has bridges limited to seven and a half tonnes, so site traffic will have to go through limited road routes. On healthcare, the local NHS says that it has no spare capacity. What is perhaps more worrying is that I have been told on good authority that local companies have been asked to tender for the work that would be needed at this site. I ask the Minister directly: have local companies been contacted to tender for work? If they have, I wonder whether it is a feasibility study. On that note, who will make the planning decisions? Will that be for North Yorkshire council, or will it be overridden?

To call it a plan is too grand. The Government do not know what they are doing. They have not thought it through, and they have not had the decency to consult local people about it. In the words of the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) in 2022, this

“tells you just about everything you need to know about the state of chaos they are in.”

[Sir Alec Shelbrooke]

This is happening under his watch, so what has changed? This is still an inappropriate site, given those technical issues.

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that series of questions. I gently say that there is a slight unfairness in the right hon. Gentleman's saying that he and his community want a greater say in the details, while at the same time saying that we do not have a plan. The whole point is that rather than inviting providers or contractors to tender for services and to be around on sites and our saying, "Nothing to see here", we are being honest that we are looking seriously at this site. The final decision is not made yet, but we are looking. That is a better way to do it, but I appreciate that there may be differences of view.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about roaming. That is in no one's interest, and what we have managed to do at Wethersfield and Crowborough is to ensure that people do not just come off-site and roam. They are non-detained, as he said. Nevertheless, by the provision of activities and of transport, we can ensure the lightest local impact possible. That would be our commitment for these sites, too.

The right hon. Gentleman mentions electricity and sewage. Those are important parts of the process that we are in now. We are well aware of the history, which transcends this Government—it goes back to the previous Government—but we would not be taking forward this site if we did not think we had viable answers. Nevertheless, it is only when we get on site and start turning over the rocks, as it were, that we can get to a final point on viability. That is the process we are doing here.

It is not our intention that the site would impact on the right hon. Gentleman's local healthcare services, outside emergency services perhaps. What we have been able to do elsewhere is to have ordinary healthcare provided for on-site to ensure that there is not an impact on the local community. Those are the types of models—[*Interruption.*] An hon. Member asks if I will give way. I am trying to answer questions fully. Perhaps I cannot win either way.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): As the Minister will know from past correspondence, I am asking for greater transparency about the criteria used to prioritise asylum hotel closures. I am still not clear about why the Victoria hotel in Chadderton, which was contacted by the Home Office five years ago without any consultation with local people or with me as the Member of Parliament, remains in use. In fact, in the intervening period, the then Immigration Minister, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick)—who now sits on the Reform Benches—increased its capacity from 80 to 120 places.

Oldham has always played its part, often doing far more than other places—in addition to the 114 asylum seekers currently in the hotel, there are 640 in dispersed accommodation in the town—but the Minister must accept that trust taken for granted becomes trust eroded. In the end, it is one housing market. We cannot have a situation where we see a push from hotels to settled accommodation but we allow Serco to take up family housing in Greater Manchester, when there are 500 children in temporary accommodation in my town alone. We

have got to see this in the round, and local authorities have to be at the front and centre when the Home Office is doing the planning.

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend is right: there was no consultation on those 400 hotels, and there was no sense of the impact on local amenities and local communities. I think we should do much better than that. That hotel will close. As for the question of criteria, we worked that out in the context of a variety of different factors, including suitability of location, size and who could be accommodated, to arrive at a prioritisation. Finally, let me make it clear to my hon. Friend and his community: all those hotels are closing.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Site A at MOD Bicester sits adjacent to a village with only 370 residents. It is more than two miles from the nearest shop, and there is no pavement next to the B road by the site. It is simply not a suitable place in which to locate 1,250 men seeking asylum. That is why a planning inspector rejected a proposal to host half the number there in 2003.

The Minister says that no final decision has been taken, but that is not how it feels in Bicester. While I appreciate that he has taken the time to speak to me twice on the phone, I am yet to receive any written information from the Home Office. However, the Ministry of Defence has already written to service personnel families and told them that the site will take 300 people by the end of this year, rising to more than 1,200 overall. To my constituents, this feels like a decision taken in secret in Whitehall and imposed on Bicester, with local people treated as an afterthought. In less than 72 hours, 7,156 local residents have signed my petition opposing the move. Opposition stretches across the political spectrum, across parties and across the community, because this isolated site is wrong for those seeking asylum and for the small villages around it, with no credible plan for local services, support or social cohesion.

This morning the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) promised to end the centralised, top-down Whitehall model, so why are the Government racing to do exactly the opposite in my constituency? Will the Minister pause, commit to preparing a detailed impact assessment in partnership with the local community, and come to Bicester to face residents and describe his proposal to them?

Alex Norris: Let me reiterate that no final decision has been taken. The hon. Member made an important point about the written information that goes into the public domain. As I personally found, getting information to people at the right moment, in the right sequence and in the right form is a challenge. Members may recall—you certainly will, Madam Deputy Speaker—that when we named previous sites, I made a commitment that I would call colleagues so that they would find out from me first, rather than from the media. We have been able to do that much, but there is clearly a gap when it comes to the written fact sheets that go into the public domain. In my experience of both Crowborough and Cameron, information is put into the public domain; it will not change on a daily basis, and I recognise that that is a source of frustration, but we will give the best that we can, and we will do the impact assessments that we need to do along the way.

I appreciate that the burden of proof is on us: it is up to us to demonstrate that we can do these schemes well and do them safely. I believe we can. We have already demonstrated that in respect of two sites—and, indeed, Napier barracks, which has subsequently closed—but I need to pass that with the hon. Member. As for engagement from the Home Office, we will ensure that he receives the right information in the right way in order to have the engagement with his constituents. That is a commitment that I would make to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to all colleagues.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement. It is important that we have the means to help people fleeing really difficult situations, and that we clamp down on illegal immigration. The Minister is aware that the widespread use of asylum hotels has put a considerable amount of pressure on local authorities. We have a situation in which over 140,000 households are in temporary accommodation in the UK, with over 175,000 children sleeping in B&Bs, as the Minister knows.

Frankly, asking asylum seekers to find secure accommodation, a job and universal credit within 28 days of receiving their statements is unachievable. That pressure goes on to local authorities, which are already dealing with a massive backlog. The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee did a recent report on the conditions in temporary accommodation. I would be grateful to know what conversations the Minister is having with colleagues in MHCLG to ensure that when our councils procure temporary accommodation, they are not competing with the Home Office.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for that important question. I agree with her that 28 days is too short, which is why we have extended the time limit to 42 days to give people enough time. We have also put in place move-on liaison officers to support that journey. I do not want people who have received good news about their protection to find that their next journey is on the street.

Our engagement with MHCLG is consistent and constant, and we share the goal of reducing homelessness. As my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon) said, MHCLG clearly has a strong view about the impact that we could have on local housing markets. We have those conversations day in, day out in order to tread as lightly as possible. To be clear, we could be out of hotels in three months if we just prioritised the cheapest dispersed accommodation available. I think that would be wrong, and that is what we are not doing.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): I have two issues affecting my constituency. As you will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, Crowborough camp affects the back of my constituency, and Copthorne hotel is close to Gatwick. The Minister, when I met him and the mayor of Uckfield, promised to do proper engagement with MPs. Why did I not find out about the length of stay being extended to 2030 until today? It was the talk of our cadets on Armed Forces Day on Saturday, with London and the south-east affected, and I am very interested in the cost.

On the prioritisation of closures, Gatwick expansion is coming and the Copthorne is one of the 170 hotels where planning permission is running out. It is needed for local uses, and issues of community cohesion and safety are playing out on either side of my constituency. I ask to join Madam Deputy Speaker in hearing from the Minister about Crowborough and Copthorne, because I am seeing this issue play out in real time in my community.

Alex Norris: As the hon. Lady says, this is the choice ahead of us. I believe that the change to larger sites is a good one. The Copthorne must close, and it will. I cannot offer her space in the meeting with Madam Deputy Speaker, but I suspect that she would be keen for the hon. Lady to be there too.

I apologise to the hon. Lady, because I rang neighbouring MPs who have been affected by Crowborough, but not in her case. I hope I will be able to mitigate that, at a point not too far away, when I ring her about Copthorne.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): We are having this debate because of the cost to us all of trying to move from the broken system that this Government inherited to a fair and effective one. We are in this position because the previous Government failed to process people, and the Conservatives now seem to want to rely on creating fiction, rather than fact, about what actually works.

The Minister is absolutely right to argue that we need to tackle the root causes and try to stop people getting into boats. It is also right to recognise that where people are fleeing persecution and that is proven, it is the mark of a good society to help them. It is also more cost-effective. Given that last week the Government lost legal proceedings on the proposal about good character and citizenship, and given the likelihood of more litigation because of the fictitious idea that somebody travelling by an irregular route is somehow less of a person, does the Minister recognise that we will save money by changing the policy and putting integration, not ill will, at the heart of a future system for refugees?

Alex Norris: It is important to recognise the cost of that loss of grip. The previous asylum contract was let on the assumption that there would be about 60,000 people. The previous Government let the figure balloon to double that. It continues to come down, but it is still around the 100,000 mark. We have to make difficult decisions, and that is the nature of the accommodation today.

We have to pivot the model in this country. We were clear in November's asylum policy statement that we have to make sure that we reduce the pull factors and remove people who have no right to be here, but we also have to make sure that we provide safe and legal means for people to come to the country—that is better. Nobody should ever transit across continents and across the channel.

My hon. Friend's point about litigation is important. It seems to me that there will always be an element of that in the Home Office, but I think we can pivot to a much better model, certainly through safe and legal means; community sponsorship allows communities to come forward in a positive way. We are not in that place yet, but we are moving to that model. This is an important staging post on that journey.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Although I am more than happy to have the Minister here for hours and hours, we do have other business to get on with, so I ask Back Benchers to make sure their questions are as short as they can be. I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I thank the Minister for confirming that RAF Scampton is not cost-effective. Frankly, he has been a lot more helpful than his predecessor Conservative Ministers, who have now left the Conservative party, so I thank him.

The problem with these sites, as I know from asking hundreds of questions, is that they are unbelievably difficult to transform into asylum centres, so can I ask the Minister: is this really a deterrent? If someone comes from a hellhole of a country, does it matter where they are going to be sent? However, can I be positive and ask a question in this way: is not the best way to solve this problem to process these asylum claimants very quickly, preferably within a month? There will be some who cannot be sent back because their country is not safe, but surely the solution is to create a returns hub in a Council of Europe country—distant, small—so there is no question of their human rights being abused. That is a real deterrent: to treat them quickly and then send them home.

Alex Norris: On processing, it seems to me that the issue is not now initial decision making, but that we have a significant portion of people waiting for their appeal to be heard, and there is not a quick way to do that. As I say, we have talked about appeals reform, and Members may see things from us shortly on that—I hope we will have their support. The right hon. Member will have heard what my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister has said in favour of returns hubs in the past. Scampton is an important part of Lincoln and Lincolnshire's economic future, and I look forward to the sale of that site and the positive development of it in short order.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for the statement, and the Government's clear objective to ensure that hotels are eliminated from our asylum accommodation system and that military bases become a short-term stopgap. Can he reassure us all that the Government will continue to focus very closely on processing people more quickly and ensuring that those not eligible to stay here are deported as soon as possible, so that the use of the military bases announced today, which are already up and running, is a temporary measure for as short a period as possible?

Alex Norris: I absolutely agree with that. This is about quicker processing and quicker removals, but I would say—I hope Members can hold this in their heads—that this is also about reducing pull factors. Last year, the volume of people seeking asylum was in the 90,000s. Between 2011 to 2020, the figure was in the 20,000s. That is part of the challenge. Exactly as my hon. Friend says, getting that down to a more steady state will help take out some of the very difficult choices that are having to be made.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): While it is welcome that the proposed use of Cameron barracks in Inverness was ultimately abandoned, that came only after months of unnecessary uncertainty for local communities following an announcement made without meaningful engagement with the Scottish Government, Highland council or NHS Highland. Does the Minister accept that bypassing devolved partners and failing to consult local communities undermines confidence in the asylum system? Will he commit that any future decisions on asylum accommodation in Scotland will be made only after meaningful engagement with the Scottish Government, local authorities and local MPs? Will he acknowledge that, while military sites may relieve immediate pressure on the system, they do not address the underlying failures driving the accommodation crisis, including slow decision making, inadequate planning and a lack of suitable community-based housing options?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that question, and I am very aware of the Scottish Government's New Scots programme. It is the clear position of the Scottish Government that they want to see people from outside Scotland coming to live there and being part of Scotland's economic future. I am committed to working with Scottish counterparts to make that a reality. There is a challenge, because that sounds good in a global sense, but down at an individual level, it may sometimes seem less attractive. There are challenges in Scotland, particularly the fact that 60% of asylum seekers in Scotland are housed in Glasgow—that is an equity point in Scotland that I think could change. However, I absolutely will work with my Scottish counterparts. I have met them and will continue to do so.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I welcome the Government's closure of the asylum seeker hotel in Dudley. It was a Conservative party policy that was a complete waste of taxpayers' money. What steps is the Minister taking to reduce the asylum backlog and the dangerous, illegal boat crossings?

Alex Norris: This is about quicker decision making, the commitment we have made to appeals reform and better collaboration with our European neighbours. Those elements are adding up to significant progress, which is why we have seen numbers fall. This is the next step to get us on the final leg of that journey.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): The Minister spoke about necessary arrangements and approvals being followed, but the Haslar immigration removal centre proposals are meaningfully different from those originally planned. The Home Office is bypassing the local planning authority, Gosport borough council, and the public consultation has been utterly derisory. This is a residential urban area, yet local people do not have any opportunity to have a say, because it will be decided by the Secretary of State in Whitehall.

Leaving aside all the rhetoric, can the Minister just answer some straight questions? Will he set out exactly how many people will now be housed at Haslar, who they will be and how long they will stay there? What opportunity will neighbouring residents have to influence the development and how it looks? When will the Home Office have proper public meetings, so that Gosport people can put their questions and have them answered?

Will he meet me to answer all the other questions I am getting from my residents, who are furious about what the Government are doing?

Alex Norris: I will of course meet the hon. Lady. Immigration removal centres are, of course, an entirely separate matter from what we are talking about here. I do not have those numbers at my fingertips, but I will get them to her in short order. There is a point of difference in terms of the engagement, as I can see from the correspondence between us on what has and has not been shared at public meetings about the nature of the site, but let us have that conversation so that we are speaking with one version of the truth.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): My hon. Friend will know that Bracknell welcomed Afghans who supported our armed forces in transitional accommodation under the Afghan resettlement programme, but under the system introduced by the Conservatives that is not taken into account when considering a local area's ability also to deliver asylum accommodation. He will know that I have been lobbying him on this matter, because small unitary authorities such as Bracknell Forest council cannot be expected to do more than their fair share. Can he provide an update on progress?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend has doggedly pursued me on this very important issue. It is really important that, as the Home Office, we consider the broader context—such as what he says with regard to Afghan resettlement scheme provision—around a community's ability to sustain a supported population and that full dispersal model we inherited from our predecessors. What we have put in place, in our attempt to close the gap between local government and national Government, is a postcode check process, so that councils can say, “Well, hang on a minute, there is provision in this area that means it might not be suitable.” We are going through that process in Bracknell at the minute and I will work with him to hopefully get to a satisfactory conclusion.

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): The Minister keeps bragging about closing asylum hotel accommodation from the peak of 400. Can it be put on record that I closed 180 of those asylum hotels in six months and the Labour Government closed only another 30 in two years? I would just like that read into the record.

More broadly, large-scale asylum accommodation centres have a detrimental effect on local communities, as we have seen in Weathersfield: people are unable to sell their houses, and the number of children applying to go to the local primary school is dropping off and it is now close to being financially untenable. That is why there was a time limit on the use of Weathersfield. We also know that when the number of people in these centres is too large, disruption happens and fights break out, which is why there was a cap on numbers. We learn that the Government tried to sneak out over the weekend an increase on the cap and an extension to the time, completely undermining the confidence of the people of Braintree in this Government. Will the Minister now accept that that is a completely unprofessional way of doing this? It is deeply unfair to the people of Weathersfield and the surrounding areas. I urge him now, before it is

too late, to rethink his proposals and scrap the foolish extensions of both time and capacity at the Weathersfield asylum centre.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his questions. It is not bragging to say that under the previous Government the number of folks accommodated in hotels was 56,000 at its peak and it is now at 21,000. It is important for the public to understand those changes. He talks about the record in Government. He will know his own Government's record at Weathersfield and the choices made there, too.

On capacity, the right hon. Gentleman knows—because we have spoken about it—that Weathersfield exists normally in a steady state of around 850, with, as he says, the surge ability to operate at 1,250. With the number of years we have had at Weathersfield, it is right to consider how best that provision can operate. Those are conversations we will have. He will have his chance to go in studs up on me, which he never misses, and come in and tell me what we ought to do differently, but it is right that we look at those things in the public interest. That is what we are doing.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Minister is right that all we saw under the previous Government were the numbers going in the wrong direction and the operation of Government coming to a standstill. Of course, we should never forget the role of the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), who does not grace us with his presence in the Chamber, but who was the orchestrator of all this. The Minister is right to bring down the numbers, which are now heading in a positive direction. He will know, because of the many times I have contacted him, about the urgency of returning the Sandpiper hotel in Chesterfield to its proper purpose. It is now being massively underutilised. Will the Minister tell us when we are likely to see the Sandpiper, which has done its turn, being returned to proper use? On appeals, can he tell us more about how we will ensure that the cases of those whose appeals have no serious prospect of succeeding can be expedited so that we do not have the appalling backlog in the appeals process?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I remind colleagues that it is always best to let other Members know in advance if you intend to refer to them.

Alex Norris: In a general sense, a number of the people we now see in leadership positions in the Reform party were previously in the Tory party and had significant agency over this issue. They pretend now to be concerned bystanders, but actually they are the architects of the situation we are now in. I feel for some of our Conservative colleagues who have been left to tidy up behind them—at least they stand and take on the question, as right hon. and hon. Members have done in this debate. On my hon. Friend's point about the Sandpiper, I cannot give him a date but I will say, to be clear to him and his community, that it will not be open a day longer than needed. The Sandpiper hotel is a vital community amenity that needs to be returned to its public use. With regard to important reforms to appeals, my hon. Friend may not have to wait much longer to see more.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The use of hotels for warehousing asylum seekers is expensive for the taxpayer and utterly miserable for the people who are stuck there waiting for their asylum cases to be heard. Does the Minister share my fear that the atmosphere of hostility towards those seeking asylum is hurting those who desperately need sanctuary. I have an Iranian constituent who is a critic of the regime and a Christian convert—and therefore guilty of apostasy under Iranian law. By any stretch of the imagination, they cannot safely be returned to Iran, but they face that fate unless their case is accepted. Will the Minister look at that case and, more broadly, ensure that genuine refugees do not become victims of political posturing?

Alex Norris: Having visited such hotels, I recognise that they are not as advertised—or distorted—by others. The ultimate distorters are the human traffickers, for whom it is a significant upside to say not only that the conditions are good, but that it is easy to work illegally from the hotels. We must change that reality. I am concerned, as all colleagues would be, about the public conversation on this issue, and the risk that vulnerable people and their neighbours often face. We are never far away from challenge in that space, but it is incumbent on us to ensure that we do not play into that rhetoric. On the case that the hon. Member raises, every case will always be heard individually and on its merits. I cannot promise to intercede in that case, but I will ensure that the system handles it properly.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This decision looks like the politics of the past, not the future; a decision made in Whitehall, not in our communities. In 2022, RAF Linton-on-Ouse was deemed unsuitable as a site, because the drainage and sewage system would need major restoration, there would need to be an upgrade in the power capacity, and there are no amenities near the site—and the site has deteriorated further since that decision. The inadequacy of public transport, and other forms of transport there, also stands out.

In my human rights city, we rejected the proposal last time, and we worked cross-party in order to put forward that case. People from Linton-on-Ouse contacted me over the weekend, restating those reasons for rejection. Will the Minister listen to local residents and local authorities? City of York council, which I spoke to this afternoon, has said that it has not been offered any resources, planning or engagement regarding the decision, yet Linton-on-Ouse faces York and there would be major implications for the city. Will the Minister ditch this plan, work with MPs and find an alternative way forward?

Alex Norris: I am well aware of York's status as a city of sanctuary—[*Interruption.*]—or as a human rights city, forgive me. I always want to work with the people of York to ensure that asylum seekers are humanely housed. Nevertheless, the challenge today is that we have around 100,000 people in the supported population and 170 hotels, give or take. We have to change that reality. There are limited options. I believe that this is the best way forward, but I know from what my hon. Friend and others have said that it is incumbent on us to show that we can deliver it in a way that is respectful of the local community. That is what we are seeking to do.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Missing from the statement, unless I missed it myself, was the word “deterrent”. The Minister suggests that it is good news, and people moving out of hotels into other accommodation is just that. What he does not mention, however, is that other accommodation also includes houses in multiple occupation, and there are only so many military sites that may or may not be available.

Given that I wrote to him on 18 June, would the Minister meet me to discuss Stoke Heath in my constituency, a village—actually, a rural settlement—of about 352 people that is going to see the arrival of up to 121 asylum seekers? This rural settlement has no integrated public services and very few public services at all. The nearest bus stop, for example, is a 30-minute walk away. Will he accept that a community meeting being held on Thursday, chaired by myself, should at least have somebody from the Home Office or Serco in attendance? People are being kept in the dark. There has been secrecy—no consultation and no transparency. People have a right to know what is going on. Would he encourage a member of Serco to come along to that meeting and answer some of the local community's concerns?

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I am well aware of the matter concerning Stoke Heath, as he has pressed hard both verbally and in writing on that already. I will, of course, have the meeting with him that he asks for. I did not use the word “deterrent”, but I did use “pull factors” in the same context. We have to change the reality of the differential attractiveness that has seen applications for asylum in this country go up while they go down across the EU. This is part of that programme. The right hon. Gentleman mentions an upcoming meeting. Let me speak to the Department and see what we can do to ensure that he can have the fullest discussion possible.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the Minister's statement and the serious attempt by this Government to get the backlogs down, change the system and reduce the use of hotels. Peterborough is a warm, generous place, but we already do our fair share in looking after asylum seekers. I ask the Minister to consider my real fear in this, which is the broken trust we have, because too many people in places like mine—myself included—think that the system is rigged by suppliers such as Serco, which pick the cheapest places to put asylum seekers.

When I was elected, based on the record of the Conservatives, Peterborough already had the highest number of asylum seekers in the region. After the general election, under this Government, Serco opened the Dragonfly hotel with no consultation and without informing me or my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling), or indeed the council, the police or any local services. It put us in a really difficult position. I know that we are bringing down numbers in the Dragonfly hotel, and I know that the Minister will not be able to tell me today the specific date by which the hotel can be shut. What can he tell us instead about how we can keep control of monsters like Serco, which drive this policy and mean that places like mine feel that the system is rigged and feel left out and left behind

Alex Norris: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his contribution and for his continued lobbying in this space. As he says, I cannot give him a date for the Dragonfly's closure, but I can tell him that it is uppermost in my mind and that the Dragonfly will close as soon as we physically can do that. On the system, we are trying to close the gap between those who administrate the asylum accommodation contracts and local government. Crucially, through our leadership, the responsibility for that belongs to me and other Ministers, rather than the providers. The contract is not good—let us be clear about that. Again, I do not blame previous Ministers who led on that in 2019. We are seeking to change that model through the process we are now undergoing in renewing the contract in 2029. As always, I say that I would municipalise everything. I do not think that is our reality at the moment, but I do want a more mixed economy so that it is more sympathetic to communities and there is greater agency in the system, and that is what we are going to do.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The hon. Gentleman, who is a diligent and sensible Minister, will understand the deep disappointment in the royal town of Sutton Coldfield that the Ramada hotel on Penns Lane was not included in the recent list of closures, not least because it was on the list before the general election. He was very generous with his time in seeing me and listening to why that location is totally inappropriate in Sutton Coldfield. Can he reassure me that the facility will now be closed as soon as possible?

Alex Norris: The right hon. Gentleman knows my enthusiasm for Royal Sutton Coldfield and the strength of its plan for neighbourhoods programme from a previous, much happier engagement I had with him. I did wince when his number came up the other day, because I knew that he would be pressing hard on why it was not his hotel that had been closed. I assure him that we will close it as soon as possible, and I know how important it is that it is returned back to the people of Royal Sutton Coldfield for marking births, marriages, funerals and all sorts of other things that make life what it is.

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): Last week we heard the very welcome news that the final asylum hotel in Dudley borough has closed. The system set up by the Conservatives was a complete failure. It was very inappropriate to house people in town centres, and it was extremely costly for the taxpayer. I am very pleased that this Labour Government are finally sorting it out. Part of the solution is to deport people with no right to be here. Can the Minister outline how many people we have deported since the election and what further steps we are taking to sort out returns agreements for other countries where we are struggling to do so?

Alex Norris: I absolutely can, and I am pleased about the good news for Dudley. Since the election, we have removed 67,000 people who have no right to be here. That is a significant increase—approaching 30%—on the equivalent period under our predecessors, but we must go further. We have secured a number of extra returns agreements. I want us to have returns agreements around the world, because they are the building blocks for safe removal. We also need more detention capacity.

Our predecessors left our detention capacity in a much thinner state than it needs to be in order to effect removals at the level we expect to see. I am pleased with the progress that we have made, but there is much more to do.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): People have a right to be angry that the Government have sought to impose hundreds of asylum seekers on their communities without consultation. The Minister has talked today about the deterrent factor. When we spend billions accommodating people, then support them financially and give them services that many local people are not able to get, and in 90% of cases grant them asylum, is that not a pull factor that brings people to the United Kingdom? Is the way to deal with it not simply to make it clear that if someone comes into the country illegally, it does not matter how good their case is—they will not be granted asylum?

Alex Norris: The idea that 90% of cases are granted is for the birds—it is not even half that. It is also not true that people who are accommodated in hotels are living a luxury lifestyle. In reality, that is far from the case. These are not great places to be; they are safe, humane, dignified and legal, but that is it. I just cannot accept the idea that it is a great time for them. It simply is not true. The traffickers exploit the idea of living in a hotel and working illegally. That is the reality we have to change. That is how we get to an ordered and controlled system and reduce demand back to a normal level.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement and the work he is doing to tackle this important issue. As my Harlow constituency borders Epping, I am not unaware of the challenges that asylum hotels and the activity surrounding them pose for communities. I thank him for the work he has done on that. Is not the key issue the asylum backlog that was left by the previous Government? Can the Minister outline what this Government are doing to bring down the backlog and deal with the issue of appeals, which he mentioned in previous answers?

Alex Norris: The backlog is one of the major sins that explains why the supported population is much larger than we would expect it to be. We have got through the backlog in initial decision making, and the pressure now is in the appeals system. That is why the King's Speech referred to important reforms that are coming to the appeals system, and colleagues may get to see those shortly.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The site identified as MOD Bicester sits just over the Buckinghamshire border in Oxfordshire and is incredibly close to villages in my constituency, including Boarstall, Oakley, Long Crendon, Marsh Gibbon, Ludgershall, Twyford, Charndon and others. I can assure the Minister from comments I have heard from constituents over the weekend that nobody thinks this is a good site for such a centre.

I would like to pick up on the answer the Minister gave an hon. Member earlier about medical provision on these sites. He said that medical provision is provided on site. I know from bitter experience in the last Parliament that provision was delivered on site at an asylum hotel,

[Greg Smith]

but it was delivered by a local GP practice, which then could not serve everybody else in the area in the normal, timely manner. Can the Minister be really clear, given that he cannot magic up doctors and primary care, that if the Bicester site goes ahead—I hope that it does not—there will not be pressure on local GP services in my constituency of Mid Buckinghamshire or, indeed, on the Oxfordshire side?

Alex Norris: We have had success on other large sites where that has not been the case. Individuals need to register with a GP, but it is our intention that the impact on the local health service will be minimal. There is the question of emergency medicine, because there will not be provision for that on site. I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman is setting that test; it is one that I very much want to meet.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): May I raise my concerns about the site at Stoke Heath, which was mentioned by the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard)? It is a really rural location, with the nearest town being Market Drayton in my constituency, and people there are very concerned about the appropriateness of the site, with it being 30 minutes' walk from a bus stop and there being no shop. Shropshire council has raised its concerns about the site's remoteness.

Given that we have seen increasing far-right infiltration in Shropshire, with people beyond the constituency borders spreading misinformation and hatred on Facebook, I am concerned about the security of the people in the development at Stoke Heath. What measures are being taken to keep those people safe? Will he explain what the criteria are for a suitable location for dispersal accommodation? It seems to me that somewhere without even a bus stop or a shop is a really inappropriate place.

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that question. I will mirror the commitment I made to the right hon. Member for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) and ensure that the hon. Lady gets whatever information she needs on Stoke Heath. On how sites are chosen, there is a mix of factors, which include local amenities, travel and transport. Those are looked at carefully before providers bring ideas forward. If a local authority has a challenge, it can bring that to the Home Office for adjudication, where all those factors are considered together.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): With 76,000 illegal crossings in the last two years, this is clearly a problem that continues to affect our country, and one that has profound social and economic consequences—largely negative ones—on communities across the country. The Government are talking about a new approach to move this problem away from communities, so I was surprised to read the other day about the specific refugee scheme reported in various media outlets. Surely it will increase the attractiveness of illegal migration via illegal routes. Anyone who travels to the UK via an illegal route should be deported. This scheme is a contribution to the pull factor.

Alex Norris: I can help the hon. Gentleman with that. The whole point on safe and legal routes is that those are not the means by which people are coming into the country. As he will have seen in the commitments we

made in the asylum policy statement in November, if people choose to come via irregular means, their route to settlement will be a very long one indeed, with a 30-month renewal of that protection. What we are trying to do is to change those behaviours in exactly the way that I think he and I want.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I have spoken to many asylum seekers who have endured some of the most horrific and atrocious life experiences. The Minister will know that, historically, the courts have deemed an Army barrack unlawful because of the inhumane conditions within it. What assessment has the Minister made of the suitability of the new barracks being considered?

Is not the real issue the processing of these asylum cases? I know that the Minister said that decisions are at a 24-year high, but there are no figures on how many applications have been processed and how many applications are waiting, not including those at the appeal courts.

Alex Norris: First, on lawfulness, this very minute we are operating two schemes very lawfully. On quality, many of these sites—certainly those we brought forward in the past—were good enough for the resettlement of Afghan families, and indeed they have been good enough for our own soldiers. I therefore contest the idea that they are not good enough.

The point about processing is important. As I said, we have functionally got through the backlog; the issue now is the demand in the appeal system, with the statistic being a 58-week wait. Yes, processing is important, but so is the reduction of demand. As I said, we are operating at three times the level we would have been at a decade ago. We have to change that reality, and this announcement is part of doing that.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Does the Minister appreciate that the reason he is commissioning former Army bases and spending millions of pounds on more asylum accommodation is that his Government's policy of smashing the gangs has completely failed? There have been 76,000 illegal crossings across the channel into our country, and until he accepts that those are economic migrants who should be deported when they arrive in our country, this problem will continue.

Alex Norris: The facts do not bear that out. We have a system that separates those who are travelling economically and those who are seeking protection. I do not want this country to lose its proud history of providing protection for people who need it. That is why we are doing this in the way we are doing it. We have taken significant steps forward in controlling the system, alongside our French counterparts. That is why, for the first time, we are seeing asylum applications coming down, as well as positive progress in the channel, as my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister has said. Of course, the traffickers had a six-year head start on us, but unless I am mistaken, which I really do not think I am, it cannot have felt like failure when we closed the hotel in the hon. Gentleman's constituency.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): The Minister said that the business of this Government was to secure the borders of this nation. In that context, can I therefore ask him how many of the buses travelling through the

open back door into the United Kingdom from the Irish Republic have ever been stopped and how many of those seeking asylum have had their credentials checked since this Government came to power two years ago? We all know what happened a few weeks ago in north Belfast, where an asylum seeker is now in custody for attempted murder, yet there has been no effort by this Government to close that back door. Why is that? Why are we allowing people to enter this United Kingdom unchecked? We talk about stopping the small boats. When are we going to stop the buses?

Alex Norris: The hon. and learned Gentleman makes an important point. I cannot wholly agree with what he says, but this is important. As we win the battle in the channel, the common travel area—which is obviously an arrangement of very long standing indeed—will be a point of challenge. I am working closely with, and have spoken to, the First Minister and Deputy First Minister on this point. The work is ongoing to keep the common travel area as protected as possible, and we of course work with the Government of Ireland as well. That collective work is how we make sure that the CTA is not exploited.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): The Mercure hotel in Dumfries is home to around 100 men of uncertain origin and, thanks to the good offices of the Home Office, I have been able to visit. However, I have not been able to get any clarity on the criteria for closure and certainly not on any kind of timescale for closure. Can the Minister, without recourse to saying, “We will close it in due course”—which is beginning to sound a bit like the old jibe about the first world war: “It will be over by Christmas; we just cannot tell you which Christmas”—offer us a bit more clarity on when these hotels will be closed?

Alex Norris: I think that is slightly unfair. The hon. Gentleman knows that they will all close by 2029, but within that, none of them will be open for a day longer than they need to be. In terms of criteria, a range of factors including size, condition and location goes into the decision making. I appreciate that in a process of reducing the number from a couple of hundred hotels to nil, everybody will want to be the first one, but all of them will close.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his statement and for his clear commitment to addressing these issues. That cannot be in doubt. This continues to be a massive issue in my constituency of Strangford and, indeed, across all of Northern Ireland. The shifting of thousands of individuals out of hotels and into large-scale alternative accommodation sites such as military barracks, vessels and repurposed institutional facilities is not a solution. It is simply moving a massive, expensive problem from one community’s doorstep to

another’s, so when will the Government stop managing the symptoms of illegal immigration and start deploying the robust enforcement, rapid detentions and immediate deportations needed to secure our borders and end this accommodation crisis once and for all?

Alex Norris: It is rare that I disagree wholeheartedly with the hon. Gentleman. His incredible work on the persecution of Christians abroad, for example, is something on which I agree with him, and it shows the importance of having managed but humane asylum systems around the world. That is what we must have in this country. I did not take it from what he said that we are actually that far apart. He talks about the cost in financial terms and about the cost in terms of the community. I share those concerns. These types of schemes are part of changing that reality, because they will reduce the pull factors so that people are not tempted to come here or exploited by traffickers to do so. I think that that is the right balance.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It is deeply disappointing that I have to remind the Minister and the Treasury Benchers that paragraph 9.1 of the “Ministerial Code” and paragraph 19.21 of “Erskine May” make it clear that statements on important matters should be made to this House first, not to the press at 10.30 pm on a Thursday night. MPs and their constituents should hear about important policy news in this House first. I expect much better from the Minister. It is totally unacceptable that constituents and MPs hear about important policy matters on the news and not in this House. There is an impact on Members, including me as a constituency MP, and our constituents deserve much better. Minister, we need to see better from you on this.

BILL PRESENTED

WATER REGULATION BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Tim Farron, supported by Charlie Maynard, presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to undertake a review of the circumstances in which a special administration order may be made in respect of a water company; to make provision about the content and application of special administration orders; to make provision for the mutualisation of a water company in respect of which a special administration order has been made; to abolish the Water Services Regulation Authority; to establish a Clean Water Authority and to make provision about its powers and duties; to make provision about the collection and publication by water companies of data relating to volume flow; to require water companies to offer a social tariff; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 December, and to be printed (Bill 104).

Estimates Day

[1ST ALLOTTED DAY]

Cabinet Office

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2027, for expenditure by the Cabinet Office:

(1) the resources authorised for current purposes be reduced by £1,308,765,000 as set out in HC 1855 of Session 2024-26,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £1,235,318,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £2,178,228,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Dame Angela Eagle.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy.

5.31 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, which could not be more timely given the crucial NATO summit next week in Ankara. I was hoping that we would be inundated with contributions from across the House, but sadly it looks as though we might be limited to one or two.

Keeping the country safe is the first responsibility of any Government. The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy, which I chair, has undertaken a huge amount of work during this Parliament to examine the Government's approach to protecting the UK's national security interests. From critical national infrastructure to the defence of our very democracy, our Committee has been working hard to highlight areas in need of vital improvement.

There is no one "National Security Department", of course, but the Cabinet Office co-ordinates the Government's approach to national security and is the home of the national security secretariat. The Cabinet Office's main estimate states that it plans to spend about £1.1 billion on day-to-day running costs and £600 million on investment projects, of which around £200 million in day-to-day costs and £25 million in investment will go towards keeping the country safe. However, national security is, at its core, a whole-of-Government responsibility, and it is therefore often difficult to get a handle on how much is being spent on the UK's security and resilience—a point that I made to the Backbench Business Committee.

In an era of unprecedented uncertainty and hybrid warfare, the case for increased spending on security and resilience could not be stronger. We see a proliferation of threats not just from hostile state actors, but from organised proxy groups and radicalised individuals. Take the cyber-attack on Jaguar Land Rover in August 2025. *The New York Times* now reports that it was Russian in origin, and the evidence suggests that the Kremlin was either directly responsible for it or responsible for facilitating it through proxy actors. The impact was severe: it cost the British economy £2.5 billion, directly cost Jaguar Land Rover £485 million in the quarter and affected more than 5,000 firms. It was so significant that it impacted our quarterly growth figures.

Threats are increasingly facilitated through the weaponisation of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and quantum. Those who would seek to destabilise our democracy, our safety and our way of life have more opportunities than ever before to do so, and they know that. Meanwhile, the Government and NATO allies have already acknowledged this reality with their commitment to spend 5% of GDP on defence by 2035, with 1.5% of that being earmarked for security and resilience.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Does the hon. Member believe, like I do, that the Russian hybrid warfare we are seeing in the UK at the moment is further fuelling disinformation, including online? We know that the arson attack on the Prime Minister's car was directly linked to Russian state operatives. If there was ever a moment when we needed to stipulate a specific budget, now is that moment.

Matt Western: That is such an important point, and I do not think that we as a Chamber have given it enough airtime. If we think about what would happen if any other premier of any other country was attacked like that—their home attacked and their car set on fire—the reaction from the media was quite muted. Now that it has become more obvious what happened, despite all the nonsense that circulated on social media at the time, it is important that that conversation happens.

We are at a crucial juncture, as the hon. Member suggested. We are running out of time to ensure that we are prepared for a worst-case scenario of increasing Russian aggression, both conventional and hybrid. At a time when the United States' security presence in Europe is being questioned, the threat from China looms ever larger, and the UK finds itself in a difficult position as a middle power in the midst of global strategic competition between the United States and China. As such, it is imperative that the Government are robustly held to account in delivering their spending commitments on defence, security and resilience.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for his introduction and his wise words, ever mindful of modern warfare and the way it is going, and the changes that the Government and we as a nation need to be prepared for. When it comes to resilience and drone technology and how to use that to the betterment and the safety and security of this country, does he believe that we need to be at the top of that tree to ensure that we can protect our people across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Matt Western: The hon. Member is absolutely right. The nature of our security is so multifaceted now in a way that it would not have been 30 years ago. Globally, we are beginning to get our heads around—I am sure the Government recognise this—how we need to pivot and reset ourselves into a very different defence and security posture, because our defence is as much on our mobile phone and our laptops, and to our way of life and our democracy, as it is at our borders, and that is crucial.

My Committee was encouraged to hear from the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster that the Government believe that they are on track to hit the target of 1.5% of GDP on security and resilience by 2035 by 2027—well

ahead of time. But they have also been evasive on exactly what the spend will entail. Like any target, there is a risk of money being merely shuffled from one pot to another—an administrative exercise rather than genuine additional funding. My Committee recommended that the spending is prioritised on investment in systems that can help build long-term resilience, in addition to spending on maintenance of basic civil infrastructure.

When we questioned the Minister, we sought to clarify what new resilience projects and capabilities the 1.5% would entail. We were given, I am afraid to say, only vague answers. Disappointingly, the Government's response to our report on the national security strategy failed to elucidate much further. We recognise that there are reasons for being protective about certain information and not disclosing too much detail, but we seek more specificity in exactly how the Government are making critical infrastructure in the UK more resilient through this spending.

In fact, I recently met the high commissioner of Canada who explained that they are investing hundreds of millions in large-scale infrastructure projects in their part of the High North, be it railways, road networks or deep sea ports. They are all planned to boost resilience across the nation.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I, too, was recently in Canada with the Business and Trade Committee, and there was significant talk about the infrastructure projects that people have invested in. Beyond that they talked about the “Canada Strong” policy, which is about supporting industries in Canada, and ensuring that money being spent for the benefit of public good is spent with Canadian companies. Does my hon. Friend agree that the procurement reforms made by the Cabinet Office in March are some of the most significant that we have seen in a generation, and should benefit British industry?

Matt Western: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have not been to Canada in recent decades, but I am hearing that its approach should be of real interest to us, including how it is prioritising certain sectors and has identified certain capabilities. Although people are protective about what those capabilities might be, I would certainly welcome conversations behind closed doors with Ministers about what we are looking to do in a similar vein.

It is striking that the Canadians are outlining their major projects and how they will spend their money, but they are also focusing on their capabilities. Here we have suffered from a lack of long-term commitment to investing in national security and preparedness. Our Government must also clearly outline what additional capabilities they are committed to developing through the target spend, prior to the start of the NATO summit next week. We need a national conversation about our nation's defence and security. Over the last 18 months my Committee has heard repeatedly about the need to get the public on board when it comes to increased spending on defence, resilience and security. With the public purse under such strain, our constituents must understand why spending on such areas must be prioritised.

Helen Maguire: I also recently met the ambassador to Canada—this goes back to the point raised by the hon. Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), who stated that

one reason for the infrastructure in the High North was so that there was something sovereign to defend. That is incredibly important. The ambassador also explained how, when selling that to the general public, when most people talk about defence they think about different toys—bullets and ships—whereas in Canada was talking more about investing so that they have something to defend that is about their country, jobs, industry and everything else. Does the hon. Member agree that we should also get that important message out to UK residents?

Matt Western: As if on cue, the hon. Member's point is one I am just about to develop. The strategic defence review called for a national conversation, and during our inquiry on societal resilience we heard much about how our allies are engaging their citizens with that essential work. The UK is, I am afraid, a little behind the curve. Beyond the Baltic and Scandinavian nations, whose security and resilience is well documented, other nations are also moving up a gear. Their Governments engage significant numbers of military reserves, volunteers, firefighters, private defence organisations and NGOs in that conversation. In certain countries, everyone between the ages of 18 and 65 has a role in resilience—every single person. Some countries conduct wargame exercises on civilian defence, to identify weaknesses in their systems. Less obvious countries such as the Netherlands and Canada are making painful choices that are necessary to ensure that societal resilience can be strengthened. The situation warrants a reset of our whole approach to resilience and security, but to do that we must bring the public with us through a national conversation.

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It has been my huge pleasure to serve on the hon. Member's Committee for the better part of the last two years, and as I stand down from it, I wish to thank him for his leadership—it has been exemplary.

On the whole-society conversation, to go back to the hon. Gentleman's earlier point about the incident with the Prime Minister's car, does he agree that we must do a better job of informing the British public about the actual threat? The first stage is getting the public to understand the real threat that we are facing right now. We are under hybrid attack, and we will need the whole of society to support us in the solution.

Matt Western: I thank the hon. Member, who I would also call a friend, not just for his kind words, but for his valuable contributions to the Committee over the past 18 months or so. Yes, it is vital that we engage the public, and it is incumbent on our media to start spelling some of this stuff out—not fearmongering, but explaining some of the harsh realities of what we face. There are certain nations who wish us absolute harm—we are their public enemy No. 1. We need to be much more open about that in our discourse with the public, not so as they become overly alarmed—as I may have been as a kid growing up—but so that they recognise the sorts of pressures that we face economically, socially and militarily. The situation demands that we bring the public along with us. The Committee has discussed how we develop that nationwide conversation, possibly including an education programme, by being more honest with the public about the threats that the UK faces.

[*Matt Western*]

The pandemic highlighted huge gaps in our country and society's resilience. Are we ready for the next crisis that might be heading our way? We must not fearmonger, but the Government must learn all they can from our allies who are further ahead of us with spending on resilience and preparedness. I want to stress that the situation was obvious to the last Government too.

It is increasingly clear that for too long the UK has outsourced its security and resilience needs elsewhere, and is now entirely dependent on others for critical elements of its infrastructure. It is only through increasing the scale of investment in its sovereign capabilities, particularly in the realm of emerging technologies, that we can wean ourselves off these dependencies.

The defence investment plan is crucial. It is essential in guiding businesses and investors. Direction is needed, as well as dynamism and agility. At a time when UK firms need certainty, we still lack clarity on exactly how investment will be allocated. As we highlighted in our report on the national security strategy, the longer businesses lack an adequate signal from Government about what investment might be on the way, the more vulnerable they are to acquisition by foreign investors and the more difficult it becomes to achieve our sovereignty goals.

The Government have made steps in the right direction through investments as part of the AI opportunities action plan and the work of the sovereign AI unit. Those are to be commended. The UK has a strong base of talent in those technologies, but the Government need to go further and faster to secure our advantage in the long term. Now is the time to secure the investment, the jobs and economic security we need through a proper digital sovereignty strategy. As we saw last week in the series of cyber-attacks, economic security is national security.

The Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy will continue to fulfil its role and to press the Government on all these points and more in a constructive and collaborative way, as it has done these past 18 months. It is only through robust challenge and scrutiny that we can ensure the Government are doing all they can to keep the people, businesses and critical systems of the UK safe and secure. As Lord Robertson of Port Ellen told the Committee earlier this year,

"it is much better to pay for deterrence than to pay for war."

It is also, ultimately, less costly. I urge the Government to take heed.

5.47 pm

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) for introducing the debate so well. He makes many excellent points, including that we face a wide range of threats to our security and resilience. Clearly, we face threats from hostile actors and not just through conventional means: he talked about cyber-warfare and the threat of disinformation. He briefly touched on the effects of the pandemic on our country. The covid pandemic, which killed nearly a quarter of a million people, was the greatest threat to human health for many decades. Recognising pandemic preparedness as hugely important within the security and resilience framework is key.

Another key threat to our country's security and resilience, which does not receive nearly enough attention, is climate breakdown. It is not just the environmentalists but the ambulance workers who say that, and the Joint Intelligence and Security Committee's national security assessment itself says that ecosystem breakdown poses a clear threat to national security. The Committee on Climate Change has pointed out that we are woefully ill-prepared as a country for the effects of climate breakdown.

We urgently need to take more action to avoid causing climate change. Equally, we urgently need to take far more action to recognise the threat to our national security and resilience posed by the effects of climate breakdown. That was brought home to us in hugely clear terms last week, as we faced the second major heatwave of the last month or so. That heatwave led to record call-outs for the ambulance service—even more than under covid.

A couple of weeks ago, I spent time with the London ambulance service, which told me that the May heatwave saw its highest number of ambulance call-outs, even including covid, and that terrible record was exceeded last week. We have to recognise the reality of the effects on human life and livelihoods and the effects on our national security and resilience caused by these issues.

This is not just about the health effects. I spoke to numerous constituents over the weekend about the effects that the appalling temperatures faced by our students are having on schools. Clearly, we need urgently to put in place maximum temperatures for schools and workplaces and take action to ensure that that is followed through.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Member accept that there is a certain irony when the same people who are concerned about climate change and temperatures rising have campaigned for air conditioning to be taken out of buildings because of its energy consumption and carbon dioxide emissions? We cannot have it both ways, can we?

Dr Chowns: I honestly do not recognise the caricature that the right hon. Gentleman paints. Technology exists to provide both heating and cooling in ecologically friendly ways, and that is absolutely what we need going forward. We need far better building standards so that we build buildings that adapt and are suitable, and we need homes that are fit for the future. That is essential.

The Committee on Climate Change—the Government's independent adviser—has set out repeatedly that these solutions are available and has set out the things that we need to put forward. The Committee has also set out repeatedly, as have any number of people over any number of years, the fact that the costs of inaction far exceed those of action. The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) made that point previously in relation to other security challenges, and it applies with knobs on to tackling the challenge of climate breakdown. Twenty years ago, Professor Nick Stern set out clearly that the costs of inaction far outweigh—many times over—the costs of action to address these risks. After 20 years of our heads collectively being in the sand as a country, we are reaping the whirlwind of that inaction.

I call on the Government and the Cabinet Office to recognise the reality that tackling climate resilience must be a central plank of any strategy to protect national security and resilience. We need a Minister in the Cabinet

Office whose responsibility it is to put in place that work and to take a cross-Government approach. This is not a siloed issue and cannot be dealt with in one single Department; it needs a cross-Government approach.

We need a comprehensive strategy to prepare the NHS for new public health challenges. We need to invest in flood protection, because we face not just extreme heat but flooding incidents of increasing frequency and severity. We have all seen what a disastrous effect that has on the economy as well as on lives and livelihoods.

We need to develop a comprehensive extreme heat strategy, a national drought plan and a farmer-led transition to climate-resilient food production. Our farmers are crying out for that support, and they too are on the frontline of the security and resilience challenges that the reality of climate breakdown places on us. We need to strengthen our transport infrastructure, energy infrastructure and water infrastructure. Last week, we heard about nuclear power stations going offline in France. Train companies were saying that nobody should travel unless it was a matter of life and death. Water shortages are becoming more and more frequent. The collective, long-term and strategic approach to tackling climate resilience must be a core plank of national security.

Tackling climate breakdown is not just an environmental issue but a central plank of security and national resilience. The costs of inaction far outweigh the costs of taking action now. Will the Minister commit to putting in place a national strategy? Will there be an individual identified in the Cabinet Office who leads on it? Does she recognise that we must invest now or pay far worse costs later?

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Mr Brickell, I was not sure if you were going to swap seats again. Are you comfortable where you are?

Phil Brickell: I am indeed.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Marvellous. The Floor is yours.

5.54 pm

Phil Brickell: I wish to confine my remarks to the responsible, resilient and transparent use of taxpayers' money. I say that as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, a role which sees me engage with ministerial colleagues from across Government on a whole swathe of issues. I push Government constructively to increase transparency, improve controls and increase enforcement when those who seek to defraud the taxpayer are identified.

Public sector fraud and error is estimated to cost taxpayers between £55 billion and £81 billion annually. That is not sustainable when we are asking taxpayers to shoulder a large burden and when our public finances are already squeezed, at a time of increasingly turbulent geopolitical headwinds. That is why, back in December 2024, I was delighted to see the Government announce the introduction of Tom Hayhoe as the new covid fraud commissioner. He was tasked with identifying areas of reckless spend overseen by the previous Government and going as far as possible in claiming back moneys for the taxpayer.

Since then, Mr Hayhoe has identified £10.9 billion lost to fraud and error across the covid schemes, at a time when the Government's resilience was pushed to the limit. Let us dwell on that £10.9 billion figure. Of that money, £324 million was lost in personal protective equipment fraud during the pandemic and £1.88 billion was lost in fraud on the bounce back loan scheme, issued by the Department for Business and Trade. We talk about more money for the defence investment plan or increased resilience at a time of increasing geopolitical instability, and those figures of taxpayers' money lost to fraudsters by the last Government are truly astonishing.

Without straying into ongoing litigation, let us dwell on the PPE Medpro scandal for a second. It has become symbolic of the waste and poor oversight that occurred during some covid-19 procurement processes. As we know, the company was awarded Government contracts worth more than £200 million through the controversial VIP lane system. In 2025, the High Court ruled that PPE Medpro had breached a £122 million contract for surgical gowns, because the products supplied did not meet the required standards, and the company was ordered to repay that money to the Government.

That matters, because holding suppliers accountable when contracts are not fulfilled properly helps to protect public funds and reinforces the principle that those who benefit from Government contracts should meet their obligations. That is a vital premise, because we must ensure that Government procurement is resilient and delivering the best value. Ensuring that those who rip off the state—and, by default, you, Madam Deputy Speaker, me and every other person up and down the length of the country—are held to account is vital.

Alongside our debate on the Cabinet Office's estimates, will the Minister articulate why the Government announced last week that they had chosen to only "partially accept" four of Tom Hayhoe's recommendations? The first of those recommendations was that the Government should have a challenge champion in crisis situations—we talk a lot about resilience. The second recommendation was to ensure that small companies publish profit-and-loss accounts—remember that small companies were the engine of the bounce back loan scheme fraud.

The third recommendation was that there should be stronger measures when Ministers issue directions to override the civil service. That is crucial, given that ministerial directions included overriding an accounting officer's concerns about fraud on bounce back loans. The fourth recommendation was to have clearer central oversight of the spending of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government through local bodies, including grants. I appreciate that my hon. Friend the Minister may not have the answers to hand, but I would be very grateful if she could write to me after this debate.

Do not let my questions distract from the good work undertaken during this Parliament. I particularly commend the Cabinet Office for the work undertaken by the Public Sector Fraud Authority, including last week's launch of the new public authorities fraud investigation and enforcement service. I had the benefit of meeting my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Test (Satvir Kaur) only a few weeks ago to discuss the vital work of the PSFA. We both know how critical it is to drive up transparency, break down information silos, and drive cultural change via the tone from the top

[Phil Brickell]

across Government. As such, we should be proud that the PSFA has reported savings to the taxpayer of £311 million in 2022-23, £373 million in 2023-24, and over £480 million in 2024-25. That is a trajectory I want to see continue—an increase of approximately 50% over the course of two financial years. In total, the Government reported £7.53 billion of taxpayer savings from counter-fraud activity in the last financial year, including almost £400 million linked to covid fraud that had been recovered. That is vital work that should not go unnoticed, and it is not small change; those are critical funds that need to be retained in the public sector, for the sake of our infrastructure, resilience and security.

The Minister may not be surprised to hear me say that we must not rest on our laurels. I therefore welcome the views of my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Test on establishing a central Government database to strengthen the detection and prevention of fraud, alongside enhanced mitigation measures and greater transparency in how they are implemented. I also support a new offence of fraud against the public purse, coupled with meaningful incentives and protection for whistleblowers to help identify and expose wrongdoing, as recommended by the campaigning organisation Spotlight on Corruption.

My constituents—whether in Heaton or Horwich, Chew Moor or Chequerbent—need to know that the Government are on their side and that attempted public sector fraud will have consequences, no matter who you are or who you know. It is only by pursuing fraudsters tenaciously that we will be able to find the much-needed resources to support investment in critical infrastructure and ensure that we are as prepared as we can be, whether that is for the next pandemic, climate change, industrial sabotage or conflict.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Front Benchers. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson—are we ready?

6.1 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): Born ready, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Earlier this year, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte said that

“we are not at war, but we are certainly not at peace either.”

Just over the two years since this Government took office, there have been many reports of instances of foreign espionage and interference. Earlier this year, it was reported that Chinese spies use LinkedIn and other recruitment platforms to target UK officials and military staff. A tracker was successfully placed on the Prime Minister’s car, and—as has been mentioned by my hon. Friends the Members for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) and for West Dorset (Edward Morello)—there have been attacks on the Prime Minister’s home and car. Also, people with links to a sitting MP were arrested on suspicion of assisting a foreign intelligence agency. It is therefore no surprise that the Government say that national security is their first responsibility. They are right to do so.

I am lucky enough to be a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme this year. I have been fortunate enough to meet some of the remarkable people

who serve in our military, from the most junior to the most senior, and the key message I have taken from those interactions is that, as a society, we are not scared enough and we are certainly not prepared enough. When talking about preparation, the thoughts of many will instantly go to physical safety and defence spending. I understand why, but there needs to be a whole-of-society approach that goes beyond our armed forces to include national security, resilience, civic preparedness, food security, economic security, cyber-security, energy security and so on. This point has already been raised by other Members, but when the Minister responds shortly, I would be grateful if she could update the House on the Government’s plans to increase the awareness of the British people—including my own Hazel Grove constituents—about the role we must all play to keep our country safe and to prepare should the worst happen.

After looking at the estimates, I have one specific question for the Minister. As I understand it, the security spending under the “Keeping the country safe” subheading is rising largely because the integrated security fund has been moved across to the Cabinet Office, not because Ministers have found new money to meet new dangers. Could the Minister tell the House how much of that uplift is new investment in our resilience, and what changes are happening to that spending as it comes under the Cabinet Office?

We cannot have national resilience if the public can no longer trust the integrity of our democracy. The National Cyber Security Centre dealt with more than 200 attacks on our critical national infrastructure in the past year alone, and around three quarters of those attacks were traced to hostile states, primarily China, Russia and Iran. They reach into hospitals, our energy supply, and the public services that many across the country depend on. That is why the Liberal Democrats tabled an amendment to the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill that would have required the Government to publish a digital sovereignty strategy. Had it been put in place, that strategy would clearly have set out how the Government would assess, manage and mitigate risks to the security and resilience of critical network and information systems arising from foreign interference and reliance on foreign technology. Additionally, our strategy would place a focus on strengthening Government procurement practices, which would ensure that the Government lay out how they intend to reduce strategic dependencies on foreign-owned service providers and commit to prioritise domestic tech. We would ensure that critical national functions are powered by technology that only the UK Government or UK companies could control.

Perhaps the sharpest threat to our democracy is the money flowing into it from outside. British politics is being targeted by powerful interests beyond our shores who would happily see our democracy weakened, and the loopholes that let them in remain far too open. Opaque, foreign and dark money can still find its way into our political parties, our campaigns and our online conversations, and the Government have not yet done enough to prevent that money from entering our democracy. They commissioned the Rycroft review into political finance, but to date, they have committed to just two of its 17 recommendations. We Liberal Democrats ask that the Minister give serious consideration to the other 15 and commit to all of them in full very soon.

The elections strategy paper published last summer and the Representation of the People Bill are both welcome steps, but there is an Elon Musk-shaped hole running right through the middle of them. They contain nothing to stop social media platforms paying elected representatives to post increasingly divisive and incendiary content, and nothing to shut the back door through which foreign money reaches our politics. Liberal Democrats have tabled amendments to the Representation of the People Bill to fix exactly that. Our amendments would ban payments to MPs by X and other platforms and bar people who have served foreign Administrations from donating to political parties, campaign groups and think-tanks, and we would implement the Rycroft review's recommendation of banning foreign-funded online political ads altogether.

Given the scale of potential foreign interference, we believe that the Government should go one step further and launch an investigation into US interference in our democracy, including financial support by this White House for those in the UK who—and I quote—share their values. I urge the Minister to further consider how we can best ensure that the Department's budget is used effectively to limit the reach of foreign interference in our political system, because our democratic security is our national security.

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

6.7 pm

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): This debate is very timely, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing it. In recent months, the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy has been joined by an ever-growing and increasingly anxious chorus of voices despairing at the Government's failings on national security. Lord Robertson, who this Government commissioned and asked to lead the strategic defence review, warned in April that Britain's security was "in peril" due to the "corrosive complacency" that was being shown towards defence. He went so far as to accuse the Treasury of "vandalism".

Earlier this month, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey) resigned as Defence Secretary. He was clear that the reason was a defence investment plan—which, it appears, *The Times* newspaper has also had sight of—that did not give the armed forces "the resources they need". He was followed out of the door by the Armed Forces Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), who said that the Government's plans were

"neither transformative enough nor sufficiently funded."

Given that the hon. Member had served in our armed forces, one would have thought that his warning might have been heeded.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Bearing in mind an item that has appeared in the news reports today, does my hon. Friend agree that either the right hon. Gentleman or the hon. and gallant Gentleman to whom she has just referred would be a far more suitable future Secretary-General of NATO than the present Prime Minister, whose lack of proper funding of a defence policy—among other deficiencies—has led him to be looking for a new job?

Alicia Kearns: I always found the former Defence Secretary to be very decent in how he engaged, how he worked across parties and how seriously he took the job. I do not think there is a vacancy for the NATO Secretary-General for at least another eight years, but the current Prime Minister, who has taken us from third place to 12th in NATO defence spending in the past couple of years, would not be the right man to lead NATO at this time or any other.

The shadow hanging over this whole state of affairs is the defence investment plan. It was due for publication in autumn 2025, and we have not yet seen it. As a NATO member, we are committed to spending 5% of GDP on defence and national security by 2035, with 3.5% on core defence and 1.5% on national security and resilience. Let us review where the Government are. On rearmament and the progress towards 3.5% and 1.5%, we are second to last—31st out of 32 NATO members. We have only moved to that place in the past year. We best only Iceland, a country that has no armed forces at all. That is where the Government have left us on the road to rearmament. On defence spending as a percentage of GDP, we have gone from third in 2021 to 12th this year. Both those things are on the Labour Government.

The failure of this Government to properly fund our core defence is not just a disaster, but an international humiliation, and the very same pattern is playing out across national security and resilience. Lord Harris, the chair of the National Preparedness Commission, has said that funds for these vital areas are currently being treated as a "creative accountancy exercise". When we look at the figures before us today, we can see what he means. I recognise the headline increase in the Cabinet Office's security-focused expenditure, but the vast bulk of that additional £130 million is simply the integrated security fund being moved from the Foreign Office to the Cabinet Office. It is not new money; it is the same money in a different pocket. Meanwhile, the figure that tells the real story is the budget for the national security secretariat, which has been cut to £18.9 million—down from £34.4 million last year. That has nearly halved—at a moment like this.

While little detail has been given to us to scrutinise, it is clear that Cabinet Office spending on national security and resilience is not at the level required, and nor will it match the threats that we face. I will press the Minister on specific areas shortly, but let us check in on whether some past commitments. Have they been fulfilled—or, like the defence investment plan, are they languishing out of sight, underfunded and promised but never delivered?

In February, the former Security Minister, the right hon. Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis), promised a one third increase to the integrated security fund for Indo-Pacific threats: primarily, the Chinese Communist party. There is no sign of that increase. We were promised a £17 million increase in counter-terrorism funding and a further £10 million to address organised crime by the end of 2026-27. Are the Government on track to deliver those things, or have they, too, been quietly forgotten?

I will turn to the specific areas that demand the attention of the House. The first is cyber-security. As we have heard from various Members, 40% of British businesses have suffered a cyber-attack or breach over the past year, including iconic names such as Marks and Spencer, and Jaguar Land Rover. The Government

[*Alicia Kearns*]

brought forward the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill, which was welcome, but it was not sufficient. Indeed, it failed to name the threat of the Chinese Communist party. Extraordinarily, it excluded central and local government computer systems from its scope. The very systems that hold our citizens' data have been left outside the Bill. What investment is being made to bolster our cyber-defences, and is that funding rising?

Secondly, the JCNSS reported last September on the risk of our undersea cables being targeted by hostile states. They carry 99% of our data. They are the arteries of our economy and our daily life. Closer co-operation with Joint Expeditionary Force nations, especially Norway, has been welcomed across this House, but specific plans and any funding remain elusive. These cables carry everything that we do, and there is no plan to protect them. When will funding come forward to do so?

Thirdly, we have discussed the covid pandemic today, and the inquiry that followed, which laid bare the need for a greater focus on biosecurity. The Government promised that it would publish the Cabinet Office's plan for biological emergencies this spring. That deadline has, like many others, been missed. When will those plans finally appear, and when will the £1 billion promise to establish a network of national biosecurity centres come into being?

Fourthly, on our critical national infrastructure, Putin's renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine and the brutality that Russia has industrialised should serve as a warning. The Russian military has deliberately targeted power infrastructure—substations, pylons and cables. Drone warfare has made our energy networks a target for terrorists and hostile states. As the Member for Rutland and Stamford, I am dismayed by the Government's plans to put a string—mile upon mile—of pylons across eastern England. One single drone could plunge huge swathes of our country into darkness, and Google Maps literally provides an online map—a targeting plan for anyone who wishes us harm. We have the capability to lay those cables underground. Instead, the Government have chosen to sacrifice our security to save a few pounds, when we should be learning from Putin's daily attacks on Ukraine's infrastructure.

The fifth area—this matters more than any other line, and it has been discussed by every single Member—is whole-of-society resilience. The threats that we discuss cannot be tackled by Government alone, and it would be foolish to suggest so. They demand that each and every one of us is prepared and able to play our part, but the Government therefore have to kick off the national conversation that they promised. Here we must be honest that the failure is not Labour's alone.

I agree with the chair of the JCNSS, the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington, that since the Iraq war it has suited the political class to say to the public, "You don't need to worry about national security or foreign policy—don't you worry your little heads; we've got it under control." We have taught a generation or two that danger is someone else's problem, that resilience is a job for the state, and that citizens do not need to think about it at all. We have allowed the public to abdicate their personal responsibility, be that choosing whether or not to be on TikTok—get off it!—the purchases they

make or the way they live their lives. That is a fatal arrow in the heart of our national resilience. When the crisis comes—and it will come—a people who have never been asked to prepare will not suddenly know how to be ready.

The Risk Assessment and Risk Planning Committee in the Lords, the JCNSS and the National Preparedness Commission have all called for a single, simple step: the appointment of a chief resilience officer to co-ordinate across Government. It is a sensible suggestion and I am not sure why it has been ignored. That role would look at protecting everything, whether that is our research, our innovation, our education, our universities, our genomics, our charities or the information environment, and it would tackle such things as the use of organised crime, which led to that heinous attack on our Prime Minister. That has been exploited by foreign states, which have misconstrued what took place to harm the Government. That is a shameful state of affairs, and I agree that we should have discussed it more.

I will now turn to China. Before the election, Labour promised to take China to the international courts over the genocide of the Uyghurs, which is an issue that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I have spoken about consistently in this place. The Government promised a full audit of China policy to guide strategy across every Department, yet the China audit was never published, its contents have never been shared with this House, and we are now in a situation where the National Security Adviser travels regularly to Beijing to meet Chinese Communist party officials. We only find out about those meetings because the Chinese Communist party publishes press releases. It is more transparent than our own Government, and that is not least because the National Security Adviser will not appear before this Parliament, unlike all his predecessors, to face justice—apologies, to face scrutiny. Well, both actually, because does our country not deserve to know that things are being done right? How can we know that they are being done right, that our country is being protected, and that hostile states are being held to account, if there is no scrutiny?

Our own Government keep quiet while preparing to pay billions to surrender sovereignty over the Chagos islands, and the protections that we put in place are not used. We passed the National Security Act 2023 precisely to counter the threat from hostile states, yet Labour refuses to put China in the enhanced tier, and the results speak for themselves. In July, it will be one year since the foreign interference registration scheme came into force. How many organisations or companies have registered as working for China on the foreign influence risk register? Not one. Three have registered as working for Republika Srpska, a tiny little entity within Bosnia, but no one says they are getting any money from the Chinese state. Have there been any investigations about this failure of anyone to register themselves? No. Have there been any prosecutions? No. Why? It is because the Government are too busy wooing the Chinese Communist party to deter it.

When the Prime Minister went to Beijing, he even met Cai Qi, the very man who had been running a spy network targeting this Parliament. The Prime Minister did not apologise for doing so; he seemed to think it was the right thing to do. Since that case collapsed last year, there have been zero repercussions for the Chinese Communist party for spying on this Parliament. That is

not deterrence; it is rewarding a state that attacked our Parliament. Why are this Government content to let our own laws be flouted by Beijing?

Let us be honest about what has been described. A retailer that sells our groceries has been halted by hostile actors. A car maker that employs thousands of our constituents has been brought to its knees. Undersea cables carrying 99% of our data have been shadowed and mapped by Russian vessels. A spy network was run from Beijing against our own Parliament. Our Prime Minister was attacked. Luckily, he and his family were not hurt, but the Government answer all this with a transferring of budgets, missed deadlines and an audit they will not publish.

These are not isolated incidents. We are not at peace, but we may not be in the same state of war as our grandparents would have recognised. There is no declaration, no frontline, no army massing on our borders—thankfully—but make no mistake: we are under sustained, deliberate and co-ordinated attack every single day. Call it what you will, but previous generations understood their duties when the nation was under threat, and they put our country on a war footing. They found the money, told the public the truth, and did not hide behind “creative accountancy”—not my words, but those of an expert. We are 31st out of 32. We have a National Security Secretariat that has been cut in half. There is no resilience officer, no investment plan, and no published audit. That is not the posture of a country that knows it is under attack. So my challenge to the Minister is simple: fund what must be funded, and protect what must be protected.

Given that this is a debate about the money, let me end by asking about what the figures cannot show. Once we strip out the transfers of function and the accounting changes, what is the real-terms trajectory of spending on the security and resilience functions of the Cabinet Office? If it is rising, by how much and how fast is it rising? The first duty of the state is to protect its people, and on the evidence before us today, based purely on the figures, it is a duty in which the Government are failing. History will not forgive those who saw the danger, named it and looked away. We therefore hope that the Government will take away our request and act to fund our defence, fund our national security, and step up and fund our national resilience.

6.20 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dame Angela Eagle): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) on securing the debate. He will, of course, know the importance to this Government of the topics discussed today. Keeping the country safe is the first responsibility of any Government, and as the world changes, the way we uphold that responsibility must change with it. This adaptability is set out in the national security strategy, published last year at the beginning of the NATO summit in The Hague. Alongside it was the commitment to spend 5% of GDP on national security by 2035—3.5% for core defence spending and 1.5% for broader resilience and security spending.

The Majority of the UK’s hard national security capabilities, such as the recently announced 150,000 drones that the Ministry of Defence will supply to Ukraine by the end of the year, are funded and delivered

by line departments. The Cabinet Office’s role is ensuring the effective running of government, and co-ordinating cross-cutting policies and operations. More than 90% of the national security and resilience budget for the Cabinet Office is therefore spent on the day-to-day running costs of the National Security Secretariat. That is a vital body that works with Departments to implement the national security strategy. It develops, leads and delivers policy across Government, and aligns, convenes and brokers the collective efforts of our stakeholders and partners on all aspects of national security. It is the nerve centre of our collective cross-Government security response. However, that spending it is not by any means the vast amount that is spent on national security and resilience across Government.

The Cabinet Office does invest in some assets. For example, the National Situation Centre, which is highly regarded internationally, provides situational awareness for crisis response by bringing together data analysis and expertise. The emergency alerts system is one of many public warning and informing capabilities that the UK Government, devolved Governments and category 1 responders have at their disposal. Since its launch, it has become an integral part of keeping the public safe, allowing the quick sharing of lifesaving information, and it is regularly tested to ensure its resilience. The UK Resilience Academy forms an important part of the skills and engagement offer. It was established in April last year to build the skills that are needed across the whole of society to respond to emergencies.

The national security strategy consolidates various reviews and strategies related to national security into a single, coherent framework. It outlines the strategic context, identifies the main challenges we face as a nation in an era of radical uncertainty, and establishes the framework that the UK uses to guide its actions both at home and abroad. It is both a clear-eyed and a hard-edged plan to deal with the breadth of the challenges that we face, setting out a long-term vision for how we will do three crucial things: protect security at home, promote strength abroad, and increase our sovereign and asymmetric capabilities.

The Government have developed an internal implementation approach to ensure the accountability and delivery of the national security strategy, as well as ensuring that we adapt to a volatile geopolitical landscape. That is why our national security is not the remit of one Department or Minister. We have identified specific objectives, and have assigned lead and assisting Departments to deliver them. Departments are responsible for periodic reporting on progress, and taking action to address any deficiencies.

The Government will continue to update the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy on progress, through formal public sessions and confidential sessions where appropriate. As part of the implementation of the strategy, we continue to make ourselves a harder target for hostile actors who seek to exploit our open, democratic society. That includes bolstering our cyber and economic security defences, which are essential to the fostering of innovation and growth.

Additionally, we are strengthening the defence of our borders and territorial waters.

In April the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), exposed covert Russian undersea activity, paying tribute

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

to the readiness of the UK's armed forces to respond. In May, Baroness Lloyd, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, outlined DSIT's plans to present new legislative proposals to modernise and strengthen penalties for malicious activity impacting our undersea infrastructure.

As I am sure events in recent weeks have made clear, our overriding priority is ensuring stability and security in the Euro-Atlantic area, starting with our unwavering support for Ukraine. In total, the UK has committed up to £25 billion for Ukraine: £16 billion in military support, £5.6 billion in non-military support, and £3.5 billion in UK export finance. We continue to go further, renewing and deepening our key alliances, particularly those with the United States and the European Union. All this work is bolstered by new international partnerships, especially in emerging policy areas such as technology—for example, the UK-India technology security initiative and the UK-Japan frontier technology partnership.

It remains the Government's intention to publish the defence investment plan before the NATO summit, which will take place on 7 July. The plan will set out much of our future strategy when it comes to how we will protect and defend our country. Let me give Members some idea of its focus. We will rebuild our core defence industrial base, focusing on achieving greater resilience in our stockpiles and supporting warfighting readiness.

Sir Julian Lewis: I am going to ask the rather obvious question. Given that the plan is to be put forward under the existing Prime Minister, does that mean that if the new Prime Minister wishes to change it, it will be changed, or will the commitment that is to be made to the forthcoming NATO Assembly have to stand as it is?

Dame Angela Eagle: As always, the right hon. Gentleman has asked a very important question. I think the key thing to understand is that this work is ongoing, and that there will be co-operation between the current Prime Minister and—I do not want to get ahead of what Labour party members might decide to do—whoever the next Prime Minister will be. I hope that gives the right hon. Gentleman some assurance.

Beyond defence, we will identify, protect and cultivate other sovereign capabilities, such as foundational industries and frontier technologies, that are critical to our industrial base and national competitiveness. I was interested by what my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington said in this connection. We are in close contact and collaboration with states such as Canada to learn as much as we can about how they do resilience, although I might gently suggest that the Canadian landmass is slightly different from the UK landmass when it comes to thinking of organising a defence for it, and slightly different approaches will clearly have to be taken, given the geographical realities. However, there is much on which we can co-operate.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con) *rose*—

Dame Angela Eagle: Has he just come in?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The hon. Member has been here throughout the debate.

Dame Angela Eagle: I give way.

Mr Snowden: Thank you very much for coming to my assistance, Madam Deputy Speaker—or to my defence, rather ironically.

The Minister has touched on critical industries as a key part of our defence plans for the future. Does she agree that our sovereign capability to manufacture our own fighter aircraft is critical, and does she share my dismay that our production lines sit empty, with no orders from the Government to maintain that sovereign capability?

Dame Angela Eagle: All I will say is that it is important that we rebuild our industrial infrastructure and make sure that we not only maintain but strengthen our sovereign capabilities, not only for now but with forward-looking tech and investment. The Government are determined to do that.

A foundation of our national security is our ability to assess, mitigate, respond to and recover from the risks that we face, should they manifest. These risks could come from anywhere. They could be natural hazards, as we have all been experiencing over the last few days, or they could be deliberate attacks, disease outbreaks or other civil emergencies.

Dr Chowns: The Minister has not mentioned climate change. Climate change is not a natural hazard; it is a human-made major risk.

Dame Angela Eagle: I agree, and it is important for the hon. Lady to understand that we are integrating climate change risks into our work. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is the leading Department on work on climate adaptation, not mitigation. It is important that lead Departments can focus on the issue at hand, and DEFRA is doing adaptation.

Dr Chowns: One of the key points that I tried to get across in my speech is that this has to be a whole-of-Government effort. DEFRA cannot put in place a strategy to adapt the health service to the reality of climate change. It cannot put in place a strategy to adapt our schools, our transport infrastructure or our energy infrastructure to the reality of climate change. Does the Minister not recognise that this has to be a whole-of-Government effort, and that it is not something that DEFRA can hold? That is precisely why we need a Cabinet Office Minister to lead on climate resilience.

Dame Angela Eagle: The hon. Lady points out that adaptation is a cross-Government, cross-departmental thing. The way that the UK Government are organised means that Departments that are responsible for school buildings or transport deal with the adaptation issues that crop up in those Departments. I do not disagree with the hon. Lady's analysis, but while the Cabinet Office does have a co-ordinating role, I do not necessarily think that having a Minister co-ordinating it would make an awful lot of difference.

Alicia Kearns: Since as early as 2013, when I was working with the Cabinet Office—specifically with the Joint Intelligence Organisation and others—climate change has been included in the matrix that it is required to plan for, respond to and seek to mitigate from a national security perspective. It is very much reflected in the national—I have forgotten the exact words, but it is the one that does not have an acronym. That is what happens when

you work on something for too long. Climate change is in there and has been in there for a very long time, even way back when I was a civil servant.

Dame Angela Eagle: The hon. Lady is correct, and she talks about mitigation. There is also an adaptation issue here, which I was addressing, but clearly the cross-departmental nature of co-ordination happens within the Cabinet Office.

Our country's resilience is front and centre of our approach to national security. Without security and resilience at home, we cannot deliver economic growth or any of our other missions to improve the lives of the British people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) gave a good speech about what happens if corruption is allowed to get out of hand and people who defraud the public purse of money are allowed to get away with it. I thank him for asking important questions about Tom Hayhoe's recommendations. I promise to make inquiries with colleagues in Government, and commit to writing to him about the specific issues that he raised in his speech.

The Government inherited a resilience landscape that had too often been neglected, leaving our nation exposed to the shocks of an increasingly volatile world. The resilience action plan, published last July, sets out the Government's strategic approach to creating a stronger and more resilient UK, and the steps being taken to deliver it. We face a rapidly changing global risk landscape. From severe weather to geopolitical instability, the risks are complex and numerous. We must be honest with the public about the challenges while demonstrating our resolve to address them head-on, and we have to strike a balance by giving an appropriate warning without panicking people. Building a truly resilient society requires a fundamental cultural shift in the way that emergency preparedness is thought about. That includes being clear about the risks we face and the actions that we can all take to improve collective resilience, as the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) said from the Liberal Democrat Front Bench.

In summary, our No. 1 priority is to keep the country safe. The Government are undertaking plenty of work within our own shores to strengthen our stance, which

is further bolstered by our unshakeable commitment to Europe-wide security. That responsibility has been spread right across the Government, and it is emblematic of the good work that can come when collaboration is at the heart of planning. Thanks to this work, the risk landscape is not an unknown country; we have made it familiar terrain through rigorous mapping of what could harm us and our citizens, and of what our response should be. It is through level-headed planning that we will create resilience at home and, through that work, create a secure foundation for families, businesses and economies to thrive.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Matt Western to wind up briefly.

6.36 pm

Matt Western: I will keep it brief, as requested. I thank all Members from across the Chamber for making time to contribute to this debate, which underlines the importance and urgency of the challenge that we face in the wider security and resilience landscape. That includes health, energy, water supplies, climate, our economy and our democracy. Even the Electoral Commission has suffered a cyber-attack.

We face so many challenges and threats, and there are states that wish to exploit our weaknesses. That is why this debate is so important. The Backbench Business Committee recognises the number, scale and diversity of the attacks that we are now facing. Members have made points about the Canadian system and spoken about corruption. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) talked about financial impropriety, and others spoke of the attacks on the Prime Minister. It is vital that we get our heads around the urgency of this issue, because the attacks that we face are growing exponentially and becoming more and more creative and inventive.

Once again, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate, and thank Members for their contributions.

Question deferred until tomorrow at Seven o'clock (Standing Order No. 54).

Northern Ireland Office

[Relevant documents: First Report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, Policing and security in Northern Ireland, HC 184; Second Report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee of Session 2024-26, The Government's new approach to addressing the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland, HC 586, and the Government response, HC 1716; correspondence between the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, on the Northern Ireland Executive Budget, reported to the House on 17 June; correspondence between the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, on the Northern Ireland Executive budget and the Public Sector Transformation Fund, reported to the House on 3 June.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2027, for expenditure by the Northern Ireland Office:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £14,256,865,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1855 of Session 2024-26,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £9,525,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £14,317,396,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—(*Taiwo Owatemi.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The debate will be opened by the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee.

6.38 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this timely debate on the spending of the Northern Ireland Office. As I stand here today, it remains the case that Northern Ireland has no agreed budget, despite it being a quarter of the way through the financial year. Executive Ministers have failed to agree a budget, which has left Departments and civil servants forced to rely on emergency contingency powers, with spending limited to 95% of last year's opening budget. Most concerning, this leaves the people of Northern Ireland uncertain about the public services they will be able to access in the coming year.

Although the Finance Minister published a draft multi-year budget in January, it was not supported by the other parties in the Executive and, frustratingly, that deadlock is still unresolved.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Will the hon. Member also acknowledge that even Members of the Finance Minister's party are now opposed to the budget he produced?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I recognise that we do find ourselves in a rather ridiculous situation, which impacts directly on the lives of people in Northern Ireland.

This precarious financial situation has serious implications beyond Northern Ireland, and the consequences for the Northern Ireland Office and the Treasury should be of concern to Members across the House. The vast majority of Northern Ireland's funding comes from the UK Government through the block grant. Executive Ministers have raised concerns about the adequacy of the settlement and are calling for further funding. They cite the current financial year as

being particularly challenging for Departments, with the block grant set to drop by 2.7%, before only modest increases in the following years.

We know that the Secretary of State has met the Finance Minister on a number of occasions in recent weeks, and I would be most grateful if he updated us on his discussions with Executive Ministers on urgently finding a resolution to agree a budget, and on the support the Government are providing to enable such a resolution to be found.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee for all that she does, but this issue of course goes beyond what she is setting out. The Northern Ireland Office is tasked with co-ordinating the local growth fund across the Province, yet my local community and voluntary sector are expressing deep concerns about its flawed programme design. They say that the funding structure is inaccessible and unresponsive to local realities on the ground. Does the hon. Lady not agree that, when the Secretary of State gets to his feet, he must explain why the Northern Ireland Office has failed to properly engage with our community sector? Does she agree that urgent steps must be taken by his Department to reform this programme to ensure that these vital funds actually reach the groups who need them most?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention about the local growth fund. In our Committee session today, we grilled the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who is sitting on the Front Bench, about this funding. On numerous occasions, we have noted our disappointment that the relevant Department has been able to shift the spending, but I am sure that the Secretary of State will give the hon. Member an explanation later.

Given the potential impact of having no agreed budget on the delivery of public services if the situation continues into the autumn, does the Secretary of State foresee a circumstance in which he would step up and step in to set a budget for Northern Ireland, should the Executive remain unable or unwilling to do so?

Linked to this are concerns about the Executive's overspending and budget sustainability. At the end of the last financial year, the Government provided the Executive with a £400 million reserve claim loan to cover departmental overspends in health and education. That follows the £559 million Executive debt write-off by the Government in 2024 as part of the financial package accompanying the restoration of power sharing.

The Northern Ireland Fiscal Council warns that overspending is now becoming normalised, and it describes how repeated bail-outs

"could dull the Executive's incentive to take difficult fiscal decisions". Overspending against available budgets by devolved Governments amounts to serious financial mismanagement, according to Treasury policy. Would the Secretary of State describe the Executive's actions in the same terms?

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Member accept that the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council has also said that, if spending allocations to the Executive were based on need, the Executive would be entitled to receive between £1 billion and £3.5 billion extra, which is part of the reason for this problem?

Tonia Antoniazzi: I think there are further discussions to be had about need, the Barnett formula and all those things. I am sure those discussions are happening and that those things are being continually reviewed, but I do agree about the need.

The Executive will repay this £400 million loan over three years—£80 million this year and £160 million next year, with £160 million due in 2028-29. Given the Executive's track record, are the Government confident that these payments will be met? Northern Ireland Ministers have warned of further overspends, given their continued constrained financial position. The two Departments responsible for the reserve claim are likely to see a drop in their resource funding this year. How will the Government respond to further overspends?

Granting the reserve loan was on the condition that the Treasury conducted an open book exercise on the spending of Northern Ireland Departments. This found that spending per head on policing in Northern Ireland is 166% of what it is in England, spending per head on health, excluding social care, is 152% and spending per head on schools is 140%. On the other hand, spending per head on prisons and probation services is only 79% of that spent in England and Wales. The report presents a number of policy options, and says that the Executive could make savings of up to £3 billion. However, Northern Ireland Ministers contest many of its findings. In his response, will the Secretary of State address the Government's expectations of the Executive taking forward these options, and tell us what steps the Government are taking to help put Northern Ireland's finances on a more sustainable footing?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way again. As she will know, one reason for that 152% health spending figure is the level of disability and poverty across Northern Ireland. The 152% figure reflects the actual need on the ground, and meeting that need must be the major goal for the Secretary of State to achieve.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I agree that our Committee has seen that the need is greater, and we are working to represent Northern Ireland and the people who live there as best we can.

My Committee has recently conducted inquiries on policing and security and on legacy, which the Government directly fund. The Police Service of Northern Ireland currently receives £37.8 million a year directly from the Government as additional security funding. This ringfenced funding was introduced in 2011, and until last year it was specifically used to address the threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism, but this ASF has now been broadened to cover all national security threats. The increase we have seen over the current spending review period may be to cover the broadened remit, but no information is publicly available about how the level of funding is determined by the Government. While we know that publishing some information may not be possible due to security considerations, my Committee has called for greater transparency, and I would be grateful for the Secretary of State's response to our recommendations.

The recent riots in Northern Ireland are of great concern, and they will be of serious concern to Members across this House. I take this opportunity to commend the PSNI and the emergency services for their response

to the disorder. The PSNI was already facing a constrained financial position, so I welcome the additional £4 million provided by the NIO to meet some of the costs it incurred. Could the Secretary of State provide more detail on, and has he had any correspondence about, the funding that I have heard has been provided by the Irish Government for community cohesion following the riots.

Finally, I turn to the issue of legacy and the work of the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery, which I will refer to as the ICRIR. This body was set up under the previous Government's Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. It is responsible for investigations of legacy cases to provide information to victims, survivors and their families about troubles-related deaths and serious injury. For the present financial year, the ICRIR is receiving £232 million over the whole spending review period. However, Peter May's recent review of the ICRIR raises some serious concerns about its capacity and governance. According to the review, cases are being paused due to a lack of resource which, in a recent Committee session, the ICRIR disputes. It says that the current funding levels "are not sufficient" to support its view of what is required under the legislation, with "real concern that they will not have the means to deliver case outcomes within any reasonable timeframe".

The ICRIR has also seen three finance directors in the past year, with the review describing "a low level of maturity in terms of its financial and corporate governance."

The review notes that the ICRIR is submitting to the Treasury a new business case seeking additional funding. Will the Secretary of State update us on the status of that? The Secretary of State told us that confidence in the ICRIR will be gained

"if it provides answers to families who have been looking for them for so long".

Does he share my fears about the impact that pausing cases will have on victims and families who have already been made to wait decades for answers about their loved ones? Can he also assure the House that confidence in the commission's financial management and governance arrangements has improved since the review?

Robin Swann: I congratulate the Chair on how she is raising the issue in this debate and how she has handled the legacy inquiry. Does she agree that there must be an answer to the concerns raised by the PSNI that it does not have any additional moneys to provide that information to the ICRIR with regard to legacy? There is also a funding issue there. Both the PSNI and the ICRIR have raised the issue of funding, saying that they are not being given the money to enable them to give the evidence they hold and manage to help the people who are waiting on those cases.

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the hon. Member for that contribution. It has been very clear from the Committee's evidence sessions that, to cover the legacy issues it is still dealing with and will have to deal with, the PSNI is taking resource of time and money that it cannot afford, which impacts on what it can provide on the street, so I too would like to highlight that point.

We want to see a stable Executive, backed up by fair and sustainable public finances, reflecting the needs of the people of Northern Ireland. I am concerned that

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

the Executive's financial constraint and the funding pressures facing the PSNI and the ICRI are having a very real impact on people's lives today.

6.52 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): In introducing the debate, the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, lamented the failure of the Northern Ireland Executive to agree a budget; indeed, for any of the parties in the Northern Ireland Executive to even agree with their own party on a budget. That, clearly, is a difficulty in terms of providing the services for the people of Northern Ireland.

It would do this House well to ask more probing questions on how, not for the first time, the Northern Ireland Executive have failed to agree a budget. Are there political influences at stake? Sinn Féin controls the Department of Finance. Sinn Féin does not even want Northern Ireland to exist, never mind succeed, so is it really any great surprise that when it is in charge of the Department of Finance there is a stand-off about agreeing a budget? For Sinn Féin, the default position is always to blame the Brits, demand more money and turn that into a political campaign on how Northern Ireland is being treated unfairly. Even if it had all the money imaginable, Sinn Féin would not seek to make Northern Ireland work. It cannot make it work and then say, "But none the less, we need the fundamental constitutional change" which is its *raison d'être* and what it demands. There are at play bigger issues than a mere failure to balance the books.

On balancing the books, many of the parties that form the Northern Ireland Executive bear much responsibility themselves. When devolution was down and coming back at the beginning of 2024, there were parties now in the Executive who had no interest in getting a durable financial settlement. They had such a stampede mindset that they just wanted back into government. They did not support negotiations to enhance what could have been the ongoing sustaining financially of the Northern Ireland Executive. There were others who just wanted back into the Executive for the very sake of power and preferred to lie about what they had achieved in terms of safeguarding the Union. This was an Executive restored on the basis of the biggest lie for generations in Northern Ireland: that the Irish sea border had been removed. It patently has not been removed. There was much that should have been done by the Northern Ireland Executive parties at the time of going back into devolution to extract the financial settlement that was needed.

Now we have reached the situation where overspend is the norm in Northern Ireland. That overspend is built on an expectation that in due course there will be a bail-out. That has been the pattern throughout the years and that is the expectation of this Executive: in due course, there will be a bail-out or a writing-off of the moneys that have been overspent. It has happened before and that is the essence of the demand again. Are the Government going to do that once more? We have had occasions when past Governments have said to the Northern Ireland Executive, "If we're going to bail you out, you have to transform and do all sorts of things to save money. Maybe you have to raise some money yourself."

None of that has happened. The absence of that engendered a belief that yet again they can produce the begging bowl and have the overspends written off. I look forward to hearing from the Secretary of State how clear he is about whether or not that will yet happen again.

Reference has also been made to policing. Yes, policing is grossly short of funding and it is a scandal that, in my constituency and others, if you can muster together three or four community constables you are doing well for a town and multiple villages. It is a scandal, but it does bring one back to the absolute folly of ever having devolved policing and justice. The Government's attitude today is, "Policing and justice is devolved, so you find the money." The allocations are wholly inadequate. If policing and justice had never been devolved, the Secretary of State would have had no escape route in terms of finding the money to give policing to the citizens of Northern Ireland. It was a moment of folly, just over 10 years ago, to devolve policing and justice.

There is a real burden that I wanted to come to, and it is this. The Northern Ireland Office's promotional website states that the Northern Ireland Office has three priorities, and within the second priority are the wonderful words, "protecting the UK internal market".

That, of course, is the one thing that this Government have lamentably failed to do. Instead of protecting the UK internal market, this Government have wrecked it, because we now have an internal market that is partitioned by a full international customs border down the Irish sea, courtesy of the very lies I referred to earlier and the Windsor framework. Far from protecting the UK internal market, the Northern Ireland Office has gleefully presided over the sabotaging of the UK internal market.

In a recent survey, the Federation of Small Businesses found that 38% of GB businesses that used to supply Northern Ireland have stopped supplying it. Why? Because of the unbearable paperwork and burdens that are put on businesses in order for them to trade with Northern Ireland. Far from protecting the UK internal market, we have a UK internal market that has been riven by this Government's actions.

When we look at the small print in these accounts, we see that the Government are going to give the mighty sum of £2.25 million over three years to a body called Intertrade UK, the purpose of which, as the name suggests, is to promote trade within the United Kingdom—and the Government are giving it £750,000 per annum to do so. Intertrade UK has no staff and no offices—nothing. Let me contrast that with InterTradeIreland: InterTradeIreland exists for the correlative purpose of promoting trade on an all-Ireland basis. It gets £5 million a year of British taxpayers' money. It also gets southern Government money. It has over 40 staff, plush offices and a real programme of work. Contrast that with Intertrade UK—the Secretary of State thinks it is adequate to give that organisation no staff, no offices and £750,000 a year.

Intertrade UK is seeking to promote trade within an economy of 70 million people, and it gets £750,000 to do it. InterTradeIreland is supposed to be promoting trade on an all-Ireland basis for a population of 7 million, and it gets millions upon millions, 40 members of staff, and more. Where is the logic? Other than the logic of wanting to do down inter-UK trade, where is the logic of being so abundantly miserly with Intertrade UK in comparison to the funds being given to InterTradeIreland?

When I read that the Government's second priority in this area is this idea of "protecting the UK internal market", I see it as a joke—not just a joke, but a very sick joke—because the very opposite has been done to my part of the United Kingdom.

I use this debate to draw attention to those facts and to say to this Government—more in hope than expectation—that one day they will realise that they are the Government of the United Kingdom, and that means promoting the United Kingdom, not promoting the partitioning of it. It means promoting the growth not of an all-Ireland economy, but of an all-UK economy. Sadly, this Government, deliberately and consciously, are failing in that fundamental mission.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I know this is an interesting debate and topic, but Members would be best to keep speeches 100% within scope.

7.4 pm

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I will do my best on that score, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) on securing this important debate.

I want to draw on a consistent message that the Northern Ireland Committee has heard throughout a number of inquiries, whether into public services, the Northern Ireland economy, or police and security: the recurring question about whether the Northern Ireland Executive have been given sufficient funding to deliver the public services that people rightly expect. I know that am looking at that question from an interesting perspective—that of an MP whose constituency is not on the island of Ireland, and who is not directly affected by the day-to-day machinations and interdependence of relationships between the Northern Ireland Office, the Treasury, this place, the Northern Ireland Executive and the Assembly—but as a Scottish MP, I do understand the practical realities of devolution. Week in, week out, I see the impact of different political priorities being pursued by different Governments with the resources available to them. We always say we do not have enough money, but we will never have enough money; we always want more money. And that experience has shaped how I view this debate.

The Committee has considered in depth the evidence of the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council, recognising that Northern Ireland's unique circumstances means that it requires more funding than a simple Barnett consequential. I keep coming back to the fact that the council again concludes that funding at around 124% of comparable spending in England is appropriate. It is considerably better than sticking a finger in the air and thinking of a number. The spending review reflects that assessment.

The Executive will receive an average of £19.3 billion a year over the spending review period, alongside targeted investment in public service transformation, policing, and city and growth deals. That is not to dismiss the very real pressures on Northern Ireland's public finances. But funding alone is not enough if public services are unable to plan because the Executive have yet to make the decisions needed to allocate that funding.

Tomorrow is the last day of June—the end of the first quarter of the 2026-27 financial year—and the Northern Ireland Executive still have not agreed a single-year

budget, let alone a multi-year one. That matters because budgets are not simply accounting exercises. They allow hospitals to plan, schools to recruit, police services to invest and public services to provide certainty for the people they serve. The consequences of delay are not abstract; they affect real people.

I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as one of the chairs of the Unison group of Labour MPs and someone who has been a member of Unison for 30 years. Before my time in this place, I lived this issue. When the Assembly collapsed in 2022, health workers in Northern Ireland received no pay increase because there was no functioning Executive able to implement the recommendations of the independent pay review body. The eventual award had to be backdated at the end of the financial year.

The consequences were significant: employers had to take action to ensure that staff were not inadvertently paid below the national minimum wage; payroll teams faced complex manual calculations to recover interim payments once backdated awards were made; and, for many low-paid NHS staff members who were also in receipt of universal credit, it created unnecessary financial uncertainty and administrative complications, because a year's backdated money in one pay packet is not an indicator of regular income. It was unfair on staff, inefficient for employers, and, ultimately, patients paid the price when public services could not plan with certainty.

This was not a one-off. It has happened four times in the past five years, regardless of whether or not Stormont has been sitting. I know that the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann), in his life before this place, did his best to try to get it through, and that is recognised and known. But it is not acceptable. This year, the "Agenda for Change" trade unions have been told that there will be no uplift until a budget has been agreed. That means that, once again, there have been manual calculations to ensure that people are not being paid below the national minimum wage. We need to do more about that.

Northern Ireland does receive funding above its independently assessed level of need. There have been levels of growth deals—defence growth deals, and city and growth deals, with the need to invest in apprenticeships—so the opportunity is there. The question is not simply about whether there is enough money; it is about whether the decisions are being taken to use that money effectively.

The priority must be for the Executive to agree a budget—preferably a multi-year one—to give public services the certainty they need. Long-term planning ensures that significant investment delivers tangible improvements for the people of Northern Ireland. I therefore ask the Minister what further discussions he is having with the Executive to encourage agreement on a multi-year budget so that this record settlement can be translated into the public services and better outcomes that the people of Northern Ireland deserve, because they deserve nothing less.

7.11 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I want to start by thanking the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi),

[Sammy Wilson]

for the work of her Committee and for the diligence she has applied to the job she has taken on. It is deeply appreciated by Members from Northern Ireland that we have a Chairperson who is totally interested in the work that she is doing. I would not always agree with everything that comes out of the Committee, but she has nevertheless shown a desire to try to get things sorted out in Northern Ireland.

First, as has already been emphasised by a number of speakers, we are approaching this debate at a time when—a quarter of the way through the year—we do not actually have a budget in Northern Ireland, and not for the first time. I do not know, as the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) has said, whether this is a co-ordinated political plan or an example of the incompetence of Sinn Féin Ministers. If it is a co-ordinated political plan, it is a very stupid one, because not having a budget and not having money allocated to Departments does not just affect the Unionist population in Northern Ireland—it affects everybody. It affects both Sinn Féin voters and Unionist voters. While it may add to Sinn Féin's argument that Northern Ireland is not a viable state, I nevertheless do not believe that they should be punishing their own constituents to prove that.

We have to look at the context of Northern Ireland. Getting a budget agreed anywhere is always going to be difficult, because there will always be competing priorities and there are always people wanting more. I suspect that the Chancellor has had similar problems and difficulties even in this Parliament, where she is dealing with only one party—there may be a lot of factions within that party, mind you, but it is only one party. It is much more difficult in a four-party coalition where the parties have totally different outlooks and they have to decide how the money is going to be allocated. We have only to look at the current and previous Sinn Féin Ministers, because do not forget: every time a budget has not been agreed in Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin have been in charge of the finances. I think that has happened on three occasions. The latest crisis has been caused because the Minister responsible did not consult with anybody before simply deciding on a budget—did not even consult with his fellow Ministers—and Ministers from his own party are now disagreeing with it.

I have some experience of this process, because I served in that post in the Northern Ireland Assembly for four years. The Conservative party gained power here in Westminster in May the year after I took over, and in June the reserves that we had, which were about 3% of the budget, were taken back by Treasury, and we were then given a 2% reduction, so there was a 5% reduction in the budget for that year. The budget had already been agreed, and it therefore had to be rewritten. It was not easy, but it was possible because there was a willingness to work. We consulted and consulted, compromised and everything else, and we managed to get a three-year budget, even against that background. That is why I do not accept the argument that they cannot get an agreed budget just because there are financial difficulties. I do not accept the excuses.

However, I would point out that Northern Ireland has for many years been underfunded, as has been confirmed by the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council review. I am pleased that our current party leader, my right

hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), was the first person to raise the requirement to have budgets in Northern Ireland determined on need, and not just on the Barnett formula. There has been some success in that, as we now get the 124%. I accept that the Government took that argument on board, although they had not done so until my right hon. Friend persisted in pushing for that at all kinds of levels. However, even with that increase, there is still an historic backlog.

I am not here to simply say, "Give us more money." I understand that there are fiscal restraints right across the United Kingdom. However, where a fiscal deficit has been identified, I think it is incumbent on the Government to look at how that can be addressed. I am sure that some people back home will not be very happy with me for saying this, but I think it would be wrong simply to say, "The Fiscal Council has identified between £1 billion and £3.5 billion, depending on whether you compare it with Scotland or Wales, so there's the money." If additional money is to be given, it should of course be allocated on the basis that something is given back in return.

Many people will say that interferes with the devolution settlement, because it means telling people how to spend the money. But I think it should be conditional: if people are looking for additional money, let us see how they are going to use it—to reform public services, to cut expenditure in the longer run, to make services more efficient. The money is given on that condition, and those conditions are measured, and the money is released on that basis. That would be one way out of the current difficulties facing the Executive.

The money would be conditionally given, and it would be given for things that have been promised for some time, I think, but have never been done, either because it was too hard to do them or there was not the money to do them. Reform does require some expenditure up front, even if it is only getting rid of some of the surplus staff or reviewing some of the estate. Looking forward in the estimates, that is one way that the Government should be considering dealing with this particular issue.

Secondly, the Northern Ireland budget is divided between what goes to the Executive—the bulk of it—and the Northern Ireland Office. We have to look at need. Let me just give some examples. On money allocated for agriculture, four times more is spent per head spent in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the United Kingdom, but that is not always reflected in the allocations. That is not because we are giving more generously; it is simply that Northern Ireland has a bigger agricultural industry, and that is reflected in the money that is given. Very often what is happening is that we are simply treated as if we were the rest of the United Kingdom, so we get much less per head, even though the industry is much more important. My hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) indicated in his intervention that poverty levels will impact the amount of money spent on health. Hence, the needs-based expenditure is more important than simply the block grant.

There are three things I want to raise about the Northern Ireland Office expenditure. First, there is a 25% uplift in the DEL spending—the departmental expenditure limit. According to the papers we have been given, that is attributed mostly to the additional money required for the Finucane inquiry. I have to say to the Secretary of State that there are people who feel really

sore about the way that moneys can be allocated to the investigation of one particular death because Sinn Féin has made it such a big issue, while hundreds of families across Northern Ireland have never had a proper investigation into the death of their loved ones.

Yesterday evening I attended a memorial service for Ulster Defence Regiment victims in Northern Ireland: 192 UDR soldiers were killed during the troubles, and 62 were killed after they had retired or left the UDR, and many of their widows and families have never had any proper investigation into the death of their loved ones. Yet for the Finucane family we have had three Stevens inquiries—I remember those from when I was on the Policing Board. Then there was a review of those inquiries to see if they were adequate—the Cory review—and now we have another bout of the inquiry, with a nearly 25% increase in the budget of the Northern Ireland Office to facilitate that. That is not regarded as fair. When inquiries are driven by the political push of one particular party and the Government's desire to keep them happy, to me that is first of all a waste of funds and, secondly, unfair.

Secondly, part of the budget has been increased to deal with the ICRIR reports and investigations. As has already been pointed out, while there has been an increase for the ICRIR, there has been no equivalent increase for the police service. The police service reckons that it is costing about £24 million per year to facilitate providing the information, yet no allowance has been made for that. That puts pressure on a budget that is already predicted to be in a deficit of £58 million this year. That means fewer police officers on the ground and so on.

Thirdly, as was pointed out by the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim, one of the roles of the Northern Ireland Office is to promote the internal market. I do not blame the current Government totally from the mess that we are in; they inherited botched negotiations by the previous Government, but little or nothing has been done to remedy that. When the Assembly was going back, negotiations went on and we got a document called "Safeguarding the Union", which was totally endorsed by the current Government, even though they were then in opposition.

Part of that was about finding ways to promote the internal market. One thing that was recognised was that if there was disruption to trade, we would need to improve the trade routes, and so a ports fund of £10 million was agreed. Yet in a recent letter from the Secretary of State, it was accepted that although extra money was found for the Finucane inquiry and for the ICRIR, no funding has been allocated to the ports fund, which was designed to improve sea routes across the Irish sea and make them more efficient, so that goods could flow in and out of Northern Ireland in a less costly way.

Will the Secretary of State tell us what exactly is the status now of that £10 million commitment? I met with the port authorities in Larne, who were hoping that they would benefit from that funding. It would have meant that they could widen and lengthen the ramps, take in bigger ships and bring down the cost of transport. It would also have opened new routes to GB. The port authorities put in £10 million, expecting—under the promise that was made—that match funding would be made available from the Government.

Other actions have been taken by the Government that have made the routes more difficult, including the imposition of the carbon tax on shipping. That will be implemented from 1 July, and it is estimated to increase the cost of bringing goods across the Irish sea from GB to Northern Ireland, or vice versa, by around 7%. That, again, makes the route and the bringing of goods in from GB less competitive, on top of all the other reasons why companies do not want to sell to Northern Ireland now anyway—namely, the additional paperwork.

In conclusion, I just say to the Secretary of State that, yes, we do have a budget crisis in Northern Ireland, but I believe that there could be some inventiveness from the Government. My colleague Gordon Lyons, who is the Communities Minister, has suggested to the Treasury that he will lean hard to get efficiencies and savings from fraud in the benefits budget. But he has asked in return that some of those benefits be shared with Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin, which does not seem to wish to attack fraud, has been holding that up, but will the Secretary of State push with the Treasury the case for those savings from fraud that might be identified in Northern Ireland to be shared with the Executive to help reduce its financial pressures? Will he commit to working with Ministers to ensure that any additional funding is used in a productive way so that Northern Ireland can become much more sustainable fiscally than it is at present?

None of us wants to be here. Certainly as a Unionist, I do not want to be here with a begging bowl year after year, but I believe that there is a responsibility on both sides: the Government must recognise that there is a deficit that needs to be dealt with, and that deficit must be dealt with in a way that makes positive changes for the future.

7.27 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): Many Members across the House have spoken about the financial situation in Northern Ireland. My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) spoke very well about the impact that it has on the lives of people in Northern Ireland.

I would like to touch briefly on the impact that it is having on a particular group of vulnerable individuals, and I declare an interest at this point as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on learning disability. That group of individuals is the people who had the misfortune to be housed at Muckamore Abbey hospital. An inquiry into two decades of systemic abuse concluded two weeks ago and published its report. Some of the findings were absolutely horrific.

The report found that mistreatment became a normality and that patients suffered black eyes, broken bones and severe neglect. These were patients who had learning disabilities and mental health issues. They were some of the most vulnerable people in our society—quite often non-verbal and unable to raise concerns about their treatment themselves. They were subjected to neglect, poor care and a wider diminution of their rights. Many had their lives made miserable by systematic bullying by certain members of staff.

The report raised serious concerns about the attitude of the trust towards patients and the abuse being reported. There was evidence of patients not being washed, with faeces under their fingernails or on their clothes, becoming obese or losing weight dramatically, owing to a lack of care over diet, and other patients were over-medicated

[*Jen Craft*]

and described as being “zombified”. Parents have described seeing their adult children basically disappearing before their eyes in a locked institution that they were unable to access.

The mistreatment of people with learning disabilities on locked mental health wards is unfortunately not contained to Northern Ireland, but this discussion about the estimates given to the Northern Ireland Executive presents an opportunity for Northern Ireland to lead the way. The report spoke of the need for a transformation in social care in Northern Ireland so that people with learning disabilities and mental health issues are treated in the community in a way that is compassionate and sees them as individuals. Given the £185 million set aside for public service transformation, does the Secretary of State share my hope that those who have suffered at Muckamore Abbey hospital, their families and their loved ones might see a transformation undertaken as a result of the report so that people in Northern Ireland, and indeed across the UK, do not have to suffer similarly?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): We come to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

7.30 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): The 2026-27 main estimate for the Northern Ireland Office asks the House to approve spending plans for this politically sensitive region of the United Kingdom. In cash terms, the 2026-27 block grant has barely increased from 2025-26 levels. As the Stormont Executive are warning, that will leave a massive deficit and represents a 2.7% decrease in real spending power.

That settlement arrives against a backdrop in which the Executive overspent their budget by £400 million in the last financial year, covered only by a Treasury reserve advance now being repaid in instalments, with £80 million due this year in the first tranche. We have a Government clawing back money, not investing in Northern Ireland’s future.

On policing, the Government have provided an extra £113 million through the PSNI digital security fund. That figure sounds impressive, but it does not begin to address the operational drain that legacy demands place on day-to-day policing. The Chief Constable, Jon Boucher, has warned that without the PSNI being funded to service the demands of what is planned to become the Legacy Commission, the entire project will fail, yet when he petitions the Secretary of State he is told that policing is a devolved matter, and when he turns to the Executive he is told that legacy costs arose under direct rule and are a matter for Westminster.

The responsibility bounces between the two, but the PSNI ends up footing the bill. The estimates do not contain any resolution to that deadlock. There is no acknowledgement that the legacy burden is a UK Government, not a Stormont, liability. Let us be clear that the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has twice recommended a dedicated ringfenced funding stream to meet PSNI legacy costs, and it continues to do so in the face of Northern Ireland Office rejections.

On trade, it is worth reminding the House that 56% of people in Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU. They have been proved correct, as Northern Ireland has borne the consequences of Brexit ever since, with disrupted supply chains and barriers to trade. Of course, the Windsor framework was meant to give Northern Ireland the best of both worlds, with unfettered access to both the UK internal market and the EU single market. The evidence suggests that it has delivered neither.

A Federation of Small Businesses survey found that more than half of businesses trading between Great Britain and Northern Ireland are experiencing real difficulties, with more than a third of UK-wide respondents who moved goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland having stopped doing so entirely. Just one in seven Northern Ireland businesses say that they benefit from dual market access, which is much less than the 71% figure quoted by the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee this afternoon, citing a pre-Windsor framework survey. Some two thirds of Northern Ireland-based businesses say that they have no understanding of the framework and have not taken advantage of it.

Implementation of the Windsor framework is a stated Northern Ireland Office priority, yet the only dedicated line of funding for it in the estimate is an £8.5 million reserve fund, and at the Select Committee today we heard that the Northern Ireland business support service—also known as the one-stop shop—will not come on stream until the next financial year at the earliest.

Finally, may I point out that the estimate transfers £35 million from the Home Office for the immigration health surcharge, yet the Home Office has not published data on the number of asylum claims lodged in Northern Ireland? We are being asked to approve spending derived from a population of claimants the Government decline to count.

Northern Ireland has endured too much and waited too long for a Government who match the scale of their ambitions with the substance of their spending. On the evidence of these estimates, it is still waiting.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

7.35 pm

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): I will also begin by congratulating the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), on making sure that we got this debate. It is clear that without her and the support of her Committee, we would not be discussing this incredibly important issue on the Floor of the House. I repeat the remarks made by the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson): the Select Committee in this Parliament has been exemplary and given us high quality analysis, which has benefited debate on both sides of the House.

We are here debating the estimate simply because the situation is becoming dire. As was said by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray)—I fear that my pronunciation may be slightly out—this is not an abstract matter; it is having a genuine impact on public services today and on the planning of public services for tomorrow. Uncertainty is building and—I am sorry to say this—there is no suggestion that

it will be alleviated any time soon. In fact, as the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) mentioned, it appears that we are further from agreement now than we were at the start of the year, because there is disagreement within Sinn Féin on the proposals put forward.

That begs an important question for the Government: what will happen next? This is a debate about devolved issues, but I know that the Secretary of State and his officials from the Northern Ireland Office have been in talks with the Executive and their representatives. I very much hope that we will get an update on those talks. We must, however, ask what will happen if no agreement is forthcoming. As was said, we are now a quarter of the way through the financial year and there is no solution in sight. We cannot move to a position where overspend continues to be normalised, and it appears that the Executive are effectively saying, “We can’t solve this problem—we need more money.” That is not sustainable, and it cannot give anyone confidence in devolution as it is now. What is the Government’s plan if the current talks break down and we move into the summer without an agreed budget in Northern Ireland?

I have a number of points to ask the Secretary of State about while I have the opportunity—most significantly, they are about legacy. He may have detected from some of our previous debates that Opposition Members are not in favour of what the Government are doing. That said, we think strongly that if the Government are to press ahead with their plans, given that it is acknowledged that those plans will create an additional burden on public services in Northern Ireland, on the police and on the legacy institutions, the Government should be prepared to meet that financial cost.

It is not enough to say that £250 million is being made available. That £250 million was made available by a Conservative Government some time ago, and since it was granted inflation has probably degraded it to £200 million at most. It is clear that if the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill is passed, it will increase the caseload of the ICRIR—the Legacy Commission, as it will become—but not increase the resources it has at its disposal, and it will increase the caseload that the PSNI is dealing with, but not increase the resources of the PSNI.

The danger is that we will see a bottleneck in the Legacy Commission and very slow processing of cases, and an additional drain on the resources of the PSNI that will take more people away from frontline policing. We know that frontline policing in Northern Ireland has about 1,000 fewer officers than were expected when New Decade, New Approach was signed. That is a clear and present danger that the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill presents to financing in Northern Ireland, and I would be grateful if the Secretary of State could explain the Government’s position.

I would also be interested to hear whether the Secretary of State has had any discussions with the heir presumptive to the Labour party leadership on the future of the troubles Bill, because the legislative timetable has obviously been pushed to the right again and it seems unlikely that we will have the legislation before the summer break. That being so, it will be a consideration for the next Prime Minister. Can the Secretary of State tell us what conversations he has had with the right hon. Member

for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) about this legislation, and whether the next Prime Minister, if that is what he is, is in favour of it?

In the negotiations that any Government have with the Executive in Northern Ireland, I believe there is a duty to make the case that the Northern Ireland Executive should be prepared to raise revenue on top of the budget settlements that the Treasury gives. After the last Budget, I was prepared to say that I thought the Northern Ireland Office had acquired a reasonably good settlement from the Treasury for Northern Ireland. The key now is that that money should be well spent. If the Northern Ireland Executive want to spend more, they should be prepared to raise revenue, but they should also be prepared to deliver their public services more efficiently and effectively. I hope that His Majesty’s Government will work with the institutions in Northern Ireland to help that to happen.

7.41 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I join others in congratulating the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), on having secured this extremely important, timely and useful estimates debate and on the work she does to scrutinise what happens in Northern Ireland and the work of the Northern Ireland Office. The Committee is exceedingly energetic and will be getting full value for money from the small ministerial team, as it did today and will do over the next couple of weeks.

I shall begin by addressing the most important question that has been highlighted, to which the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) just referred: the lack of an agreed budget. He has just reminded us that he thought the spending review was a pretty good settlement. The Chancellor set out that Northern Ireland would receive £19.3 billion per year on average over the course of the spending review period—the largest settlement since devolution in 1998. In addition, the Chancellor confirmed that the Government would be providing almost £750 million in additional funding through the Barnett formula over the spending review period as a result of decisions made at the autumn Budget and the spring statement. That includes an extra £373 million in the current financial year, 2026-27, and that money is available to the Executive.

To pick up on one point, I am aware of the arguments about the funding in comparison to Scotland and Wales. I simply want to make the point that funding settlements for all the nations of the United Kingdom are underpinned by the Barnett formula, and it is important to remember that, for example, compared with Wales, Northern Ireland has benefited from generous funding from the Barnett formula in previous years. The UK Government—the last Government and this one—have also committed around £16 billion in funding packages and agreed financial flexibilities from 2014-15 right up to 2029-30 for the Executive to support public services and long-term investment. The Treasury has given a commitment to discuss a fiscal framework for Northern Ireland, where, of course, funding under the Barnett formula can be discussed.

On the level of need, the fact is that this was independently assessed by the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council. The figure that it came up with was 124%, and that is indeed the level of funding that the Northern

[Hilary Benn]

Ireland Executive are getting. My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) recognises that fact. She rightly points out that, however much money is allocated, someone will always say, “Give us more.” How the money is spent has also been an important part of this debate, and I shall come to the remarks of the former Finance Minister, the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson), in a moment.

Let us look at what is achieved in Northern Ireland for the expenditure, with 124% of the funding in England. In England, about 4% of people are waiting more than a year to see a hospital consultant. In Northern Ireland, it is nearly 50%, with more funding.

Robin Swann: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Hilary Benn: Of course I will give way to the former Health Minister.

Robin Swann: The right hon. Gentleman will acknowledge that, as there has not been a repetitive budget since 2016, any transformation or investment in health is always more challenging, and that is where the waiting lists are. Does he also acknowledge that that transformation funding is now there, and that the work being done by my party colleague, the present Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt, is bringing those waiting lists down?

Hilary Benn: I absolutely acknowledge the work that Mike Nesbitt has been doing in health, and it shows what can be achieved if minds are put to it. It is a difficult balance between, on the one hand, running the services today and keeping them going and, on the other hand, investing in transformation. In the end, however, investing in the transformation is the way in which we will be able to deliver better public services for the people of Northern Ireland.

I share the concern that has been expressed right across the House at the absence of an agreed multi-year budget, which is creating, above all, significant uncertainty for the funding of public services. I have been talking regularly with the Minister for Finance, who clearly faces a huge challenge in trying to get an agreement, and those conversations will continue this week, because we need to get to a multi-year budget as quickly as possible. I said about a month ago that the Executive needed to come towards the Government and meet us halfway, and there are two essential requirements.

The first relates to the fact that the amount of money currently being forecast as the overspend for this year is going up, beyond the level that we saw in the last financial year. The word “pressures” is heard frequently in Northern Ireland. People say that they have budget pressures. Well, everyone has budget pressures. Quite reasonably, the Government have asked what the nature of those pressures is. Are they absolutely unavoidable legal commitments, are they things we would like to do or are they things in between? Trying to interrogate and understand the nature of those pressures and to see what the Executive tell the Government about that is the first requirement.

The second requirement is a plan for how we will move from this year-to-year crisis—which was very clearly articulated by the right hon. Member for East Antrim in his contribution—because we need to see something that will address this in the longer term. I am much

struck by what the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council said in its report on the sustainability of the finances, published on 16 June. It said that

“these immediate issues facing NI’s public finances reflect an unsustainable trajectory resulting from the underlying structural problems in the Budget. These structural issues are visible in the relatively high public sector pay bill, limited revenue-raising”—

a point just referred to—

“and persistent overspends.”

Whatever the size of the budget that anyone has, we have, in the end, a responsibility to find a way of living within that and to raise more revenue if that is open to us. That is what all Governments must do. The current Government have done it in relation to the public finances, and the same is true for the Northern Ireland Executive. In addition to the funding I have already described, there is the £617 million from the UK Government that is going into the city and growth deals, as well as the defence growth deal, which the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick), has spoken about in the House; the enhanced investment zone; and the local growth fund.

A point was raised about the local growth fund. I recognise and accept that the change in the profile from revenue to capital has created a difficulty for the voluntary sector. That is why I met representatives of the voluntary sector and said to them, “There is unspent money in the PEACEPLUS programme; you can make a bid to that.” I think about £12 million is available in revenue. The Exec came to the Government and said, “We would like to keep £3 million of that for Go Succeed; we think it is a great programme, and we’d like you to carry on backing it.” We said, “Fine.” That left £9 million available in revenue for the economic inactivity programmes that the voluntary sector has been running. I said to the Executive, “How about putting the extra Barnett consequential that you now have, including £373 million in the current year that you were not expecting, together with the £9 million? We could then enable those projects to continue.” That is an example of what can be done if we put our minds to it.

The extra capital allocation in the local growth fund may in part be the answer to the question asked about the ports fund. A number of commitments were made in the “Safeguarding the Union” document. I remember a large commitment that Casement Park would be fully funded so that the Euros could be hosted. Well, no money was allocated for it at all. The previous Government were very free with the promises, but they did not do the work to find the money. No funding has been identified for the ports fund, but there is money in the local growth fund. I also point out that Belfast harbour has a masterplan, which I understand it is looking to self-fund, and that the Government have made available an increase in capital funding to the Northern Ireland Executive. If the Executive wish to put money into port infrastructure, they are entirely able to do so.

Let me turn to PSNI funding. I once again pay tribute to the officers of the PSNI who, every time there is disorder in Northern Ireland, show extraordinary courage in protecting the public from those who are setting fire to buses, throwing bricks and burning people out of their houses. I had the chance to thank some of those officers when I returned to Northern Ireland the

week before last, following the disorder. They are very brave. From memory, I think some 42 officers were injured in the recent disorder.

I appreciate the financial pressures faced, but this is a devolved matter. The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim said that he thought it was a profound mistake to have devolved responsibility for policing and justice. I respectfully disagree with him. The trouble with the call for ringfencing, which we have heard from other sources this evening, is this: we either believe in devolved Government—the elected representatives of the people of Northern Ireland taking decisions about how the money is spent—or begin to move back towards a ringfence; once we have a ringfence for the PSNI, it will not be long before someone says, “Can I have a ringfence over here?” In the end, we have a choice to make. I believe in devolved Government in Northern Ireland, and the Government believe in devolved Government in Northern Ireland. There is a matter of principle here: the funding is available to the Executive; it is for them to decide how much they allocate to policing as opposed to other priorities.

Sammy Wilson: I accept the argument that the Secretary of State is making. I served on the Northern Ireland Policing Board during the change from the Royal Ulster Constabulary to the PSNI, and was on the finance committee of the board. We had continual battles with the then Secretary of State, who was no more generous or flexible than a devolved Minister would have been. Devolution or no devolution, the fiscal and the financial situation is the same. I suppose the difference is that, when it comes to putting on pressure, the Secretary of State here is perhaps a bit more remote than the Justice Minister in Northern Ireland.

Hilary Benn: I will reflect on that point. I do not know in what sense the right hon. Gentleman uses “remote”; if it is geographical, I agree with him entirely. I acknowledge that, as he said from experience, agreeing a budget is difficult in a power-sharing system. It is difficult. He told the House an interesting story about being faced with reductions in budget and it being possible to come together and agree one. All Governments have to deal with the financial and fiscal circumstances they find, but when we take office, we have a responsibility to fulfil the tasks that are in front of us, which include balancing the budget. He also made interesting points about conditionality. How do we ensure, in return for whatever support a Government give—we have seen a long history of lumps and bumps of money, restoration after collapse, and so on—a consistent, measurable path to balanced budgets year after year, and an end to boom and bust in times of crisis?

We have increased the additional security funding, which, from memory, I think was flat for about 10 years under the previous Government. This Government came in and decided to increase the additional security funding. The point has been raised in the Select Committee about the comparison with the counter-terrorism policing grant that is available in England and Wales. However, if we divide the grant by the population, we get £19.42 per head of funding; if we divide the additional security funding for Northern Ireland by the population of Northern Ireland, we get £19.61 per head. When people ask why Northern Ireland is not eligible for the counter-terrorism grant, the answer is that it is getting the same

funding per head from the additional security funding. It is for the Chief Constable to decide how best to use that money.

Let me turn to legacy funding. The hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar, speaking for the Opposition, is right that the sum was identified some time ago. It is actually £232 million, because £18 million of the £250 million has been set aside for part 4 of the legacy Act. In addition, the framework agreement, to be given effect by the troubles Bill, will enable the Irish Government to commit a further €25 million for legacy mechanisms. We are talking regularly to the ICRIR and the Treasury on a business case, but I say to the hon. Gentleman that the caseload faced by the legacy commission is entirely the product of the piece of legislation that the previous Government passed.

Alex Burghart: That’s why we funded it.

Hilary Benn: Well, it is entirely the result of that. The funding that was made available was the fixed sum to which I referred a moment ago. That is the first point.

Secondly, the Department of Justice had put aside a sum of around, from memory, £50 million when the inquests five-year plan was put in place. It thought it would have 50 cases. A number of those, of course, are now not going ahead, and the troubles Bill proposes to restore nine and to sift the rest. Thirdly, prior to the legacy Act’s coming into law, the PSNI had about 1,000 cases to investigate; had the legacy Act not been passed, it would have continued to have to investigate those and receive requests for disclosure.

The final point I would make on this issue—and I did make this point to the Select Committee when I was asked about it—is that we are looking in particular at schedule 4 to the Bill because Jon Boutcher makes the point that if there is a requirement to sift all the material to identify that which is of high security before handing over the files, that puts an obligation in place. We are looking at what we can do to ease some of the cost burdens, as hon. Members have said, as more people come to the Legacy Commission—and I hope more people will come forward.

I will turn now to a couple of other points.

Alex Burghart: I am pleased that the Government are looking at some sort of additional support for PSNI. I sense that the Secretary of State is about to move off legacy. I did ask him whether he had discussed the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill with the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) because, obviously, his view of the Bill will be critical for its future.

Hilary Benn: The hon. Gentleman invites me to speculate on discussions I may or may not have had, and I will kindly resist the request that he has just made for reasons that I am sure will have been obvious to him when he wrote that question into his speech.

The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) and I have discussed the internal market many times before. He talks about the firms that have stopped shipping stuff to Northern Ireland. He will find many, many firms that have stopped shipping stuff to Europe for exactly the same reason: the decision to leave the European Union. It is from that that all the consequences have flowed.

Jim Allister *indicated dissent.*

Hilary Benn: The hon. and learned Member shakes his head. With respect, I am afraid that it is a self-evident fact.

Sammy Wilson: Would the right hon. Member accept that international trade is much different than trade within the country that we belong to? If the impediments are stopping trade within our own country, of course that is much more serious than companies deciding that they are not going to sell to countries abroad.

Hilary Benn: I would indeed accept that point, if it was not for the fact that a decision had been made to leave the European Union when there is an open border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. That was the fundamental problem that had to be solved, and none of the alternative suggestions would enable us to do this.

I want to respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) about the Muckamore hospital report. I think that every single Member of the House was deeply shocked by what we read in that report, and our hearts go out to all those who have been affected by the mistreatment that has been revealed. I think the answer to the very reasonable question that she put is that we all hope to see all the many recommendations in that report implemented.

Robin Swann: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Hilary Benn: I think the hon. Gentleman was responsible for establishing the inquiry, and I pay credit to him for doing so. The real way to honour those who have suffered is to ensure that the recommendations of the report are fully implemented.

Robin Swann: I thank the hon. Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for raising the matter. I was the Minister who commissioned the inquiry, and listening to the families and the individuals who were in Muckamore at that time was a harrowing experience. I want to put on the record my thanks to Tom Kark KC, who chaired the

inquiry, for handling the inquiry and bringing forward the recommendations in an engaging and compassionate way. The health service, the trusts and the entire health family in Northern Ireland need to pay careful tribute to a number of those recommendations, and the hon. Lady made a good point that they contain learnings for health bodies, trusts and Departments across the United Kingdom.

Hilary Benn: I congratulate the hon. Member on having established the inquiry, because when things go catastrophically wrong, it is what we do about it that counts, and that requires an independent look and for the truth to be told.

In conclusion, it is of course for the Executive to agree a budget—above all, for the citizens they serve. That is the fundamental principle of devolved government in Northern Ireland. I repeat what I said earlier: both myself and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury are ready and willing to try to assist the Executive in doing that, but we need to see the things that I described earlier to be able to do so.

8.4 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi: I thank the Secretary of State and the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick), for their positive engagement with the Committee. We understand the challenges the Secretary of State faces, but we hope to provide the correct amount of scrutiny to get Northern Ireland into a better place financially. Many thanks to the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart), and also to the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) for his kind words. I also pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jen Craft) for talking about the very difficult reading that is the Muckamore Abbey hospital review. I want everybody to be able to see that across this House, we care for everybody wherever they live, but especially in Northern Ireland.

Question deferred until tomorrow at Seven o'clock (Standing Order No. 54).

Home Office and Ministry of Justice

[Relevant documents: First Report of the Justice Committee, Courts and Tribunals Bill, HC 192; Sixth Report of the Justice Committee of Session 2024–26, Tackling the drugs crisis in our prisons, HC 557, and the Government response, HC 1599; Seventh Report of the Justice Committee of Session 2024–26, Ending the cycle of reoffending – part one: rehabilitation in prisons, HC 469, and the Government response, HC 1639.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That,

(1) for the year ending with 31 March 2027, for expenditure by the Home Office:

- (a) further resources, not exceeding £10,441,629,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1855 of Session 2024–26,
- (b) further resources, not exceeding £860,906,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (c) a further sum, not exceeding £10,985,000,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament; and

(2) for the year ending with 31 March 2027, for expenditure by the Ministry of Justice:

- (a) further resources, not exceeding £9,308,668,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1855 of Session 2024–26,
- (b) further resources, not exceeding £1,453,047,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and
- (c) a further sum, not exceeding £8,887,226,000, be granted to His Majesty to be issued by the Treasury out of the Consolidated Fund and applied for expenditure on the use of resources authorised by Parliament.—
(*Mark Ferguson.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The debate will be opened by the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

8.5 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee, Mr Speaker, and yourself, Madam Deputy Speaker, for granting the debate, and the Minister for being here—I hope she will find it useful.

We often speak in this Chamber about defence spending, and rightly so. Defence keeps our nation safe, but justice is what keeps the public safe, ensuring that victims receive justice and that offenders are removed from our streets. According to the National Audit Office, the Ministry of Justice's total expenditure for 2024–25 was £15.5 billion, with an income of £1.9 billion, resulting in a net cost to the taxpayer of £13.6 billion. To put that into perspective, it is the equivalent of just two weeks of welfare spending.

When I refer to one justice system, I mean the police, the courts, prison officers and the Probation Service working together as a single interdependent system. When one part underperforms, it creates a domino effect across the entire system. Since the beginning of this parliamentary term, the Public Accounts Committee has published a number of critical reports on the criminal justice system, covering Crown courts, police productivity, probation efficiency, violence against women and girls, MOJ reports and prison estate capacity. These are not separate issues; they are interconnected pressures within

one system, and they must be analysed, funded and reformed accordingly, not in isolation. I suggest that the PAC is a very useful Committee for considering these types of cross-cutting issues.

It is clear that the criminal justice system has considerable weaknesses. A central issue is the lack of usable integrated data. The police, courts and prisons operate on separate systems that do not effectively communicate with one another. This fragmentation makes it difficult for the system to function efficiently as a whole and increases the risk of serious administrative errors. That is reflected in the number of erroneous prisoner releases. In the last 12 months to March 2025, 262 prisoners were mistakenly released—an increase of 128% compared with the previous years.

Let me turn first to the estimates themselves—after all, that is what the debate is about. It is striking that even identifying a clear, unified figure for the system is difficult because of the fragmented way in which the funding is structured and assessed. The House of Commons Library has confirmed that the Ministry of Justice 2026–27 main estimate for resource departmental expenditure limit—running expenditure—is £12.69 billion, and capital departmental expenditure limit is confirmed at £2.36 billion. That represents a 4.4% and 2.6% increase compared with last year respectively. By contrast, the Home Office main estimate for RDEL for 2026–27 was £19.5% billion, representing a 10.8% increase on last year.

The Prime Minister has said that governing this country is about choices, so the question is: are these the right choices? Although the Government have committed to increasing the Ministry of Justice budget by more than 2% per year, the Department faces mounting pressures, as the Minister will know. Half its running costs are spent on staff, and it has experienced rising demand, inflationary pressures, and higher than expected costs. It has responded by transferring £695 million from underspent capital budgets into day-to-day expenditure, largely due to delays in the prison expansion programme. At the same time, it has committed to delivering at least 5% in savings, reducing administrative costs by 15% by 2029–30, and introducing AI to drive efficiencies. Those are all good things, but they do put pressure on the current budget. These ambitious targets must not come at the expense of frontline services, and they must come with the data to back up the ambition.

Let me turn to some of the issues in more detail. Police officers are on the frontline, and too often they face criticism without proper recognition for the vital work they do to keep our communities up and down the country safe. Although their funding has increased, with a £535.8 million uplift in 2026–27, forces are dealing with the growing complexity of crime, sustained financial pressure and persistent productivity challenges. In Gloucestershire, the Government are not delivering sufficient funding through the police grant to invest in any new digital IT, which would enable the police to be more efficient, and such pressures inevitably feed into the courts, which are already under severe strain.

The rising population in this country is bound to mean that more people will be going through our court system. Around 4 million new cases are now entering our courts and tribunals each year in England and Wales, and the average time to resolve a case has risen dramatically, from 481 days to 685. The backlog in the criminal courts remains exceptionally high, with an

[Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

unprecedented 88,200 Crown court cases open as of December 2025—it might have come down a little since then. The median time from an offence being committed to the case being completed is 355 days, with some rape and other serious sexual offences—the so-called RASSO cases—taking three years or more, and some being postponed up to six times. Many victims simply give up before their cases come to court in order to try to put the trauma they have suffered behind them.

Is the system any better in the magistrates courts, where there is a backlog in excess of 310,000 cases? Through the Courts and Tribunals Bill, the Government propose to increase magistrates' sentencing powers to up to 36 months. However, we have a huge problem with the recruitment of magistrates, meaning that the system is likely to be overwhelmed if more cases are diverted to them. It cannot be right that we have empty courtrooms and burgeoning waiting lists. The Government's changes to legal aid have also led to inefficiency, with more people now representing themselves; I do not blame them at all, but it means that each case takes longer because people often need the court procedure explained to them.

Crown court sitting days have not kept pace with demand, despite offers from the Lady Chief Justice to increase capacity, which have not been taken up fully by the Government. Around 11% of courts are inactive on any given day. Delays of that scale are unacceptable for victims, defendants and public confidence in the system. These delays have the direct impact on the prison population, with more people being held on remand due to the backlog, as well as increased time for preliminary hearings and the granting of bail.

We are also seeing an increase in the number of people received into prison, driven by tougher sentencing and a rising remand population. Currently, between 16,600 and 18,000 people are held on remand in UK prisons, meaning they have been denied bail or are awaiting trial. Many of those people have been on remand for over six months, which is the target for maximum remand. That accounts for nearly 20% of the prison population. The increased flow of untried defendants and extended waiting times due to court backlogs is leading to that unacceptable increase in the prison population. If dealt with more efficiently, it would help with overcrowding in our prisons, but without sufficient capacity or staffing, the trend is unsustainable. The prison population reached a record high of 98% capacity, or 88,000, in August 2024—the highest ever. Overcrowding is driving violence, placing staff at risk, and undermining rehabilitation efforts.

As we know, the Government have committed to creating 20,000 new prison places, yet progress has been slow, with repeated delays and underspending. In a recent accounting officer assessment, there were significant delays in awarding new contracts at both HMP Forest Bank and HMP Rye Hill. The AOA does not set out the cause for those delays or for the additional costs incurred.

At the same time, retention of prison officers remains a serious challenge, affecting safety and stability across the prison estate. To give just one example of what is going on in the prison system, at our hearing on HMP Dartmoor the issue of radon was raised. The Ministry of Justice has signed a lease that cannot be

broken until 2033, yet no sooner had that lease been signed, the prison was deemed unsafe because of radon. It is costing £4 million a year for an empty prison. HMP Dartmoor is an example of a Department making a decision under pressure and at speed, leading to a complete waste of public money.

In March 2025, approximately 242,000 individuals were under probation supervision. Vacancy rates in the probation service have risen from 14% in 2021 to 21% in 2025. Staff are routinely working beyond capacity, estimated at 118%, although the figure is likely to be higher, particularly in London. That workload will be increased further with the Government's early release scheme. We heard deeply concerning evidence describing a culture of emotional strain and trauma among probation staff. This is not just a workforce issue, but a public safety issue, because when probation fails, reoffending rises, placing additional burdens on the police, courts and prisons.

The cost to this country of reoffending alone stands at a staggering £20.9 million, but the human cost to victims and communities is immeasurable. In part that is because our prisons are so overcrowded that prisoners are not being given meaningful activity, for example work training, so that when they are released they have developed skills that could help them to find work and reduce the reoffending rate.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when prisoners are engaged in retraining or rehabilitation, they can then return to the community they were brought up in, but that is often where their problems started? The report might be able to recommend things that can be done in prison, but when people get back to their community, that takes over and they start where they left off. Does he agree that such issues must be sorted out in the location, in the community, and in the place people come from, to ensure that they do not go back to their bad habits?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The hon. Member makes an interesting point, and the Government must consider in the round how they can give people useful training, work and leisure in prison, so that they come out with some skills. Where people go, how they are housed and what employment offers they get are issues that the Government need to consider seriously—it is a really big problem.

The number of recalls to prison is now at an all-time high, demonstrating a system under severe stress. Planned reforms, including early-release schemes, risk placing even greater pressure on an already overstretched probation service. Well-run probation is not optional; it is essential. It is what enables people to reintegrate into society and prevents the cycle of crime from continuing.

In conclusion, the criminal justice system must be treated as one system. The Home Office and the Ministry of Justice need to work much more closely together to resolve some of the serious problems that I have outlined. Investment, reform and accountability must reflect that reality. Fixing one part in isolation will not solve the wider problem. As I have said, democracy is founded on an effective and properly functioning criminal justice system to keep its citizens safe. Serious criminals need to be removed from society by imprisonment, but the system must help itself by taking strenuous steps to

reduce reoffending, which I repeat costs this country £20.9 billion a year. It is a well-thumbed maxim that, whatever the cause, justice delayed is justice denied.

8.20 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting time for this important debate. The debate follows a joint application by the Chairs of the Justice, Public Accounts and Home Affairs Committees. There is cross-Committee concern for our criminal justice system, as the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), has just said. I thank my fellow Chairs for their focus on the issue in its widest sense.

As Chair of the Justice Committee, I will focus my remarks on the estimates for the Ministry of Justice. A year ago, the Justice Committee was granted a similar debate on the spending of the Ministry of Justice. I noted at that point the positive settlement that the MOJ had received as part of the spending review, including a £7 billion investment aimed at delivering 14,000 new prison places by 2031 and £700 million a year for the Probation Service by 2028-29, in the light of the Sentencing Act 2026 reforms. Although I welcome many of the actions that the Government have taken over the past year to reform our criminal justice system, there is still a great deal of progress to be made, as those targets indicate.

The Ministry of Justice suffered years of budget cuts during the years of Tory austerity, meaning that when this Government were elected in 2024, MOJ expenditure was 11% less in real terms than it was in 2010. The main estimates for 2026-27 confirm that the MOJ's day-to-day spending is set to increase by £757 million, or 6.5%, which includes further investment in the Prison and Probation Service, the Courts and Tribunals Service and the Legal Aid Agency. I will come to each of those areas in turn shortly. The MOJ's capital spending is also set to increase by almost £60 million, or 2.6%. I note that the MOJ anticipates drawing down further funding at the supplementary estimates to support its prison capacity programme, and that must be right.

This year's main estimates allocate over half its day-to-day spending to the Prison and Probation Service. This is aimed at investment in staffing, opening of additional prison places and paying for prison contract costs. The prison population stands at over 87,000 and it is predicted to increase, with the most recent set of projections forecasting 91,400 by September 2026, and between 97,400 and 102,100 by September 2029. These are the highest numbers we will ever have seen in UK prisons.

Already, 25% of prisoners live in overcrowded conditions. As we have heard, overcrowding reduces safety, increases the likelihood of self-harm and violence, and impairs the rehabilitative programme that prisons are able to offer. The Justice Committee has focused much of its work over the past year on the endemic drugs crisis in our prisons and the poor rehabilitative offer available for prisoners.

The Government's continued investment in creating new prison places is necessary, but alongside the provisions of the Sentencing Act, some of which have now come into force, I hope that we can begin to see a stabilisation and eventual reduction of the prison population and an

improvement in conditions there. I note that deaths in prison custody decreased by 12% from the previous 12 months up to March this year, but any non-natural death in prison is a tragedy. I direct Members to our reports on drugs in prisons and rehabilitation in prisons, which have been tagged on the Order Paper as relevant documents for this debate.

As I mentioned earlier, by 2028-29, the Probation Service will receive an additional £700 million per year to support reforms resulting from the Sentencing Act, including a significant increase in the use of electronic monitoring or tagging. That investment is a substantial and welcome increase for a service that has been under strain for many years. I have raised repeatedly my concerns about the performance of Serco in its provision of the tagging service, and the Justice Committee will closely monitor Serco's performance moving forward.

I commend the work of the Public Accounts Committee in looking at the probation service and the report it published in February this year. The PAC report stated that the vacancy rate for probation officers increased from 14% in 2021 to 21% in 2025, with probation officers working above capacity for several years. The system has been running hot for an unsustainable period, which impacts on the hard-working probation staff. That cannot be underplayed and I hope to see improvements in this area soon.

The additional funding for the Courts and Tribunals Service is driven by pay increases and an increase in the uncapped sitting days in the Crown courts, which are necessary to recruit and retain staff and to address the backlog. The Crown court backlog continues to sit at around 80,000 cases. The uncapping of sitting days for 2026-27 is a welcome step and has already had a positive impact, but it is widely recognised that it is not enough on its own.

It is against that backdrop of an ever-increasing backlog that the Government introduced the Courts and Tribunals Bill earlier this year. Among other measures, the Bill would shift more cases to the magistrates courts and reduce the use of jury trials. The Justice Committee recently published an extensive report on the Bill, in which we warned that capacity in magistrates courts is unlikely to expand quickly enough to meet this increased level of demand. Our report highlighted the long-standing reductions in the number of magistrates and legal advisers, and described the recruitment target of having 21,000 magistrates in place by 2029 as unrealistic.

The Courts and Tribunals Bill has been carried over to this Session, but a date for its consideration on Report has not yet been set. I would encourage the incoming Prime Minister—whosoever that may be—to consider carefully the Committee's critique of the Bill, but also to be conscious that reform is desperately needed and cannot simply be kicked down the road to avoid difficult decisions.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): I am grateful to the Chair of the Justice Committee for giving way. What contribution to reducing the Crown court backlog does he believe curtailing the right to jury trials will make?

Andy Slaughter: First, one has to look at the Leveson package—the two volumes that Sir Brian Leveson has put together over 1,000 pages. That has 180 recommendations, a very small number of which deal with this issue. It is

[*Andy Slaughter*]

undeniable that it will be one factor that has an effect. Where I agree with the hon. Gentleman is that it is very difficult to calculate at this stage what effect it will have.

The changes to jury trials—not the abolition of jury trials—are moving the line so that some more cases will be dealt with at a summary level. As I think the hon. Gentleman knows, I prefer to look at the practical problems there may be in replacing some jury trials, with the additional pressures on the magistrates court. As a matter of principle, we can differ; as a matter of practice, I suspect he would agree with me. I ask him to agree with me that there will be some benefit, but I agree that it has not been calculated as yet.

Let me pick up what I was saying. A malfunctioning courts system is bad for victims, bad for defendants and bad for faith in our justice system, which has ramifications for our democracy.

I will conclude by touching on the Legal Aid Agency, which affects civil and criminal legal aid. Legal Aid Agency spending will rise by 10% year on year. That is driven by Government reforms that will result in higher billing in civil representation schemes, fee uplifts in crime lower schemes and additional operating costs. As I said last year, I was surprised to see that the spending review did not include a specific funding allocation for the Legal Aid Agency, with the only reference to it being in the context of potential efficiency savings that the MOJ will make in the review period.

Continuing investment in legal aid is essential to the proper functioning of the criminal justice system and efforts to tackle the Crown court backlog. Access to justice for those who rely on legal aid is reliant on a well-funded and properly functioning Legal Aid Agency, and we are all aware of the difficulties it has had over the past year. The Justice Committee will soon publish a report focused on legal aid as part of a wider access to justice inquiry.

Let me emphasise how important it is that we have a properly functioning criminal justice system if the public are to continue to have faith in our institutions and political system. I implore the incoming Administration not to lose the focus on reforming the criminal justice system. The current system is not fit for purpose, and we cannot afford not to act.

8.31 pm

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): The Crown court backlog is the most significant challenge facing the Ministry of Justice. Long delays in cases reaching trial undermine confidence in the whole justice system. I welcome the extra money that the Government have made available to increase the number of sitting days of the Crown court. I also welcome the additional funding to improve the physical condition of our courts and to invest in improved IT systems to make our courts run more efficiently.

While the Government are right to take those steps, I am concerned that they are wasting time, effort and money in curtailing the rights of British citizens to a jury trial. This reform has been presented as a necessary step to improve the efficiency of the courts. However, evidence suggests the contrary. The Government are aware of analysis by criminal justice researchers that indicates that the entire package of Government reforms

will save no more than 8% of Crown court time. More striking still, the introduction of judge-only trials is likely to deliver a saving of just 1.5% to 2.5%. That is a marginal efficiency gain compared with the curtailing of our citizens' rights to a jury trial, and it does not take into account the potential wasted time in determining whether a trial is to be held in a magistrates court or the new Crown court bench division.

I have previously asked the Lord Chancellor to set out the evidence to show how much of the backlog will be cut by his reduction of jury trials, but I have not received a meaningful reply, so I must conclude that he is either unwilling or unable to provide a response. The Labour party has proven of late that it is willing to dispense with the unpopular and the ineffectual, so I hope it will take the same approach to unpopular and ineffectual policy as it does to personnel. I hope that the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) and his new Lord Chancellor will drop this dreadful policy.

If the Government are serious about reducing delays, perhaps their focus should be on addressing why workers in the Ministry of Justice take more days off sick than workers in any other Whitehall Department. The average MOJ employee took 10.7 days' sickness in 2024-25; that is 30% higher than the civil service average, and double the average in the private sector. The Minister needs to get her Department in order.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): Does the hon. Member have any figures disaggregating prison officers from the remainder of MOJ staff? Obviously, their working lives are very different.

Sir Ashley Fox: I do not believe that information was provided, certainly not when it was presented to me, but if the hon. Lady has it, no doubt she will send it to me.

Jury trials and staff absence are not the only areas where the Government are focusing on the wrong issue; a similar problem emerges in the management of our prisons. The Government seem to believe that recklessly releasing many thousands of criminals early will address the crisis of overcrowding, instead of investing in measures to ensure that they do not reoffend. I fear that releasing so many criminals so early in their sentences risks a wave of reoffending in the future.

It is well established that when prisoners engage in meaningful educational or vocational courses, there are sizeable reductions in reoffending. More than 50% of adult prisoners have the literacy skills of an 11-year-old or lower; knowing this, one might think that the Government would seek to address the problem. The earned progression model should surely ensure that participation in education and training is compulsory to secure the very early releases that the Government are proposing. Instead, this Government are choosing to reduce the provision of prison education, astonishing though that might seem.

That is of huge concern, because investment in prison education is cost-effective. Research in 2018 showed that the economic benefits of lower reoffending and higher levels of employment after release outweighed the costs of prisoner education by a ratio of 5:1. In this instance, the problem is not that the budget has been cut, but that the cost of supplying that education has risen so significantly that the volume of core education delivered this year will be cut by 20% to 25%. Instead of

addressing why those costs have increased or exploring more competitive and flexible commissioning models to incorporate smaller providers, the Government's response has been to cut provision. That is short-sighted. If the MOJ is so poor at entering into contracts, may I recommend to the Minister that that budget is entirely devolved to prison governors? I believe they would be better at bringing together local businesses to provide the education they need for the prisoners in their care. It would certainly be better than paying Serco, Capita or whoever £100 million a year to deliver less education each year.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent point about the ability of prison governors to spend money. I was speaking to a prison governor recently, who said that because of the amount he is allowed to spend, when the washing machine breaks, he cannot purchase a commercial one. He keeps buying ones from the high street, which naturally break after a week or so because of the level of washing his prison has to do. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that giving prison governors some more flexibility so that they can make decisions for the prisons they know best would actually save the MOJ money in the long run?

Sir Ashley Fox: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, and I agree with her. Members of the Justice Committee hear that all the time when we visit prisons. For example, broken security netting cannot be repaired or replaced until some very long and convoluted process goes through Whitehall and comes back six months later, no doubt after many drones have flown in with however many packages of contraband goods. It is absolutely hopeless. We have to devolve proper responsibility and financial management to prison governors. Sitting on the Justice Committee, I have seen and heard at first hand the reality of how reduced educational opportunities are putting rehabilitation at risk, yet despite awareness of these dangers, the Government only partially accepted our formal recommendation to prioritise the delivery of core education provision.

Estimates day debates allow the House to hold the Government to account, not just for how much they spend, but for how well they spend it. Curtailing jury trials for marginal gain and cutting back on prison education are not the reforms of a system focused on long-term effectiveness. If we are serious about delivering timely, fair and sustainable justice, we must prioritise the right kinds of investment that will deliver the reforms the justice system needs to protect victims as its No. 1 priority, to deliver justice and to get good value for money for the taxpayer.

8.40 pm

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): I thank the Government for the considerable progress that has been made on criminal legal aid and other matters within the estimates since we have taken office. The courts system, as we have heard, was in the most dilapidated and decrepit state, and we had a dearth of judge recruitment between 2010 and 2018. The net result was that the entire justice system was on its knees. In that context, the 10% uplift in legal aid expenditure over two years was long overdue.

I will ask the Minister a couple of questions. There have been significant problems with the Legal Aid Agency's IT systems. Those problems are increasingly in hand,

but it appears from House of Commons Library papers that there is a 75% reduction in capital spend at the Legal Aid Agency over the coming period. It is not clear to me whether that reporting is accurate or perhaps not right, because there is a proposal to spend significant money on the Legal Aid Agency's IT systems, and I do not see how that would not fit within the capital estimates. It would be helpful if the Minister could report back, either today or to the Justice Committee subsequently, on how that has come about. The disparity seems extremely large.

The entire system is still creaking heavily. In an environment in which we know that there may have to be further cuts to other Departments to fund the defence investment that is required, we must remember that the Ministry of Justice has experienced cuts not just since 2010, but since 1997. Legal aid rates have gone up by £1 an hour since 1997, with the exception of the areas that the Government have put up—it is only some of them—since we took office. The result is that legal aid in general is in hugely difficult circumstances, and we see the net effect of that in the number of people representing themselves in the courts.

I have asked in Justice Committee sittings whether there has been an evaluation of the impact on court backlogs of unrepresented litigants in person. I have asked what assessment has been made of the difference they make to trial times in the criminal and civil courts, and therefore the potential implications for the backlogs in those courts. At the moment, the backlog stands at 350,000 in the magistrates court, and the figure is commonly reported to be 80,000 for the Crown court.

The MOJ has not been able to give us those figures, and it cannot say that that assessment has been done. It is speculative to suggest that people not having a lawyer—and large numbers of them do not—is increasing the courts backlog, because we just do not have the figures. In an environment in which every penny counts, and in which spending that money extremely efficiently is vital, it seems a significant omission not to have at least reviewed whether moving up the criteria for entitlement to legal aid significantly might change the dimensions of the court backlog, as all of us want to see.

The nature of the current entitlement is that someone with a total household income of £37,000 or more in the Crown court—they could be facing trial for rape or all kinds of serious offences—would not be entitled to legal aid. I think most members of the public would be shocked that if they were accused of a crime of that gravity, they would get no legal aid if their household income—potentially from two adults—came to more than that. In 1970, about 28 million people in this country were eligible for legal aid. The figure today would be infinitely smaller.

I completely accept that we cannot simply flood money into a system when we do not have that money and when it would not be responsible. There is also the risk that we create waste if we suddenly flush money into a system not set up to accommodate it. I understand why the Government are taking a staged approach, but I should like us to ensure that we are exploring all the potential ways of reducing the Crown court backlog. At present there are some contentious proposals on the table, some of which I do not support. It is pleasing to note that Andy Burnham—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The right hon. Member for Makerfield.

Sarah Russell: Many thanks, Madam Deputy Speaker. My right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) suggested in December that this might be worth looking at again, and many of us in all parts of the House would be grateful for such an approach.

8.45 pm

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): It is an honour to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell), and indeed, to follow all the Members who have contributed to what has been a very thoughtful debate. There seems to be a huge amount of cross-party consensus, indicated by the Chair of the Justice Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) and my colleague on the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown). I commend the hon. Gentleman for the work that he does in championing sound public finances. I also agreed with a great deal of what he said about this being an issue across Government, and about the Public Accounts Committee therefore being well placed to contribute to the discussion and, indeed, the solutions. Failures to address these issues have significant effects, both on the public finances and on the most vulnerable people in society, and, indeed, they are issues that are often reflected in our constituency mailboxes.

I was contacted recently by a young woman who had reported child sexual abuse to the police last year. Owing to repeated delays and cancellations, she has still not had her “achieving best evidence” interview with the police. That is extremely distressing for her, as all can imagine, but I am afraid it is symptomatic of the delays that persist within the criminal justice system, and we know that young victims are significantly more likely to withdraw from the justice process when a case is dragging on. In 2023, more than one in four rape investigations ended because the victims could no longer continue. These long waiting times are a significant factor when it comes to achieving justice, not to mention the cost to the public purse. With that in mind, I am pleased that the Government have already lifted the cap on the number of days on which courts can sit, because it will promote efficiency within the system. We must use our court estate to its full capacity, and we know that that is not happening at present.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Not long ago, I had a meeting with a group of barristers at Wolverhampton Crown court. They were grateful to the Government for uncapping the number of hearing days and trial dates, which they said had made a significant difference to the court backlogs, but they also raised the problem of prisoners not arriving in court on time. They felt that dealing with it would make a significant impact on ensuring that cases did proceed. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government could perhaps take another look at that?

Catherine McKinnell: I entirely agree, and my hon. Friend has anticipated a point that I was going to make. The increased court days are clearly vital to maintaining productivity and the efficiency of the use of court time, although that only works if the court system itself

is working. We have seen very good examples of the way in which the additional days are already being used to clear backlogs and reduce the number of outstanding cases. In the English courts, we have seen evidence of the prioritisation of domestic abuse cases involving vulnerable witnesses. This can reduce waiting times, particularly for people involved in those sensitive cases—and yes, that makes a big difference to them individually, but it also makes an impact on our system as a whole.

As my hon. Friend has said, we need a court estate that is fit for purpose in order to maximise the use of these additional days. I too have visited my local court, in this instance Newcastle Crown court. What was obvious, even on the day I was there, was the consequence of some of the malfunctions in the system that make it difficult for court cases to proceed, such as faulty infrastructure, the flooding of parts of the court building, dock alarms or door locks failing to operate. As a result of such problems, staff do not feel safe enough to do their work and maintain the security of the courtroom, and therefore cannot go ahead. Often it is vulnerable victims who bear the brunt of delays and cancelled court hearings.

On the day I was at Newcastle Crown court, I heard about a complainant in a rape case. Her husband was the victim of an assault by the defendant, who had raped his wife. They were forced to wait four hours for the trial to begin. They were eventually told that the defendant would arrive and that the delay to his delivery was causing the delay, but it had a knock-on effect on additional days in court. Such delays ensue right across the system.

Court staff report that, from a structural perspective, many of the issues affecting the court system in Newcastle have been caused by the departure of a full-time maintenance engineer, who was dismissed due to the need to make savings. In the light of the many delays of trials and hearings, that appears to be a false economy, which is why I am pleased that the Government have recognised the challenges to the court estate itself and are making investments. I am also really pleased that the Minister is acting on the huge problem of private contractors delivering defendants to an incorrect court, several hours late or just not at all.

Midway through a trial in Newcastle in April, a defendant left court in custody on a Friday, only to fail to reappear the following Monday, with a jury ready and waiting. It is completely unacceptable, a total waste of taxpayers' money and hugely offensive to those taking part in trials. I know the Minister is aware of these issues and is keen to establish an oversight body to review the prisoner transfer process from end to end. I will keep a very close eye on that, and I am sure that other Members contributing to this debate will do the same.

Finally, I know that the Government recognise the importance of providing free legal advice, as set out very well by my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton. The Public Accounts Committee has recognised the importance of investing up to £34 million more a year in criminal aid, which is welcome.

I conclude by asking the Minister to join me in recognising both the human and the financial benefit of timely justice, the absolute importance of maintaining our court estate, and the improvements. Where we see good practice happening across our system, it must be shared.

I often hear good ideas and wonder why they are not being done elsewhere, and we need to have a system in which good practice is shared and best practice is rolled out for the benefit of justice right across the system.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

8.52 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): It is a pleasure to speak in today's estimates day debate on criminal justice, and I put on the record my thanks to the three Chairs of the Select Committees that suggested this debate to the Backbench Business Committee: the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown); the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Dame Karen Bradley); and the Chair of the Justice Committee, the hon. Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter). I also thank all hon. Members who have stuck it out in the Chamber on a Monday evening, who clearly care about criminal justice.

Politics is all about priorities, and so often the justice system falls a little short. Unless members of the public have had experience of the criminal justice system, have been victims of crime or have a loved one who has had the experience of going through the system, it does not necessarily appear in their top five priorities for the Government, but I thank all those who work to keep the criminal justice system functioning despite the lack of investment, the often crumbling infrastructure and the huge amount of pressure on them to ensure that justice is served.

The system as it stands lets down victims and defendants alike. It fails to rehabilitate offenders, and so many never see the justice that they deserve. The Crown court backlog is clearly unacceptably high, and that opinion is shared across the House. It is the biggest challenge that the justice system faces, as the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox) said in his contribution. Its exponential growth requires urgent action, but the fix does not lie in taking a sledgehammer to jury trials. Jury trials provide a fundamental safeguard of fairness and liberty, and they are not the cause of the backlog.

We on the Liberal Democrat Benches do not fundamentally believe that the Government have successfully made the case that their reforms will reduce the backlog or make any cost saving to the Department. The modelling has still not been made available, and the estimates behind the claimed time savings have been widely questioned. Even accepting the Government's own estimates, it will take a decade for the backlog to fall below current levels. Indeed, the backlog is currently predicted to continue increasing and to surpass 100,000 cases by the end of next year.

What has been proven to reduce the backlog across the country is the very welcome uncapping of sitting days, and we are pleased that His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service has been allocated a £143.1 million uplift, including the funding for uncapped sitting days. With the previous increases in sitting days that the Government announced in the last round, Crown court backlogs are beginning to fall. The Old Bailey reduced its backlog in 2025. In Chelmsford, it fell by 10%, and

Maidstone saw a 5% reduction in its backlog. Across the country, the overall Crown court backlog in the last quarter fell for the first time in three years. So the truth is that proper funding for our courts and open sitting days are bringing down the backlog, and we are yet to see the result of the full uncapping of sitting days, which came into place only in April.

Given the scepticism that the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) has expressed about jury trial reform, I hope the Government will give serious consideration to changing course. He told BBC Radio Manchester that the Government should

"pause...this and take a step back and have proper consideration", as the hon. Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) mentioned.

On another area of the criminal justice system, we Liberal Democrats have put forward several amendments, such as training for court staff, so that the victim experience is better, because victims often report feeling unsupported or unheard. The Government must do more to continue their journey to ensure that the court system centres victims' experience. Part of that experience is the processing after a criminal case, and access to court transcripts for victims. I acknowledge that the Government have made steps to improve access, after robust negotiations in both Houses on various Bills since July 2024, most recently the Sentencing Act 2026 and the Victims and Courts Act 2026.

I put on record the exemplary effort made by my hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Sarah Olney), who has been campaigning to ensure that court transcripts are made available for free to victims of crime, after a constituent of hers was quoted thousands of pounds to access the transcript of her own court case. Nobody should be priced out of seeing their own story in black and white after they have gone through a Crown court experience. Charlotte Meijer and the campaign Open Justice for All have been campaigning incredibly on this issue. They have published a letter calling on the Deputy Prime Minister to go further and faster, and that includes ensuring that magistrates courts are recorded and sentencing remarks are made available for free in all courts.

We are not here to discuss the Courts and Tribunals Bill, but it does not seem to be progressing currently or coming back to the House in any rush. I would be quite happy for clauses 1 to 8 to never appear again, but other clauses that do really important things—introducing recording in magistrates courts, repealing the presumption against parental responsibility—are key to strengthening our justice system and our family courts.

We repeatedly hear stories of failings in infrastructure such as roofs collapsing, IT systems not working, and evidence being shared on a memory stick and being lost during a hearing. The Ministry of Justice must get a grip of this chance to change that and to improve the environment for those working in the courts and those attending them.

I will briefly move on to prisons, which continue to run very hot. They are overcrowded, understaffed and increasingly unable to rehabilitate offenders. Violence is rife, with an average of 28 assaults on staff every day across the prison estate. On the point made by the hon. Member for Bridgwater about higher sickness levels, I think that is in large part due to the stress experienced by prison staff. We see the same in the Probation Service,

[*Jess Brown-Fuller*]

which has a much higher sickness rate than other civil service departments, and I think it is also largely due to stress.

The Liberal Democrats believe that rehabilitation must be at the heart of any approach within our prison system. That means investing in better education, alongside introducing a through-the-gates mentoring programme to support prisoners as they transition back into society. Education is a key area. I recently raised it with the MOJ, because Government analysis shows a significant decrease in core education hours in public sector prisons. That has been felt most acutely in women's prisons, where there has been a 30% fall in the number of hours for which women can access prison education. The Government urgently need to set out a plan to reverse that trend, otherwise the cycle of reoffending will simply continue for far too many people. Reoffending, as mentioned by the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, is estimated to cost taxpayers £20.9 billion every year.

I sat down with a group of ex-offenders earlier this year, working with the organisation Revolving Doors. One of the ex-offenders I was chatting to had been in prison 17 times on short sentences. He explained that drug addiction was ruling his life; when he was released from prison, in order to fund a drug addiction that was costing him £250 a day, he would commit theft to the value of £750 a day. He would re-sell the stolen items so that he could afford his drug habit. This shows that there is a cost to our businesses as well. If we do not get the criminal justice system working, and if we do not invest in people and stop the cycle of reoffending to fund addiction, those people get trapped in the criminal justice system. Nowhere in our system is the “investor save” principle stronger than in our criminal justice system.

A well-functioning Probation Service is indispensable to rehabilitating ex-offenders. A dysfunctional Probation Service fails victims. Probation officers are expected to manage ever larger caseloads while receiving less training. Combined with poor pay, it is little wonder that many leave, despite wanting to help. A probation officer said to me, in one of my surgeries, that when she first started in probation 30 years ago, she spent 30 minutes with an offender she was managing. When she came out of the meeting, her boss said, “Why on earth did you only spend 30 minutes with that person? How on earth could you get to know them in just 30 minutes?” She said that if she spends 30 minutes with somebody now, she is told she needs to speed up because she has spent far too long with them and has far too many people to get through. She has stuck it out—she is still in the Probation Service—but so many people leave. We have a real retention crisis, because nobody goes into probation to tick boxes; they go in because they truly believe that they can change people's lives.

In February this year, the Public Accounts Committee published a report on the efficiency and reliability of the Probation Service. It concluded that

“the Probation Service in England and Wales is failing”,
that it is

“teetering on the edge of collapse”,

and that its performance has significantly worsened since the MOJ and His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service brought probation under full public control in 2018-19. The failure of the system is epitomised by record numbers

of prisoners being recalled to custody. At the end of March 2025, recalled prisoners accounted for 15% of the entire prison population—a 49% increase since 2021. I recognise that the Government will have invested £700 million in probation by 2028-29, but we are yet to see a significant step change to show that that investment has stabilised the service. It is not just about the investment, though; it is about the culture shift that is desperately needed in probation. I have had many conversations with the Prisons Minister in the other place on this topic and I know it is something he feels passionately about.

Keeping the public safe also requires improvements to policing, a return to visible neighbourhood policing and an end to the scourge of officers stuck behind desks completing administrative work. Even though policing has received an uplift, cases are, as the hon. Member for North Cotswolds said, far more complex and require far more police time. This situation—alongside the alarming reduction in police front counters and stations—has left communities, especially those in my constituency, feeling abandoned. I should not see constituents turning around with shock when they see a police officer walking down the street with me in areas like Selsey; they are so not used to community policing people acted like they had never seen a police officer before when they saw us. The Government should commit, as part of their upcoming police force reorganisation, to embedding a dedicated rural and coastal crime team in every police force, ensuring that rural crime does not go unpunished.

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

9.4 pm

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am grateful to be able to respond to this estimates day debate considering the expenditure of the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office as it relates to criminal justice. I thank all Members who contributed. I especially thank the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), for opening the debate, and for his sponsorship of the application for debate, alongside the Chairs of the Home Affairs Committee and the Justice Committee.

I want to thank all the prison, probation and police officers, the staff that work in the relevant agencies, and the many workers and volunteers in the associated charities who work hard in our justice system. Whatever we debate, and whatever the Government decide around expenditure, they are the ones who have to go out and deliver the priorities of the Government of the day.

I am afraid that, whatever the topic and whatever part of their activities and spending plans we are debating now, we are debating a shadow Government—a Government in name only. We are debating the spending plans of a Government who lost their Prime Minister a week ago. We are scrutinising the priorities of a Ministry of Justice whose Lord Chancellor serves at the pleasure of a Labour party that is, as we speak, sounding the fanfares and preparing a coronation for its newest MP to become Prime Minister—a Prime Minister whose team has briefed *The Spectator* that they are going to sack the Lord Chancellor. We have no idea who will be the Lord Chancellor in a few weeks' time, nor even who will make up the ministerial ranks serving him.

We have a Government in limbo, and however much they protest and tell us that it is business as usual, there will not be any sensible civil servant in any Government Department wanting to move forward policy and delivery work when they have no idea whether it will or will not survive contact with the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) and his new Ministers. This provides Labour with a welcome opportunity to change course. We have heard about the challenges facing these Departments, including prison education, the court estate, data, record levels of mistaken releases—at record levels—as well as legal aid and the IT hacking experienced earlier in the year. The Government are wrestling with many issues, but I will primarily focus on two.

First, I will turn to Labour's appalling plans to let rapists, paedophiles and seriously violent criminals out of prison early, which we were able to consider today through the urgent question. Many of our constituents have been receiving letters telling them that the person who was convicted of harming them is being considered for early release. Victims have already spoken publicly about the impact that has had on them, and this is before they are certain about what is going to happen; that is because, to make it even worse, the letters do not tell them if the prisoner will definitely be released, or when exactly, just that they might be.

The Conservatives' understanding, though, is that everyone who has been written to has a perpetrator who is serving a standard determinate sentence and therefore will automatically be released early. Labour has failed victims either way: either they are all being released, so why have the Government not told people whether they are and when; or some of them will not be, in which case, why are the Government causing unnecessary upset and distress to victims?

Sir Ashley Fox: Does my hon. Friend recall that when the Labour party announced its early release system, it said words to the effect of those who have been imprisoned for the most serious and heinous crimes would not be covered by the early release scheme? Does it not seem extraordinary that rapists and those who have committed serious sexual assaults are in fact eligible for this early release scheme?

Dr Mullan: My hon. Friend is right, and I will discuss his point in more detail. My hon. Friend said, "words to the effect", but that was the exact wording that Ministers used in this Chamber, on the Government website and in press releases: the Government said that the most serious offenders would be excluded. When we challenged that, behind the scenes—and even on live television, on Sky News—Ministers said that what we were saying was not true; as we now know for sure, it was.

Labour tells us that this move is necessary. I imagine that Labour Members who genuinely care about these issues have been told by Ministers that here is nothing else they can do—that they have no choice and it is all because of the prison overcrowding crisis. I want to tackle that in detail, because that is not true. There are always different choices to be made.

The estimates before us, explaining the spending that is planned on prisons and prison spaces, highlight that most of the Department's capital budget is allocated to the prison programme, which was awarded £7 billion up to 2030 in the recent spending review. Ministers know that their planned prison space numbers are essentially

the same as ours were. The Minister also knows that the prisons that the Government have opened were paid for and started by the last Government. I share the frustration that Ministers at the time felt with the challenges in prison building; this Government already know how that feels at first hand, considering they have failed for more than a year to do anything significant about a major prison building contractor going bust. Nevertheless, more spaces are due to come online. So what we are managing is a short-term challenge.

I have spoken before about my preference for the justice system to be a greater public and political priority, which the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), also spoke about. Others, including the hon. Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell), talked about the long-term lack of prioritisation of this issue. As a result, early prison release is absolutely not new. The previous Labour Government released 80,000 prisoners early, and the previous Conservative Government also operated the same early release programmes; Labour has used the exact same programme that the previous Government used and then implemented one of its own. These programmes allow for a Government to manage prison capacity in order to tackle the sorts of challenges mentioned by Ministers and Members on the Government Benches.

Previous projections are also unreliable and have forecast much higher prison populations than is currently the case. In fact, the prison population was projected to reach 90,000 by June 2019, but it did not hit that figure—it never has. So is the plan to release rapists and child groomers an essential short-term measure? No, it is not. It is a permanent long-term change to our sentencing laws that will have a profound impact on victims and the ability to secure justice. It is also being done in a fundamentally different way from other early release programmes.

Early release schemes have historically excluded serious violent and sexual offenders, but this Government are deliberately and specifically choosing not to do that. We warned the Government repeatedly that their exclusions based on sentence type were flawed, but they simply said again and again that the most serious offenders would be excluded. That was always untrue, because the criterion for this—the use of an extended determinate sentence—was never a criterion related to the seriousness or type of offence. During the passage of the Sentencing Act, I told the Government that every year, more than 60% of rapists and 90% of child groomers receive standard determinate sentences, and would therefore not be excluded and could be released early, but they did not listen. Instead, they sent Ministers on to the airwaves to say that it was not true. Now, finally, after victims themselves have been written to, the Government can no longer escape from what they have done.

Those victims include Fiona Goddard, who went public in sharing her letter last week. Live on "Good Morning Britain", after explaining what her perpetrators had done to her—about the rapes and sexual assaults that she suffered—she was told the Government line: that they had excluded the most dangerous offenders. Susanna Reid, who was interviewing her, saw immediately how insulting to Fiona that response was, saying that it did not address anything that she had been saying. Fiona said that it was

"actually quite offensive, because they are basically trying to say that sexual crimes against children aren't some of the most serious."

[Dr Mullan]

She is right, isn't she? How can anyone justify an early release programme that includes rapists and child sexual predators by saying it excludes the most dangerous offenders?

The use of the word "dangerous" is in itself a deceitful change in terminology. Up until last week, the Government said that the programme would exclude the most serious offenders, despite, as I have said, me telling them repeatedly that this definition was not aligned to the sentences they were excluding. Finally, just weeks before serious criminals will be let out, they have realised that they were wrong—not that "dangerous" is any better than "most serious" if, either way, rapists are included and are being released early.

We know that more than 7,000 victims have been written to; we know that many more are not registered for updates and will not be told. But how many perpetrators are getting out, and what offences have they committed? We do not know. We have an idea. We know that every year, as I mentioned, more than 5,000 rapists, paedophiles, child groomers and seriously violent offenders are sent to prison on a standard determinate sentence. That is every year—we can therefore assume that thousands of such offenders are in prison at any one time.

The Government are today happy to present to us their estimates on their spending on the prison population and prison building, but they will not and cannot tell us how many of those offenders they will be letting out.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: As my hon. Friend and the House will know, the reoffending rate is around 50%. Given the numbers he has just announced, it is inevitable that serious crimes will be committed. If the Government are committed to this policy, which I hope they are not, and want to release people early, which I do not agree with, they should not release these serious criminals. They should instead release the less serious criminals.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I will remind the shadow Minister that this is a debate on the estimates—perhaps we could return to them.

Dr Mullan: If you will forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am talking about a major issue that relates directly to the estimates: the prison building programme, the need for that programme and what the Government are doing to manage the prison population. I believe it is directly related to the estimates in that regard.

I repeat, sincerely, that multiple Governments of different parties have let prisoners out of prison early in order to manage prison crises, but they have never let rapists and child groomers out early. Government Members are therefore backing a totally unnecessary way of managing prison capacity. They really do not have to do it. They are being forced into doing so, and I feel very sorry for them as a result.

It is difficult to understand how the Government can lay these estimates before the House and put forward a proposal for changes to sentencing if they do not even know how many people they are letting out of prison and for what reason. I cannot believe that the Minister thinks that that is acceptable, and it will be difficult for her to justify. But, to be fair, she may also struggle to

answer a basic question about her own responsibilities—about her plans to erode our right to jury trial and to abolish our right to elect.

The Conservatives will oppose any erosion of the right to jury trial. It is a constitutional protection that belongs to people, not to the convenience of a Government. The evidence does not support the case that jury trials are the cause of the backlog; empty courtrooms are. We are awaiting a date for Report stage of the Courts and Tribunals Bill. Given the political situation, and considering the Minister's planned capital and revenue expenditure in this area, I think it is entirely legitimate to ask whether the proposal on jury trials is even still Government policy. When the legislation that is meant to address the central crisis in our criminal justice system is dependent on who wins an internal party election in the next few weeks—if there even is one—that is not a functioning legislative programme; it is chaos dressed up as reform.

Are the Government laser-focused on what will actually work to bring the backlog down? No. Instead, they have been laser-focused on driving through unnecessary vandalism on one of our oldest constitutional rights. While the backlog is still much too high, the backlogs in Crown courts are stabilising and even coming down in some areas. The Government have announced uncapped Crown court sitting days for 2026-27, and we absolutely welcome that, even though it took much too long. It is exactly what we have called for consistently, and I give credit where it is due.

We have seen the first quarterly decline in Crown court backlogs across England and Wales in three years in the most recent data. The Criminal Bar Association points out that in particular areas of the country, the reductions are more significant. In the south-east of England, the backlogs in courts are down 3.1% over three months and 4.2% over six months. In the north-west of England, they are down 2.3% over three months and 3.3% over six months. In the north-east of England, they are down 2.9% in three months. In Wales, they are down 2.4% over three months. Meanwhile, the figure for magistrates courts shows an all-time peak of more than 370,000 cases at the end of March this year, up 2% on the previous quarter—and the magistrates courts are where the Government want to send more cases.

We heard again and again in the first stages of the Courts and Tribunals Bill that the workforce, whether it be in the courts, judges or legal representatives, can bring the backlogs down, but that the jury reforms were an unnecessary distraction. According to the X feed of the monitoring account Idle Courts, recently as many as 123 out of 516 Crown courtrooms—nearly a quarter—were standing empty on working days. We know that that was not because there were no cases to hear, no juries or no defendants. It was because of issues such as listing challenges, staffing shortages and the underutilisation of available court space.

To date, the Government have not listened and have refused to drop those parts of the Bill that are, as the hon. Member for Chichester said, clearly unwelcome to so many in the workforce. I hope we learn today that what we are told about the views of the right hon. Member for Makerfield is correct and that this unacceptable plan to erode our jury rights will be dropped.

Let me turn to the Home Office elements of this debate, because the two Departments are inextricably linked. Members will understand that it is not the day-to-day

responsibility of the Minister or I, but we both know that what happens at the front end—policing, charging, and bail—flows directly into the courts, with probation and prisons at the back end. Police officer numbers fell by more than 1,000 in just one year under this Government, from September 2024 to September 2025, and the total number of people involved in policing fell by 3,000. The National Police Chiefs' Council said in response to this year's funding settlement and the estimates that we are debating that many forces are planning service reductions, with consequences for officer numbers, staff capacity and overall resilience.

The Government cannot simultaneously claim to want swifter justice and a safer society while allowing the frontline workforce who investigate crime, make arrests and build prosecutions to continue to shrink. The Conservatives' plan would put 10,000 extra officers on the streets, triple the use of stop and search, and introduce facial recognition technology in the worst crime hotspots.

On asylum, the Home Office estimates that there are more than 400,000 illegal migrants in the UK—people in this country illegally—but nearly half cannot be removed because of outstanding asylum and human rights claims. Total spending on asylum support remains at over £4.5 billion, and the decision of the Government to put even more asylum seekers in more expensive locations such as Crowborough in Wealden in the constituency of your fellow Deputy Speaker, Madam Deputy Speaker, is going to cost more money than if they were to be kept in their original places.

Let me close with this. The Chair of the Public Accounts Committee said that the focus of the debate can be distilled to concerns about the risks to public safety and trust, and he is right. We are spending more than ever before on our criminal justice system—billions of pounds of taxpayers' money flow through the estimates we are debating—but reoffending is rising, rape gang survivors are being told that their abusers may be freed early and police officer numbers are falling. The Government may be about to change their Prime Minister, and with that the MOJ will more than likely welcome a new Lord Chancellor, so policies announced with great fanfare may quietly disappear over the summer, but the people waiting for Crown court hearings and the victims seeing criminals walk free will still be there.

We will not oppose the estimate, but we will not let the Government off the hook, either. They have had nearly two years and the numbers are not getting any better. The public deserve better. The Opposition will hold them to account for every one of these figures, whoever happens to be sitting in Downing Street when we do it.

9.20 pm

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): I associate myself with the remarks of those who have thanked the Chairs of the various Select Committees for securing this important debate, and I thank everybody who made incredibly thoughtful contributions to it, although there was the odd exception.

To govern is to choose, and those on the Opposition—*[Interruption.]* I am coming to it. The hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan) is getting started early. We know what choices the Opposition would make, because the Government's inheritance in the criminal

justice system was intolerable. Our prisons were allowed to run red hot so that the most serious offenders had nowhere to be locked up—a total dereliction of duty from the so-called party of law and order. In our courts, we had record and rising backlogs—there is consensus about that in the House—with both victims and defendants seeing intolerable delays. I could not agree more with the hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) that this is one system, and it must keep the public safe and command public confidence. Yes, indeed, justice delayed is justice denied.

We see the brass-neckedness of Opposition Members—there is no apology—but this Government do not duck the choices. As I will come to, in both areas we have grasped the nettle. We have sought expert advice in the form of the independent review led by Sir Brian Leveson into the state of our criminal courts, and from David Gauke in relation to sentencing. We have heard the conclusions of those reviews, and yes, we have been prepared to make the tough choices required to put our justice system first and to put it on a stable footing.

The context outlined by the hon. Member for North Cotswolds and astutely by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick (Andy Slaughter) is one in which for several decades justice has been relatively sidelined in public policy terms and in investment terms. That has changed under this Labour Government with the uplift in the capital budget, as hon. Members across the House have rightly acknowledged. That is seen in prison construction, the investment in our court estate, the investment in the technology required to bring our justice system into the 21st century and, indeed, in the vital intervention of uncapping sitting days to salvage our courts from the brink of collapse. That is the choice that the Government have made to put justice first and to fix the mess that the Opposition left us with.

Let me turn first to the crisis in our courts. We have taken a multi-pronged approach to this issue, as is set out in the estimates Bill. In colloquial terms, I would say that we have thrown the kitchen sink at it. We have done that in three ways: investment; modernisation and efficiency; and reform. Let me take each in turn.

First, we have taken the choice that the Conservatives failed to take when they gutted our legal aid system, our court workforce and the capital spend in our courts. We have reversed that. Now, £2.78 billion has been agreed in the concordat with our courts, including those uncapped sitting days, and £287 million in capital spend is literally fixing the leaking roofs in Newcastle and right across the country. I was also pleased to see Harrow Crown court reopened when I visited the other day.

On investment in our workforce, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle speaks of empty courtrooms. Of course we do not want to see empty courtrooms, but that is a reflection of the state of system capacity. We cannot 3D-print judges, prosecutors, defence lawyers or court staff; we have to train them. Those people are skilled. They have to be trained, they have to be remunerated, they have to be retained. That is why this Government chose, early doors, to make the investment of £116 million in criminal legal aid for solicitors, the £34 million pledged to advocates and the record settlement for the Crown Prosecution Service, as well as the investment in our judiciary. It is that that is going to fill and sustain our empty courtrooms.

[Sarah Sackman]

Many, including the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown-Fuller), have rightly spoken about victims. We have made a £0.5 billion investment in victim support services. The transformation in the availability of transcripts and audio recording of proceedings in our magistrates courts is vital not only to improving the victim experience but, given the intolerable delays, to keeping victims and witnesses engaged in the process, because when victims and witnesses pull out of the process and walk away, they do not get justice at all. That is the situation that the Conservatives left us with.

Efficiency and modernisation are vital too, and it is right that Members across this House challenge the system and challenge those responsible for it to improve matters. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne North (Catherine McKinnell) for referring to prisoner transport and the prisoner escort and custody services—PECS—because this issue has been highlighted by the Bar, by the judiciary and by Members in this House. The Minister for Prisons in the other place and I have set up an oversight board to grip our PECS contracts—contracts that were agreed with Serco by the previous Government—to ensure that we are driving out inefficiency in that operation from end to end.

The judiciary is making a step change through a national listing framework, accompanied by AI data-driven tools, to improve the listing and scheduling of cases and make it more consistent. We are seeing investment in blitz courts in London and other places, as well as a case co-ordinator in every single Crown court centre to progress cases more rapidly. The adoption of remote technology is increasing the amount of remote participation, reducing the need for those prisoner transfers and enabling us to get through the easier cases. All of that is being done to drive the efficiency that everyone quite rightly wants to see.

However, I have to be clear that—just as my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Chiswick said, and consistent with the conclusions of Sir Brian Leveson—efficiency and investment alone will not reduce the backlog. It is true that the investment that we have made in sitting days, uncapping them for 2026-27, has resulted in a stabilisation of the backlog, just as we hoped it would, but the backlog continues to sit at over 80,000. Behind each and every one of those cases, there is a victim waiting for justice and a defendant stuck languishing in the remand system, and the public's confidence in our criminal justice system is waning. That is why we will not duck the necessity of structural reform.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: The Minister is absolutely right: it is necessary to have confidence in our criminal justice system. Will she therefore answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan)? Will the Government be letting out rapists and other serious offenders under the early release scheme, and if so, how many?

Sarah Sackman: I am talking about courts, but I will turn to sentencing and prisons in due course. However, I must remind the hon. Gentleman that the Sentencing Act provisions, which will come into force in September and to which he refers, were made necessary by the

Opposition's failure to invest in prison places over many years. Over 14 years in government, they made their choice, and they added net 500 prison places. In the first two years, this Government have already delivered an additional 3,000 places, and the biggest prison building programme since the Victorians is set to deliver 14,000 additional prison places.

Let me return to the Crown court backlog. Reform cannot be avoided. To bring the backlog down, it is vital we ensure that the right cases are heard in the right place. It cannot be right that defendants can insist on their right to a jury trial in cases that could be heard by magistrates under even the existing sentencing powers. That is not fair on victims, and it is not fair that those cases are in the same queue as other, more serious cases, which have to have a jury trial, but a timely one. We cannot duck those choices.

The proposals to increase magistrates courts' sentencing powers, remove the right to elect and create a Crown court bench division are sound. When a triable either-way case is heard in the magistrates court, it moves far faster than in the Crown court. We have to take a proportionate and hard-headed approach that balances the rights of defendants, the rights of victims and the entitlement of every citizen in this country to a timely trial. Timeliness is an essential ingredient of fairness.

As I have said, we inherited a prison system on the brink of collapse. To govern is to choose, and we took decisive action: £4.7 billion invested in the largest prison building programme that this country has seen, more foreign national offenders deported than ever before, 3,000 prison places delivered in the first two years of this Government and the Sentencing Act reforms, which will put our prisons on a more sustainable footing. As others have mentioned, we have also made a vital £700 million investment in probation, which is crucial to keeping the public safe and, as others have said, getting reoffending under control. Punishment can take place in prison, but punishment can also take place outside prison. The tough community sentence regime, the presumption of tagging, and the managed, structured and orderly early release system, as compared with the chaotic and opaque system under the previous Government—that is the choice that we make. That is how we get our criminal justice system under control.

Dr Mullan: Will you answer the question?

Sarah Sackman: The hon. Member has had an entire urgent question in which to ventilate these issues, and I am here to debate the estimates and address some of the other points that have been raised. I do not duck the essential point that our early release scheme will apply to some of those guilty of the offences to which he refers, if safe to do so. If they have misbehaved in prison, they will not benefit from those provisions. The point is that this is not a free-for-all. They will be subject to tagging and control on the outside. That is why the investment in probation is critical.

Dr Mullan: The Minister is completely wrong. The releases are automatic. There will be no prevention of a release of someone on a standard determinate sentence, regardless of what the risk assessment shows. The Minister must at least be accurate in describing the policy.

Sarah Sackman: The policy exists, as I have said, critically in the context of a restored probation system, and it is to that which I come right now.

Probation is an indispensable part of the scheme that the hon. Member talks about—a probation system that was, as I have said, absolutely gutted under the Opposition. Probation and community services will receive an additional £700 million by the final year of the spending review. In real terms, that looks like recruiting at least an additional 1,300 trainee probation officers by March 2027, on top of the over 2,300 who have been onboarded in the past two years. Those hard-working probation officers—not the slackers that perhaps were portrayed by the hon. Member for Bridgwater (Sir Ashley Fox); far from it—doing some of the most difficult jobs in our public services have been delivered a 6% headline increase in pay, and rightly so, because they do such valuable work. They have been given the tools with which to do that work.

We have the biggest expansion of tagging in British history, with a presumption that every offender will be tagged on release from prison, save in very specific circumstances. All of that keeps the public safe, and staff will be given the technology to enable them to do their work in a more efficient and accurate way with the Justice Transcribe AI-powered tool. These investments and reforms will ensure that probation officers can have the biggest impact by focusing on those who present the highest risk.

A number of points have been made on legal aid, which will celebrate its 80th anniversary in a couple of years' time. It is one of the proudest achievements of a previous Labour Government—the Attlee Government. It is something that we have put back on a stable footing. As I have said, we have put in an enormous uplift of £116 million for legal aid solicitors, up to £34 million for barristers, match funding for pupillages, building the workforce and, to the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell), investment in the digital system.

My hon. Friend is right that the particular line in the estimates pack from the House of Commons Library to which I believe she refers does not reflect the totality of the capital investment that the Government have made in this area. We are at £61 million invested in the digital transformation. That is much needed because those in this House will know that the impact that the criminal cyber-attack had on the legal aid system was so detrimental, precisely because there had been so much underinvestment and neglect of the system. It is therefore important that we not just stabilise the system, but transform it so that legal aid providers, but even more importantly, their clients can benefit in the long term.

I am conscious of time, and so I will speak briefly about policing. The hon. Member for North Cotswolds is absolutely right that this is one system and it needs to behave as such. I recently had the privilege of visiting the Greater Manchester local criminal justice board, and I saw an outstanding example of cross-working in the criminal justice system. Prevention is better than cure, and so much of the investment we see in policing, but also the reform in the policing reform Bill, which will bring so many officers out from behind their desks and onto the streets in neighbourhood policing, will mean that we can prevent so much crime and intervene before so much of that behaviour becomes problematic.

Sir Ashley Fox: On prevention being better than cure, would the Minister care to comment upon the reduction in provision of prison education before she concludes her remarks?

Sarah Sackman: Prison education is vital, and I have seen some fantastic examples of it, in particular on a recent visit to High Down. Prison education can take many forms, such as vocational training and education in a conventional sense. In some senses, the bigger question is how do we make our prisons safe? There is no point in having outstanding education—I agree with the hon. Member that it is important; I do not think we disagree on this—if drones are bringing drugs and contraband into prisons, as he pointed out, and if prisons are overcrowded. If that is the case, it is almost impossible to deliver and see the benefit of that education. The fact that this Government are prioritising, through a £40 million investment, a drone prevention programme, that we are building new prisons that are fit for people to live in and receive that education, is a choice that makes sense and that, as I said, prevents so much of the problem.

Violence reduction units, the prison reform Bill, and the workforce plan that the Home Office has put forward are all part of the choice—I return to that theme—that the Government make, whether on policing, courts, prisons, or probation. We choose to fix the mess, and when we see a problem we make the choices required to fix it. Investment, modernisation and reform: the contrast between that and the choices that Opposition Members made when in government could not be starker. We must now give the plan a chance to work.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown to wind up the debate briefly.

9.40 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: This has been a constructive debate, and everybody has aired the themes that I raised throughout the debate. The Minister has outlined one or two areas where things are going a little better, namely perhaps a reduction in some of the Crown court backlogs, but that is countervailed by increases in the backlog in magistrates courts. I echo the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Dr Mullan)—as I am sure the Minister would—because we should pay grateful thanks to those police officers, probation officers and court officers who often have to work in incredibly difficult conditions, delivering some of the most difficult tasks in society. We should thank them.

The most worrying thing I heard tonight concerns the early release scheme, and the number of potentially very serious criminals who will be released. The Minister has made very clear that government is about choices. I think this is the wrong choice, but if she and the Government are determined to do this, let us be honest about it. She did not answer my question about numbers, but perhaps if I table a parliamentary question she will—I will do that to see whether she does answer it. I think this is the wrong choice, and I urge her again to rethink it.

I also echo comments made by my colleagues. The reoffending rate is far too high at around 50%, and we must find a way of giving prisoners meaningful education, training and skills, so that when they come out of prison they will, we hope, not reoffend. Finally, the Minister

[Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown]

makes great play of measures that will be taken with serious offenders when they come out of prison—tagging and so on. Tagging has a part to play, but as she and I know, and the rest of the House knows, if a prisoner is going to commit a crime, they will commit that crime whether they have a tag on or not—they will probably take it off before they commit the crime, but I do not wish to go too far down that line. I ask the Minister to please reconsider this issue. We all want the criminal justice system to work and for people to have faith in it, but my worry is that if one person who is released early commits a heinous crime, that will destabilise society in a huge way. Otherwise, this has been a constructive debate, and I thank the Government and the Minister for her time.

Question deferred until tomorrow at Seven o'clock (Standing Order No. 54).

Business without Debate

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Ordered,

That David Reed be discharged from the International Development Committee and Alicia Kearns be added.—
(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

NORTHERN IRELAND AFFAIRS

Ordered,

That Alicia Kearns be discharged from the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and Sir Alec Shelbrooke be added.—
(*Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

Diethylstilbestrol: Intergenerational Impact

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Mark Ferguson.*)

9.43 pm

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I am grateful to have secured this important debate.

I begin by asking the House to imagine a young woman in Britain in the 1950s. She is pregnant, she may have struggled to conceive and she may already have experienced the heartbreak of miscarriage, so she is desperate to do everything that she can to protect her baby. She goes to the doctor, as many of us would. She is prescribed a drug and told that it may help to prevent miscarriage, help her carry that baby to term and even give her the healthy child she so desperately wants. Of course she takes it—why would she not? She trusts her doctor, she trusts the health system and above all she wants to do the best she can for her child. But then imagine her finding out, decades later, that the very medicine that she took to protect her child had in fact harmed her, harmed that child and may even have harmed her grandchildren as well. That is the reality of diethylstilbestrol or DES.

DES was widely prescribed as an anti-miscarriage drug between the 1930s and the 1970s. It was used to treat pregnancy complications and to suppress breast milk, and it was prescribed to women who were looking to the medical profession for help. But DES was not the miracle drug they were told it was. Evidence emerged in the 1950s that not only was it ineffective, but that it was also dangerous. It has since been linked to breast cancer, cervical and vaginal cancers, infertility and a range of other serious reproductive and gynaecological issues. Yet despite the warning signs, the evidence of harm and the fact that other countries moved to withdraw or restrict its use, DES continued to be prescribed in Britain for decades. Around 300,000 women are estimated to have been given DES in the UK between 1939 and the 1970s.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) for securing the debate. I spoke to her beforehand to obtain her permission to intervene. As she rightly says, over 300,000 women in the UK were prescribed DES in one of the worst medical disasters in NHS history. Repercussions of the use of the drug, as the hon. Lady says, are intergenerational, as evidence shows negative effects on third generations. Does she agree that further research is needed to study the long-term effects of DES exposure to better understand the extent of its impact and ensure effective medical treatment for those affected by the drug? I commend her again and I look forward to hearing the Minister's reply.

Jessica Toale: Yes, I agree that research is needed and that is one of the things that DES campaigners are calling for.

One of those 300,000 women was Rita, the mother of my constituent, Jan Hall. Rita was prescribed DES when she was pregnant with Jan, but when Jan was just a toddler, Rita died of breast cancer. She was only 32. Jan herself later developed cervical cancer in her twenties.

Because of the surgeries she had to undergo, she was told she may never be able to have children. She lived not only with that physical consequence, but with decades of uncertainty, fear, grief and anger. Her daughters have experienced significant gynaecological health problems, and now Jan worries about her grandchildren as well.

Jan is not alone. Across the country, men, women and their families have come forward to share their stories and their experiences as victims of this scandal. Some of them are in the Gallery with us today and have allowed me to share some of their painful testimonies.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): One of the people in the Gallery is my constituent, Heather Farrant, who came to Parliament today with two of her three daughters. She has lived with the lifelong consequences of her mother's exposure to DES. Will the hon. Lady commend Heather and all the campaigners for their bravery in speaking so publicly about something that has been hidden for a long time? Until Heather came to speak to me in my surgery, I had not heard of DES, and without those campaigners, we would not have known about it and been able to raise it here today.

Jessica Toale: It was a pleasure to meet Heather today, along with all the other campaigners. I thank them all for having shown such strength in coming forward to share their stories.

One of the cruellest impacts of DES, which sets it apart from other medical scandals, is that its consequences do not stop with the women who were prescribed it or their immediate children. There is growing evidence of intergenerational impacts affecting grandchildren, and possibly beyond. We do not yet know how far those consequences reach. That uncertainty is part of the harm that the families face.

Research suggests that women who took DES during pregnancy—the DES mothers—may face around a 30% higher chance of breast cancer. Female babies exposed in the womb—DES daughters—have around 40 times the risk of developing clear cell adenocarcinoma of the vagina and cervix. They also face increased risks of reproductive complications, including infertility, ectopic pregnancies, premature births and a range of other conditions and complications that we are learning about all the time.

Clare, who is in the Gallery today, described being robbed of her fertility and suffering ovarian failure, and later developing an autoimmune inflammatory condition. At the age of 18, Juliette, who is also with us, was rushed to A&E with severe haemorrhaging after a reaction to the contraceptive pill, and she has stage 4 endometriosis. Anne-Marie, who is also with us, was taken off the pill due to stroke risk and has described being housebound due to the gynaecological issues she has faced. Many of them describe managing complex hormonal challenges and, later in life, debilitating menopausal symptoms. That is a common experience for a lot of these women.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for securing this really important debate. One of my constituents, who is a DES daughter, came to see me, and she reported that her mother's health records were lost when her GP moved back in the 1970s. Does the hon. Member share my concern that a key issue here is that the lack of effective recordkeeping

and the loss or destruction of records over time make it harder and harder to trace causal effects? Does she agree that we want to hear from the Minister what allowances will be made for this record-keeping issue in addressing the long-term impacts of DES on those daughters and grandchildren?

Jessica Toale: Of course. Recordkeeping is one of the issues we face as a campaign group. I know the Department of Health and Social Care is looking at that, and I will come on to that issue later in my remarks.

Limited studies have been done on DES sons, but they suggest that these men face an increased risk of genital abnormalities and infertility. In May 2026, Maxwell Samuda became the first man to speak out openly about the effects of the scandal on him and his family, and I pay tribute to him. There are serious, unresolved questions about the second and third generations—the grandchildren. That is important, because this is not history or a scandal of the past; it is live and a continuing injustice to these women and their families.

People affected by DES are still living with the consequences today. Some are discovering later in life that health problems they have endured for decades may be connected to a drug that their mother took and was prescribed before they were born. Those who suspect DES exposure often find that doctors, clinicians and the wider health system have little or no awareness of it. That really matters, because for too many DES survivors, the harm has been compounded by the disbelief that they face. They have been told that their symptoms are unrelated and not to worry. They have been sent away, ignored, dismissed or left to piece the evidence together for themselves. Anne-Marie, who is here today, said that she had to buy her own medical encyclopaedia just to find out what was wrong with her.

Sadly, that is part of a much wider pattern that we see in women's health, which has been poorly understood for generations and continues to be poorly understood today. Women's pain is too often minimised. Their symptoms are normalised or ignored. Reproductive health is often treated as something that is niche, too complicated, embarrassing or somehow secondary, and it is not given the seriousness that it deserves. Women are not listened to and their concerns are dismissed until the evidence is too impossible to ignore. The history and present experience of DES is part of that wider system and failure, and, even now, we do not have the systems in place to properly support those affected.

One of the most worrying examples of that is in screening. Current routine smear testing for cervical cancer is designed primarily to deal with and detect changes linked to HPV. It does not reliably detect clear cell adenocarcinoma—the rare cancer associated with DES exposure. That means many DES daughters may believe that they are being adequately screened, but in fact the very cancers for which they have an increased risk will not be picked up through the standard process. Crucially, they need access to advanced screening for a much longer span of years than most women do.

A truly heartbreaking experience of that was the experience of Charly, who is in the Gallery today. She is a DES daughter and was diagnosed with clear cell adenocarcinoma in her cervix and uterus at the age of eight; she was given a hysterectomy at the age of nine.

[Jessica Toale]

We know that standard breast cancer screening does not pick things up and is not adequate for women who face DES exposure.

Many women bear not only the emotional burden of uncertainty because of DES, but a financial burden, self-funding annual scans as a precautionary measure and undertaking fertility treatments. Today, in the meeting with the Minister, Juliette described the range of tests she undergoes every year at large personal expense and the lack of fairness for people who cannot afford to do so. That is unacceptable, which is why targeted screening and specialist monitoring for those at risk is so important. People who are affected need accurate information, proper care, and the chance of early diagnosis.

When I first heard Jan's story, I had to act, and as a nation, we have a unique responsibility to act.

Mr Connor Rand (Altrincham and Sale West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the powerful speech she is making, and for her campaigning work on this really important issue. I recently met my constituent Susannah, who is a victim of the DES scandal. She spoke movingly about the impact it has had on her life—20 gruelling operations since she was a teenager, precious time with her friends and family lost and the shadow of a life-threatening illness, because of course as a DES sufferer, she is 40 times more likely to suffer from cervical cancer. Does my hon. Friend agree with Susannah and me that the Government should very carefully consider the merits of a full public inquiry into this scandal?

Jessica Toale: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I have also met Susie—she is a doughty campaigner and a real tribute to the movement. I will come on to some of the calls of the DES Justice campaign shortly.

The reason I think we as a nation have a unique responsibility to act is that DES was developed here in the UK, using public money. I am just going to let that sink in for a minute. It was not patented, meaning that it could be used widely, and it was. Despite the evidence of harms, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency still has not shown us any evidence of when it officially advised against the use of DES.

In July last year, I co-ordinated a cross-party letter signed by 37 Members of Parliament, calling for recognition and an apology for those affected by DES. Since then, those affected have come together to establish the DES Justice campaign, and I pay tribute to all the brave men and women who have come forward to share their stories. I know how painful and personal this is, and I know that for many, speaking out means reliving a trauma that has shaped their whole life. I also want to acknowledge Clare Fletcher and the DES campaigners who have worked tirelessly for recognition, often with little support and against huge institutional silence, and I thank Sarah Corker and ITV News for their investigation, which helped bring the scandal to public attention and forced institutions to begin answering questions that were left unanswered for decades.

That co-ordinated campaigning has paid off. In September, the MHRA admitted that it had made inaccurate statements for up to 25 years about when DES was withdrawn in Britain and apologised. In November, the former Health Secretary, my right hon.

Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), acknowledged the suffering of DES-affected families and apologised. This was a huge step; it was the first time that many campaigners felt that the state had begun to recognise what had happened to them. That apology matters, but it cannot be the end of the matter, because for people like Jan—who has campaigned for more than 40 years—there must now be action.

The DES Justice campaign is calling for the Government to take five clear steps. The first of those steps is to commit to uncovering the truth about what happened, including through a full, judge-led statutory inquiry. The second is to support research into the long-term and intergenerational effects of DES; the third is to raise awareness of DES among NHS professionals; the fourth is to assess the feasibility of tracking and informing those potentially exposed to DES; and the fifth is to introduce targeted screening and monitoring for those at risk.

Those asks are reasonable, practical and necessary, because while some progress has been made, it remains nowhere near enough. We need updated and accurate information on the NHS website, so that people searching for DES are not left confused, frightened, or dependent on campaign groups for basic facts. We need better information flows to GPs, gynaecologists, oncologists, fertility specialists and other NHS professionals. We need DES to be included in medical training and continuing professional development, so that clinicians know what it is, what the risks are, and how to support people who have been exposed. We need clear guidance on screening and monitoring, especially given the limitations of routine smear testing.

We also need a serious effort to understand whether and how those at risk can be identified, and those affected informed. I recognise that this is difficult—many of the records are old, and some have been lost or destroyed or were never kept properly. Some people will not know whether their mothers took DES, and some mothers may no longer be alive to be asked, but difficulty cannot be an excuse for inaction.

There are people who may be at risk today and do not know it. There are women who believe they are protected by the smear test, but they need specialist monitoring. There are families living with unexplained patterns of gynaecological problems—infertility, pregnancy loss or cancer—without even ever knowing that DES could be part of the picture.

10 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Jessica Toale: There are mothers who carry and have carried unimaginable guilt—a guilt that should never have been theirs to bear. No mother should be made to feel responsible for trusting her doctor, no daughter should be left to feel that her suffering is inexplicable, and no family should be forced to campaign for decades simply to be believed.

I believe that DES is the greatest pharmaceutical scandal of our time, and one for which we owe victims justice and greater accountability. A drug developed using public money was prescribed to hundreds of thousands of women, with evidence of harm emerging while it

continued to be used, and the consequences stretch across generations, yet most people have never heard of it. That is part of the injustice, too, and it must change.

I thank the Minister for meeting some of our DES Justice campaigners and their families today. Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for dropping into our drop-in this afternoon. Will the Minister honour the calls of those campaigners for greater awareness among NHS professionals; better clinical guidance; more publicly available information; research; and targeted screening and support? Will the Government consider the case for a full statutory inquiry, so that the truth can finally be established?

Time is running out. Many DES mothers have already died. Many daughters are now later in life. Many campaigners have been fighting for decades to be heard. With every year that passes, more records disappear, more witnesses are lost and more families are left without answers. It is not too late to do the right thing, to acknowledge the scale of the failure and to improve care for those who were affected.

I close by paying tribute again to my constituent Jan, whose courage and determination brought this issue to my attention. She has kept campaigning not just for herself, but for every family affected by DES. I pay tribute to every DES mother, daughter, son and grandchild, and every family member who has fought for recognition. They deserve justice, and they deserve answers and to know what happened to them. They deserve to be supported by the very health system that failed them. If anyone listening to this debate thinks that they, their mother, their grandmother or someone they know may have been affected by DES, I urge them to seek further information from the DES Justice campaign or to contact my office. This Government have an opportunity to listen, to act and to begin putting right one of the greatest medical injustices of our time. I urge the Minister to take that opportunity today.

10.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Preet Kaur Gill): I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to this important debate on the intergenerational impact of diethylstilbestrol on women. I begin by applauding the perseverance of my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale) and the courage of those affected by the impact of DES, including the campaigners, many of them women, and their families, who have worked for many years to ensure that their experiences are heard and understood. I was honoured to meet some of them earlier today, and I thank them for being here in the Gallery tonight—mothers and daughters, on behalf of their children and grandchildren.

On 5 November 2025, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), the then Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, issued a formal apology on behalf of the Government to all those who have been affected by DES. I wish to reiterate that apology today. At this stage, the Government's focus is on carefully considering the available evidence and determining the most appropriate next steps, rather than simply establishing a public inquiry. Our current work includes ensuring that appropriate clinical pathways, professional awareness and sources of support are in place for those who may have been affected by DES exposure.

We have taken action to raise awareness of DES among health professionals. On 12 December 2025, Professor Peter Johnson, the national clinical director for cancer, sent a letter to all cancer alliance leaders highlighting the effects of DES and asking them to cascade guidance through their clinical networks to help to reach appropriate health professionals, including GPs. We have also taken steps to improve our knowledge of the impacts of DES. The Department has formally commissioned the University of Exeter, through the National Institute for Health and Care Research, to undertake a systematic evidence review of those impacts, because, as my hon. Friend pointed out, the current research, while useful, does not yet paint a coherent picture. For instance, existing systematic reviews of the physical impacts across first, second and third generations are relatively dated, and have reached differing conclusions. There are also primary research studies that have not yet been incorporated in those reviews, and existing reviews have not fully considered psychosocial impacts. The newly commissioned review is intended to address those gaps.

My hon. Friend asked about screening. The research ensures that any future policy on local treatment pathways, clinical guidance and potential screening arrangements is informed by the latest available evidence. It will also be important in guiding decisions on whether a lifelong screening protocol should be developed for people affected by DES. The women affected by it should, of course, be involved in this work, which is why we ensured that the university will engage with members of DES Justice UK so that it can learn from women—and some men—with lived experience of the effects.

I recognise the importance of trying to understand the scale of DES exposure and the number of people who may have been affected. The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency has taken a number of steps to establish what regulatory action was taken by its predecessor in relation to the risk associated with DES. They include searches of agency archives, both digital and hard-copy, for documentation relating to regulatory activity associated with the use of DES; visits to the National Archives to attempt to locate records from the 1970s, including discussions of DES by the Committee on Safety of Medicines, a predecessor of the Commission on Human Medicines; and locating previous editions of the “British National Formulary” and Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry datasheets that may detail information on the use of DES. The MHRA also contacted the General Medical Council to establish whether any direct communications on DES had been sent by the GMC to healthcare professionals directly, but the GMC could find no records of communications. Finally, there have been searches of the Yellow Card database for any reports of the use of DES, although given the time that has passed, I am sure that the House will appreciate the significant challenges in relation to locating and retrieving records between the 1940s and the 1970s. In addition, my officials are working to explore what can be done through NHS digital processes in relation to missing or destroyed medical records.

Let me again thank Members for raising this important issue, and pay tribute to all those affected by DES who have continued to campaign for recognition, support and answers.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am here because my constituent Helen, from Romiley, came to see me at my advice surgery on Saturday. I was waiting to raise this point until the Minister was close to ending her speech, because I want to understand what is being done and what more the Government can do to give information to people who think they may be DES daughters. Helen's mum certainly took something during her pregnancy, but it is difficult to interpret the GP's handwriting on the records that Helen has received. What can the Minister tell Helen and people like her who think their health conditions suggest that they are DES daughters, but who do not yet have the evidence to show that they are?

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank the hon. Member for her question, and pay tribute to Helen. My hon. Friend mentioned this important issue. While there may be 600 women out there, there are many, many more who just do not know—and, I am sure, grandchildren too. Not only should information be widely available on NHS websites, but women should be able to go to their GPs, and their GPs should be able to direct them to a screening service, while also taking seriously the issues that they raise. More needs to be more done in this regard, and I look forward to working with campaigners and with my hon. Friend to establish what more we can do when we identify gaps.

I pay tribute to the women I met earlier today, who are sitting in the Gallery. Hearing directly from them their powerful testimonies puts a lot of this into context for me. It is not just about reading people's stories; it is about the lived experience of what that trauma has been like for many women, their grandchildren and so forth. I pay tribute to Clare Fletcher; Marion and Juliette; Heather and her two daughters; Liam, Charly, Anne-Marie and her daughter; and Julia. My apologies if I have missed someone's name. Thank you so much for sharing your exposure to DES and the fact that the healthcare system did not adequately address the recognised and multigenerational adverse effects of the drug.

We have to continue to listen carefully to those affected, learn from their experiences and take every appropriate step to safeguard people, now and in the future. As someone said, this is not simply a historical medical issue; it is about women whose voices were dismissed, whose experiences were doubted and whose families continue to live with the consequences. It is just a reminder that when women say that something is wrong, we must listen. We cannot change the past, but we can ensure that their voices shape how we respond.

Question put and agreed to.

10.11 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Monday 29 June 2026

[DR ANDREW MURRISON *in the Chair*]

Animal Abusers

4.30 pm

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 759783 relating to a public register of animal abusers and automatic ownership bans.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison, and a privilege to lead this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. The creator of the petition, Bea Elton, joins us in the Public Gallery. Bea does not work day to day in the protection of animals; she provides a cleaning service for those in need and who are struggling to keep their homes in order. She documents this on her Instagram channel, *cleanwithbea*, which has more than 2.2 million followers—probably about the same number as the Minister has.

Bea was kind enough to meet me online ahead of today's debate—it is lucky she did not meet me in my office, because there was quite a lot of cleaning to do on my desk. Meeting Bea made clear to me her passion and sense of duty for those less fortunate than herself. While deep cleaning homes, Bea has uncovered the awful situations in which some animals find themselves vulnerable to serious neglect and abuse.

It is important to note the distinction between abuse and neglect. Abuse is distinguished by intent. Some people unintentionally neglect their animals due to circumstances beyond their control, such as financial difficulty or mental distress. Those people are not the concern of this petition, which is focused on intentional abuse. The abuse we are discussing today is not the professional cruelty of organised criminals running illegal dogfights or breeding operations, which are well known to the police, or abusive commercial practices in farms; it is about the hidden cruelty inflicted in domestic settings up and down the country.

Bea emphasised to me that her focus is on abuse committed in the domestic, rather than the commercial setting. Unfortunately, the most recent statistics from the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the main investigative body for offences under the current legislation, confirm that Bea's experiences reflect the situation across our society. In 2022, 400 pet owners were convicted on evidence gathered by the RSPCA in its investigations. I put on record my thanks to the RSPCA for its tireless work in this space right across our country.

The abuse of animals offends our deepest instincts of fairness and kindness. These animals are utterly blameless, yet uniquely vulnerable. The more animals Bea found in this predicament, the stronger became her conviction that the current system for preventing animal abuse is inadequate. One of Bea's most pressing concerns is that the system fails to prevent animal abuse from occurring in the first place.

In short, Bea's petition requests that those convicted of animal abuse be prohibited from owning animals again, and that their conviction be listed on a national register that can be accessed by breeders, charities, vets, local authorities and other appropriate organisations. In response, the Government have rejected the demands on the grounds that the current provisions are sufficient; I will return to those points later in my remarks.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): I thank the petitioners for bringing this important issue to the House; I am very sympathetic.

Animal abuse comes in many forms, and we should also consider what sanctions owners who are irresponsible with their pets should face. In my constituency, we recently had a horrific case where an XL bully attacked a man and he ended up needing hospital treatment. Does my hon. Friend agree that people who cannot responsibly handle their animals are also committing a form of abuse and should be treated accordingly?

Jacob Collier: I think that is a separate issue, but legislation on XL bullies already exists and it needs to be properly enforced.

Animal abuse convictions are most often made under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, and sexual abuse is covered by the Crime and Policing Act 2026. An individual convicted under the Animal Welfare Act can face up to five years in prison and can be subject to a court-issued disqualification order preventing them from owning animals for the rest of their life, although the court decides the specific terms of the order.

The experts I spoke to in preparation for this debate—I thank Claire McParland, Dr David Martin and Mark Randell—agree that the current legislative framework is a significant improvement on the previous legislation, under which animal cruelty was largely prosecuted as criminal damage and sentences were often a little lenient for organised crime. The Government note in their response that all

“offences under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 are currently stored on the Police National Computer. This information may be shared with appropriate organisations”

and with members of the public in specific circumstances. However, the records of convictions under the earlier legislation are less comprehensive.

Under the current system, the reporting of suspected offences is an inevitable challenge. Most reports of animal abuse come from the public, which makes enforcement more reactive than preventive. One risk of a national register is that it could make people less likely to report, because they may assume that the authorities already have the matter in hand. Once the RSPCA begins to investigate a report, it can request information from the police about any previous convictions, but that process can be slow and there is no guarantee that the police will release the information. A dedicated national register would, of course, make that easier.

Another route through which animal abuse can be investigated is when police forces discover abuse while investigating other reports. Dr David Martin, who has decades of experience as an expert witness in animal abuse cases, stressed to me that the collaboration between the police and the RSPCA is very effective in England, Scotland and Wales. Local teams know who to call when they have a query or come across animal abuse in their

[*Jacob Collier*]

day-to-day activities. On the other hand, Mark Randell, a former police officer who has spent decades campaigning for improvements to the police response to animal abuse, said that identifying animal abuse is not standardised across police forces, and understanding of how animal abuse fits into broader safeguarding varies greatly between police forces across the country. We should consider standardised training so that there is not a postcode lottery.

Despite the difficulties, the RSPCA successfully prosecutes hundreds of cases each year. Although disqualification orders are at the discretion of the court, the petition requests that bans be made automatic upon conviction. That might reduce instances of animal abuse, especially if coupled with a national register available to vets and rehoming charities. However, in a liberal democracy, we evaluate proposals for punishing crimes based not simply on how effectively they prevent recurrence, but on whether the punishment is proportionate, and it is not clear that automatic lifetime bans are proportionate.

An automatic ban has no regard for whether the perpetrator is entirely responsible for their crime. For example, they could be in a coercive or controlling relationship, or could themselves be a victim of abuse, which might drive them to inflict harm on animals. In such cases, it is harder to establish with certainty that they are responsible for the crime, so an automatic ban may be disproportionate.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Across Cornwall, there are dozens of cases of animal abuse every year and animal abuse is a blight on our duchy, so I welcome the principle of an abuser register. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should not just add perpetrators to the register, but ensure that the threat of custodial sentences is strong enough that they know they will be punished for their crimes?

Jacob Collier: I agree. The threat of prosecution was strengthened by the 2006 Act, which has aided in preventing abuse. When the Government review the animal welfare legislation, they should take that into consideration.

A lifetime ban ignores the possibility that offenders may change their ways. In this country, we believe that those who break the law can be rehabilitated into law-abiding society. Imagine a case in which a child or young adult commits abuse against an animal. What if they are locking that animal in a cupboard to protect it from a violent parent? A lifetime ban would mean that they would be unable to have such a pet in their retirement, which feels disproportionate.

When the argument is considered from that perspective, the discretionary nature of disqualification orders appears to be a strength: judges have the freedom to consider the offender's circumstances, which may have motivated the crime. None the less, it may be the case that disqualification orders need to be issued more regularly to prevent recurrence. Guidelines could be changed to make them time-limited orders when a certain level or kind of abuse has been committed.

As for the national register, the RSPCA has repeatedly stated that it is unreasonably difficult for it to access the history of an alleged offender. How the register works in practice must be considered carefully. Bea wants the register to be accessible to appropriate organisations,

but not the general public, which would avoid giving rise to animal abuse vigilantism, the likes of which we have seen spreading on social media in other cases.

Alongside access, there is also the question of what information the register should contain. A public register may be less effective if it is simply a snapshot of past offending. As I noted earlier, convictions under the Animal Welfare Act are only part of the picture, and a register of convictions is not as detailed as the archive of RSPCA intelligence. Information must be comprehensive and up to date if it is to be truly effective for relevant agencies.

A more useful alternative might therefore be a disclosure scheme akin to Clare's law, which enables police to disclose information about an individual's history of violence or abuse where there is a credible risk to their partner. That scheme is on a statutory footing, requiring police forces to give reasons if they do not wish to make a disclosure. The family of Holly Bramley have been campaigning for an animal abuse register and police disclosure scheme since her tragic murder in 2023. Holly's killer was a prolific abuser and killer of animals and he used the threat of animal abuse to control Holly. The link between animal abuse and domestic violence cannot be ignored, and it is key to this debate. We owe it to Holly to take action.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend makes a valid link between the abuse of animals and of human beings. I thank the petitioner, Bea, for bringing this issue to this place, because it shines a spotlight on both forms of abuse. The RSPCA has reported that 71% of domestic violence victims suffer death threats to their pets, too. Does that not prove that we need to be more sophisticated in how we record crimes of animal abuse, so that we capture the wider sense that these people are a threat not just to animals, but to their wives, their partners and everyone else?

Jacob Collier: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I was shocked by some of the evidence I heard while preparing for this debate about the link between domestic violence and animal abuse. As the Government consider the next steps, that must be key to their thinking. I understand that the RSPCA is in discussions with the Home Office and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs regarding a version of Clare's law for animal abuse, and I would welcome an update on those discussions from the Minister.

In just three months, Bea's petition has received more than 238,000 signatures, illustrating the depth of feeling across our country about abuse against animals. That feeling, together with the expert opinion of organisations such as the RSPCA, indicates that the current provisions against animal abuse are not adequate. An automatic life ban for convicted abusers appears to be a disproportionate response, though questions remain about whether disqualification orders are being used as frequently as they should be. A public register of convictions is similarly unsuitable. However, a version of Clare's law for animal abuse might strike the right balance, allowing the appropriate agencies up-to-date access and intelligence when they need it, in order to intervene before abuse is committed. I thank Bea for creating this petition and allowing this necessary debate—my office is a prime candidate if she wants to conduct another spring clean.

4.44 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Reform): I begin by thanking Bea Elton and the near-quarter of a million petitioners who have brought this issue to the attention of the House of Commons. We are a nation of animal lovers; it is an essential part of the British psyche. We were the first country in the world to have an animal cruelty charity, which became the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. In fact, the RSPCA was created 60 years before a similar charity for children, which perhaps says something about the unique attachment we on these islands have to our animals. In 1822, we became the first state to create laws against animal cruelty, again before some prescient ones with respect to humans. Animal charities receive millions of pounds more every year than charities for children do. All of that tells us that the British love their animals; I certainly do.

I am here on behalf of my constituents to strongly back the petition and all that Bea and her fellow campaigners have achieved so far. It cannot be right that in a country like ours, where we have such a deep sentimental attachment to our animals, we allow people who have been known to abuse animals to take charge of them again. It should be the law of the land that if somebody has been convicted of knowingly abusing an animal, they are never in charge of one again. I strongly support the purpose of the petition.

Similarly, it is right that a register is created that is either in the public domain or, as a bare minimum, available to those who breed and sell animals—the ultimate guardians of animals, who entrust them to others—so that they can make sensible choices and not give animals to those who are known to have abused them. It is surprising that a register like that does not exist in our country already; it should do. If the petition spurs the Government to establish such a register, Bea and the quarter of a million people the length and breadth of the country who signed it will have done a good deed.

We must take better care of our pets and animals. That is obviously good for animals, but it is good for us as well. The tenderness we show animals should be something that we celebrate and take pride in when we visit other parts of the world that do not have the traditions that we have. It is part of, as I think Peter Singer described, the “ever-expanding circle of empathy” where, if we treat animals well, it will encourage us to treat humans in a similar fashion.

I will finish by again thanking Bea and all of the petitioners. I encourage the Government to take up the recommendations and to create a mandatory ban and a register that is available for all those who pass animals into the custody of their fellow citizens. That will ensure that we protect animals and increase and improve the world-class laws against animal cruelty that we have in this country.

4.48 pm

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) on securing this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, and I thank all my constituents and everybody else who signed the e-petition. Of course, I also thank Bea, who is in the Public Gallery today, for bringing this issue to light.

This topic matters deeply to people across the country, including in my constituency. People expect those who cause suffering to an animal to face serious consequences. More than that, they expect the law to prevent another animal from ever being put at risk again. At home, our dog Foggy is a treasured member of our family, and that is how most people feel about their pets. They rely on us, they trust us and they absolutely deserve to be safe in our care.

I recently received a letter about today’s debate from a 13-year-old constituent, who is worried that someone convicted of animal abuse could go on to have another animal and cannot understand why someone who has already shown cruelty towards an animal should be given another opportunity to cause harm. It was a powerful letter, not because it came from a young person—although that certainly made it all the more striking—but because it put the matter so plainly: why should we wait until another animal has suffered before we act?

As we have heard, important powers are already available to the courts under the Animal Welfare Act 2006. Those convicted of an offence can be disqualified from owning animals, keeping them, taking part in their care, influencing how they are kept, dealing in them or transporting them. Those powers absolutely matter. Increasing the maximum sentences for the most serious animal cruelty offences was an important step forward, but the petition raises a fair question: is the current system clear, consistent and practical enough to stop people who have been banned simply going elsewhere and acquiring another animal? A conviction may be recorded and a disqualification order may be made, but what happens when someone approaches a rescue centre, a breeder or another organisation to take on an animal? How does that organisation know whether the person standing in front of them has a history of serious cruelty or has been banned by a court from keeping animals? At present, the answer seems far too uncertain.

Perran Moon: Does my hon. Friend agree that we surely need to close the loophole whereby banned owners can give their pets or farm animals to their wife or husband to own, and still live with them?

Lee Pitcher: Absolutely; there is no place for legal loopholes like that in our country, where we love our animals so much.

The Government have referred to the police national computer and to existing arrangements for information sharing. I recognise that there are important safeguards around personal information and data protection that we must be aware of, but a record held somewhere in the system is not the same as a practical safeguarding tool that can stop a banned person acquiring another animal. That is the point behind the petition, and it is a point that we should take very seriously. This Labour Government were elected on a commitment to strengthen animal welfare, including through action on puppy farming and smuggling, snare traps, trail hunting and hunting trophies. We should now look carefully at whether the animal protection provided after a cruelty conviction is strong enough in practice.

I believe there is a serious case for a properly governed national safeguarding scheme for those convicted of the most serious animal cruelty offences and subject to

[Lee Pitcher]

ownership bans. It would not need to be a public database. This should not be about naming and shaming people or allowing uncontrolled access to sensitive information; it should be a proportionate safeguarding measure, with clear rules on who can make a check, when they can do so, and what information they can receive. It can be managed, is what I am saying.

Animal rescue and rehoming organisations, veterinary professionals, local authorities, licensing bodies and responsible breeders should be able to establish whether an individual is prohibited from keeping an animal before an animal is placed in that person's care. We rightly recognise that information sometimes needs to be shared to protect children, vulnerable adults and the wider public. I believe we should be willing to consider a careful and proportionate approach that protects animals from people with a proven record of cruelty or neglect.

The petition calls for automatic life bans following convictions for animal abuse or neglect. I understand why it has attracted such strong support. For the gravest cases, particularly those involving deliberate, sustained or repeated cruelty, the future protection of animals must be at the heart of the court's decision. There should be a strong presumption that someone who has shown such serious cruelty should not be entrusted with the care of an animal again. Courts must retain the ability to consider the individual circumstances of the case, but where a serious offender receives only a short ban, or no ban at all, there should be clear reasons for that decision.

This is not simply about punishment; it is about prevention. Animal cruelty can be part of a wider pattern of harm, as we have heard. It can sit alongside coercive control, domestic abuse and violence within a household, which makes early identification and effective safeguarding even more important, so I ask the Minister to look carefully at what more can be done. Will the Government consider consulting on a national animal welfare safeguarding disclosure scheme, so that responsible organisations can check whether a prospective owner has been convicted of serious cruelty or banned from keeping animals previously? Will the Government consider whether the law should create a stronger expectation of lengthy and, where appropriate, lifetime ownership bans in serious and repeated cases? Will they also publish clearer information on the number of disqualification orders made, how long they last, how often they are breached, and what action is taken when they are ignored?

My 13-year-old constituent is not asking for anything unreasonable. They are asking for a system that works, before another animal is intentionally harmed. That is a basic test of whether our animal welfare laws are doing what the public expect them to do. For my 13-year-old constituent, for Bea, for all those who signed the petition and for every wonderful, beautiful animal we love, we should always try to meet that test.

4.55 pm

Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) for his opening speech, particularly for

talking about the link between domestic violence and animal abuse. I also thank the people from my constituency who signed the petition, and the petitioner for creating it.

Animal abuse is a particular type of cruelty for which perpetrators should be made accountable—but far too often, that does not happen. I was encouraged by the Government's animal welfare strategy, which sets out a clear vision for improving animal welfare standards across the country. This Government are delivering the most comprehensive animal welfare programme in a generation, but we have the opportunity to go further. The Government could consider having a register of animal abusers and an automatic ban on ownership for all those convicted of animal abuse, to tackle the increased number of cases and reported cases that we are seeing today. In 2024, the RSPCA reported a heartbreaking increase in cases of animal and pet abuse, with their emergency line taking more than one call every 16 seconds. Therefore, I can only support the petition.

Although courts can disqualify individuals from ownership once they are convicted of animal abuse, there is no central register on which charities, vets or businesses can check if someone is banned from keeping animals before selling or rehoming to them, or even employing them to take care of animals. The Government have said that having a public register would not be appropriate, because it would run the risk of exposing a person on the register to vigilantism. However, a closed register that is only accessible by, for example, vets, breeders and charities could remedy that problem. A closed register, alongside a mandatory ban, would serve as a deterrent to animal abusers, especially repeat offenders.

Statistics show that abuse of pets is on the rise, and I have been made aware of an increase in animal abuse content being shared online, so I can only support the petition. The vast majority of pets are not simply animals to us, but members of our families. We recognise that although animal cruelty is on the rise, it is the exception; many pets across the country can safely rely on their owners for consistent care, safety and kindness. However, all animals deserve the best lives possible, so I ask the Government to build on the foundations that they laid in the animal welfare strategy.

4.58 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak with you in the Chair, Dr Murrison, for what I think is the first time. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) for, as always, introducing the debate so thoughtfully as a member of the Petitions Committee. I also thank the 386 animal lovers in my constituency who added their names to the petition. Colleagues may have been hoping to have an animal welfare debate without hearing from me, but I am afraid that today is not that day.

The petitions that we debate are not often started by social media influencers, but it is because of the determination of Bea Elton—known to her millions of followers, myself included, as Clean with Bea—that we are able to debate this important issue today. I will forgive hon. Members who have not yet watched Bea's videos if they are on their phones throughout my speech. Bea offers free home cleaning to people in deep crisis or with severe hoarding tendencies. Sadly, she often comes across animals that have been neglected and have had to

live in awful conditions. I am glad that Bea has used her experience and platform to bring the issue to Parliament. I hope that we can focus on the art of the possible, as I know that preventing the needless suffering of animals unites us all, across the political spectrum.

Last autumn, I went on a ride-along with Sophie, an RSPCA inspector, to see what a day looked like for her. My constituency is full of pet owners, and who can blame them—why would anyone who lives somewhere as beautiful as Cannock Chase not get a dog as motivation to explore our stunning scenery together? However, I admit that I do not have a pet, not because I do not love animals, but because I could not give one the time and attention that it deserves—I often joke that I have two young kids and that is enough for now.

This debate comes down to the fundamental fact that owning a pet is not a right; it is a privilege and a responsibility. The time I spent with Sophie reinforced that. Like many people, I assumed that most of an RSPCA inspector's work involved rescuing animals from awful situations—and of course, they do that, in tandem with the police—but what surprised me was how much of their time is spent trying to stop animals reaching that point in the first place. Inspectors spend hours following up with owners after advising them that a pet needs veterinary treatment, for example, and they work closely with local vets to check whether animals have actually received the care that they need. Most owners do the right thing, but when somebody repeatedly ignores inspectors' advice and an animal continues to suffer because treatment has been withheld, concerns rightly begin to escalate.

One thing that has stayed with me from that day is that many cases of animal abuse reveal something far deeper. Inspectors told me that they often encounter people whose lives have unravelled. That might be because of relationship breakdown, domestic abuse, as we have heard, physical illness or mental ill health. None of that excuses neglect, but it reminds us that animal welfare is often connected to the wider challenges in somebody's life.

We also know, as we have heard, that the relationship can work the other way. The Ruby's law campaign highlighted that perpetrators of domestic abuse may threaten or harm family pets as a means of coercion and control, knowing exactly how much fear and distress that causes. Nine in 10 people experiencing domestic abuse in England and Wales reported that animals were also abused by the perpetrators, so protecting animals is not separate from protecting people; sometimes it is part of the very same task. That is why partnership between organisations is so important. The RSPCA, as we know, does not have the power to seize animals, so it relies on the police following its investigations, and inspectors cannot force entry into a property if access is refused.

The experience left me with one clear thought: our system does a reasonable job of responding once abuse has happened, but I am not convinced that it does enough to stop the next animal becoming a victim. As hon. Members have highlighted, the Government's response to the petition states that convictions for animal cruelty are already recorded on the police national computer and that courts have the power to disqualify offenders from keeping animals. That is absolutely true, but rescue centres, breeders and pet shops cannot routinely check those records, so somebody who has already been banned from keeping

animals can walk into one of those organisations, appear perfectly respectable and walk out with another pet simply because the people rehoming the animal have no way of checking whether that person has been disqualified. That does not mean the law has comprehensively failed; it means there is a gap in the system.

Breaching a disqualification order is an offence, but somebody has to discover that breach first. Given the demands on our police and local authorities, we should not be relying on chance or left hoping that somebody will spot what has happened when another animal is already suffering. Surely it is better to stop the animal being placed there in the first place.

I understand the Government's concerns about privacy when it comes to a public register, but there could be a sensible middle ground, as hon. Members have already outlined. If a register was available to verified rescue organisations, breeders and licensed pet sellers, it would allow them to check whether somebody is currently subject to a disqualification order before an animal is handed over. It would not be to name and shame, or to publish personal information, but to answer one simple question: can this person legally keep and care for an animal?

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making such a powerful speech that I did not want to interrupt, but I spoke to volunteers at the East Ardsley RSPCA in my constituency the other week. They told me that they have to endure abuse from people who accuse them of not taking care of animals, because people have reported cruelty to them, but the volunteers do not necessarily have the powers to act. If the RSPCA and other organisations had access to a database, that would solve that problem. Will my hon. Friend also take the opportunity to commend the RSPCA in my constituency for all of its outstanding work?

Josh Newbury: I will never miss an opportunity to thank the RSPCA, including in Leeds South West and Morley and the East Ardsley centre. My hon. Friend is right that RSPCA staff and volunteers often face abuse themselves because many people are rightly passionate about protecting animals, but it is important to remember that their powers are far more limited than perhaps many of us realise. They are as determined as anybody to do the right thing by animals, so we need to make sure that they are given as many powers as are appropriate and that we support them in doing their important work. The enemy are the people who commit the abuse, not the people who try to help.

The Government are right that judges should retain discretion over the terms of disqualification orders. Every case is different, and rehabilitation should always remain possible where appropriate, but once someone has been convicted of egregious animal abuse, a ban should be automatic and should have a practical effect. The petition is not asking us to reinvent the wheel. The convictions already exist and the courts already have the powers. All we are asking is to close one obvious gap in the system so that trusted organisations have the information they need to stop known offenders acquiring another vulnerable animal. I say to the Minister that if that change could prevent even a handful of animals suffering, it would be a step well worth taking.

5.5 pm

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) for introducing this hugely important debate; the petitioners and Bea Elton for getting so many signatures, which is why we are discussing this issue; and Holly's family, who are turning an absolute tragedy into something that could have a positive legacy. That is very courageous.

In my many years of working in veterinary practice, one observation always stuck with me: how people treat animals is often a reflection of how they treat the people closest to them. People who treat animals with unfailing kindness tend to be some of the kindest people you will ever meet. If people deliberately inflict suffering on a defenceless animal, it is often a warning sign that that violence will extend beyond the animal and into the home. We do not know what goes on behind closed doors.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend on being a fantastic animal champion; he has done fantastic work on puppy smuggling. Does he agree not only that there should be stronger sentencing powers, but that those with a proven track record of serious animal abuse and harm should face complete ownership bans?

Dr Chambers: I totally agree. We should be clear that, as other hon. Members have pointed out, there is a very big difference between someone who causes suffering to an animal for a variety of reasons, such as mental health issues or ignorance, or through neglect, and someone who deliberately causes harm to an animal because they have a sadistic personality or want to feel powerful. In this debate, it is important to consider the motivation behind causing the suffering: if someone causes deliberate suffering, it indicates that they may well cause harm to other people around them.

As a vet, it is always unsettling to treat a dog with a broken rib that could have resulted from a kick when the owner says that it fell down the stairs, for example. That is a very unusual thing for a dog to do, and it would be very unusual to break a rib as a result. My concern in those situations, beyond treating the animal in front of me, extends to the people living in closest proximity to the person who has brought in the dog. We know that people sometimes even coerce their partner to stay with them instead of leaving by threatening to harm their pet. On that note, I pay tribute to organisations such as Trinity in Winchester, which has a refuge for people fleeing domestic abuse that allows them to take their pets with them, because that is a barrier to people escaping that situation. Cats Protection and Dogs Trust have very similar schemes, and they are hugely important.

As vets, we are trained to recognise the early signs of diseases so that we can treat them before they become irreversible, and I believe we should take the same approach to violence. Animal abuse is not always an isolated act of cruelty; sometimes it is the first symptom of something much more dangerous. That is why I take every opportunity to discuss the important work of the Links Group, which highlights the evidence linking animal abuse with domestic abuse and other forms of violence.

I ask the Minister to consider three measures. First, when someone has been convicted of abusing an animal, that information should be disclosed under the domestic violence disclosure scheme, commonly known as Clare's law, where it is relevant to protecting someone at risk. If animal abuse predicts domestic violence, that information must be available to all those who need it. The issue at the moment is that the abuse of an animal is often prosecuted under animal welfare laws and does not show up when people look for historical allegations of or convictions for domestic violence.

Secondly, anyone convicted of sexually abusing an animal should be automatically placed on the sex offenders register. At present, such convictions under animal welfare legislation carry no referral to public protection mechanisms. That means that if someone has sexually abused an animal, they are prosecuted under animal welfare laws and there is no way of tracking them, although they have a higher likelihood of committing sexual violence against other people as well. That cannot be right; it is an anomaly that this House should fix. Thirdly, anyone convicted of deliberately abusing an animal should be prohibited from owning animals in the future. The courts should have the powers to impose long-term or, where appropriate, lifetime disqualification orders.

Holly's killer had abused animals since the age of eight. He had admitted it and the RSPCA knew about it, but the legal and justice systems that are in place did not allow anyone to join those dots. We cannot allow that to happen again. By clamping down hard on deliberate animal abuse, we can protect women, spouses, children and animals from future harm.

5.11 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. This is an important debate, and I thank Bea for highlighting the issue through the petition.

We have had many contributions. The hon. Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) clearly set out the background to the petition and the challenges in identifying and enforcing convictions for animal abuse. The right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) highlighted the importance of and the care that we all feel for our pets and animals. The hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) discussed the need to think about prevention alongside punishment.

We are all united in our shared belief that any case of animal cruelty is completely unacceptable. As an animal lover, I am deeply committed to doing what I can in this House to raise awareness, to legislate and to support efforts to prevent animal cruelty. I am therefore proud to be part of a Conservative party that has a strong record on animal welfare from our time in government. We passed legislation including the Animal Welfare (Livestock Exports) Act 2024, which bans the export of live animals for slaughter, and the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Act 2021, which increased the maximum prison sentence for animal cruelty from six months to five years. The last Government also introduced the Animal Welfare (Sentience) Act 2022, the Animals (Penalty Notices) Act 2022 and the Glue Traps (Offences) Act 2022.

I will mention one more piece of legislation, passed since the July 2024 election and introduced by a Conservative MP—me. The Dogs (Protection of Livestock)

(Amendment) Act 2025 shows our ongoing commitment to animal welfare. I was pleased to introduce that legislation to update the laws surrounding livestock worrying, by increasing the fine where dogs attack livestock and giving the police more powers to investigate instances of livestock worrying. I am grateful to hon. Members from across the House who supported the passage of that Act.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I apologise to the hon. Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier), who introduced the debate, that I was not here at the outset; I have already apologised to you, Dr Murrison. I rise simply to highlight the association between animal cruelty and domestic abuse, which was highlighted earlier. Annette Bramley is my constituent. Her daughter Holly was killed by a wicked husband who is now enduring life in prison, although of course in a better age he would have been executed.

The connection between animal cruelty and domestic abuse is proven; I have the facts and figures, and I am happy to give them to my hon. Friend the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) and to the Minister, but I will not bore the Chamber with them now. They illustrate that a huge proportion of those who are cruel to people have also been cruel to animals: there is an association that would allow us to deal with risk more effectively.

I have been working with the Government on this issue and I commend them for that work, but I wonder if the Minister can address it in his speech. It is important that we know where the Government are on that work, whether it can be done within existing legislation, or whether it will require further secondary or primary legislation.

Aphra Brandreth: I thank my right hon. Friend for speaking so eloquently, as he always does. I will come on to the case of his constituent and pay tribute to the work that she is doing in due course.

Because of the widespread commitment to, and support for, reducing animal cruelty, the UK has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, and it is right for us to cement our status as a global leader by continuing to raise the bar. It does not surprise me that the petition we are debating today has received over 230,000 signatures, because I know this is an issue that many of our constituents rightly feel strongly about. In my constituency, 328 people have added their names to it.

Existing provisions ensure that all prosecutions for animal cruelty offences under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 are stored on the police national computer. That information can be shared with appropriate organisations at the police's discretion. However, there are some points that I would welcome the Minister's thoughts on. What assessment has he made of the arrangement under the 2006 Act? For example, is there consistency in decisions as to when data is shared? How regularly is data being shared? Where is it being shared? Importantly, is it helping to prevent incidents of abuse?

I want to turn to the connection between animal abuse and domestic violence, because, sadly, there is a link, and perpetrators of animal abuse too often also abuse people. That has been highlighted by cases such as the tragic murder of Holly Bramley, as we have heard,

which has not only boosted awareness, but increased demand for a public register. I commend her mother Annette for turning an unimaginably difficult situation into a campaign that honours her daughter's legacy and focuses on ensuring that the link between animal and domestic violence is properly recorded.

The RSPA highlighted that 2.3 million adults experienced domestic abuse in 2024, and 71% of victims reported a threat to their pets. Figures such as that should give us serious cause for concern. What steps is the Minister taking to work with ministerial colleagues in the Home Office to ensure a cohesive approach to tackling the link between animal and domestic abuse?

I want to recognise the important work being done by the veterinary profession to highlight that link—I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as someone who is married to a veterinary surgeon and as an owner of a veterinary business. The work of the Links Group, which is chaired by Dr Paula Boyden, former veterinary director of the Dogs Trust, is helping to inform vets on the frontline who may be exposed to cases that need action. I hope the Minister will join me in acknowledging the importance of that work and outline whether the Government are engaging with the veterinary profession, including the Links Group, the British Veterinary Association and other stakeholders, to support that work.

Pets are too often used as a means of coercion and control against those experiencing domestic abuse. That is why it is so important that anyone suffering at the hands of an abuser knows that support is available. Earlier this month, I attended the Cats Protection drop-in in Parliament where, among other things, it highlighted the work of charities that provide temporary foster care for pets when someone is fleeing domestic abuse. That support can make the difference between someone remaining in an abusive relationship for fear of leaving a beloved pet behind and having the confidence to escape to safety. Does the Minister agree that those are exactly the kinds of initiatives we should be championing to raise awareness of this issue? Will he outline what steps the Government are taking to improve public awareness of the links between animal abuse and domestic abuse, including the use of threats or harm to pets as a form of coercive and controlling behaviour?

I am sure that all Members will encourage anyone who is experiencing domestic abuse or worried about animal abuse to come forward and seek help. Police forces, including Cheshire constabulary in my area, have safe ways for people to report abuse, and I want anyone listening to this debate to know that you do not have to face it alone; help is available and I urge you to reach out. If we raise awareness of the link between animal and domestic abuse, and improve the sharing and recording of information, I believe that we can identify abuse earlier, protect more victims and prevent further harm. Ultimately, that is what every one of us in this House wants to achieve.

Although the Government have said in their written response to the petition that they will not introduce a public register, given the number of U-turns that have been made thus far, I am not certain whether that position can be relied on. However, what is certain is that anyone who is abusing animals or using the threat of animal abuse for manipulation must be prosecuted and face the consequences of their despicable actions.

5.19 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Stephen Morgan): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) on opening this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee and thank him for the thoughtful way he set out the issues raised in the petition. I also thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions on establishing a public register for animal abusers and the automatic ownership ban.

The petition has attracted significant public support, with more than 235,000 signatures, clearly demonstrating how strongly people across the country feel about protecting animals. I commend the tireless campaigning of Bea and her supporters. As a dog lover—and the owner of 11-year-old labradoodle Albert Attlee, who brings real joy to my family and me—I share the petitioners' deep concern about animal cruelty. People want to see animals treated with care and respect.

We are a nation of animal lovers, and I represent a party with a proud track record of delivering meaningful protections for animals. From introducing the landmark Hunting Act 2004 to strengthening safeguards for domestic animals through the Animal Welfare Act, Labour has consistently led the way in placing animal welfare at the heart of the Government agenda, because we believe that how we treat animals reflects the kind of society we are.

However, we must also confront the harsh reality that animal abuse still occurs often and in deeply distressing ways that shock the conscience and undermine the values we hold dear as a nation. Cases of neglect, cruelty and deliberate harm continue to surface, reminding us that the protections we have in place, while important, are not always enough to prevent suffering or deter repeat offending. That reality drives the strength of feeling behind this petition. Where abuse occurs, we want animals to be protected, offenders to be held accountable and to make sure that further harm is not caused. The challenge is not whether to act, but how best to achieve lasting protection for animals.

I will first address the proposal for automatic lifetime bans on animal ownership. Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, courts can impose disqualification orders preventing individuals from owning, keeping or caring for animals. In the most serious cases, these bans can be imposed for life. It is for the courts to determine the appropriate sanction based on the specific facts of each case. Judicial discretion is not a weakness in the legislation; it is a strength. It enables courts to impose the strongest possible restrictions where they are needed, while ensuring fairness and proportionality. Introducing an automatic lifetime ban in all cases would remove that discretion.

I now turn to the proposal for a public register of animal abusers. I understand why there is public support for the idea, and the reassurance it is intended to provide, but there are already systems in place to record and share this information when it is right to do so. Convictions under the Animal Welfare Act 2006 are recorded on the police national computer, and enforcement bodies such as the police and local authorities have access to that information.

There are also established disclosure mechanisms that allow the police to share relevant information with those who need it. That means relevant information can

be used where it is needed for licensing, safeguarding or public protection. A publicly accessible register, however, could create serious risks, including the potential for harassment and misuse of personal data. The more effective approach is targeted disclosure, ensuring that relevant information is shared lawfully, proportionately and with the appropriate bodies at the right time.

I also recognise the concerns raised by campaigns such as Holly's law and Ruby's law, which Members have raised today. They speak to a serious issue: the link between animal abuse, domestic abuse and coercive control. The Government take that link very seriously. Statutory guidance under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 already recognises that pets can be used to control, coerce, threaten or distress a victim. DEFRA is supporting wider, cross-Government work in this area, led by the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice. I assure Members that I will continue that cross-Government work.

Our focus is on better awareness, appropriate information-sharing, pet fostering, veterinary awareness and stronger microchipping safeguards. That is why the right information must reach the right people at the right time through lawful and targeted safeguarding routes.

Sir John Hayes: I am grateful for the Minister's indulgence, given that I was not here at the beginning. He is right that the sharing of information is critical among all the agencies that deal with domestic abuse and animal cruelty, but the Government may need to weave this into their bigger piece of work, which he will be aware of, on risk—dealing with risk in a rather different way, reinforcing some of the existing guidance and possibly even statute. We spoke about Holly's law, which does not necessarily need to be primary legislation, but does need to have statutory force. Statutory guidance may be the answer in this respect. I do not prejudge that; I simply put it on the record for the Minister to discuss with his compatriots in the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice.

Stephen Morgan: The right hon. Member is a tireless champion on these issues, having met the former Safeguarding Minister in the Home Office and written to Baroness Hayman following his business question last year. I assure him that officials are continuing to work across Government on the points that came out of his meeting with the Minister, and I will certainly take away the points that he just raised.

Dr Chambers: I totally understand the need for safeguards so that disclosures are not used as an excuse for harassment or inappropriate release of data. Sexually abusing an animal does not mean that someone is on the sex offenders register, and the committing of deliberate acts of violence against an animal would not automatically be included in domestic violence disclosure; but, given the way that information is recorded and stored currently, even if the police wanted to and thought it appropriate, it is unlikely that they would be able to disclose it. Would the Minister meet me to discuss how we ensure that these offences are at least recorded in a way that means that they could be disclosed if deemed necessary and appropriate?

Stephen Morgan: I thank the hon. Member for the insight that he, as a vet, brings to the debate. I am very happy to take his suggestions and views back to the Department. He will know that animal welfare is

not within my portfolio—it is the responsibility of Baroness Hayman—but I will take back his suggestions and concerns and explore that further.

Dr Chambers rose—

Stephen Morgan: I will make some progress, but I am happy to take away the action and share it with my ministerial colleague.

We heard at the start of the debate that, more broadly, the Government are committed to strengthening animal welfare protections and raising standards across the system. That is why, last December, we published our ambitious animal welfare strategy for England. This strategy is not a short-term list of individual measures but a long-term plan to improve welfare, prevent poor welfare earlier and support a more joined-up approach. It includes practical action to promote sensible, responsible pet ownership, tackle puppy smuggling, end low-welfare puppy farming and explore further protections.

That matters, because many welfare problems begin long before prosecution is brought. They can start with poor breeding, poor socialisation, lack of knowledge or owners unable to meet an animal's needs. By addressing those causes earlier, we can reduce the risk of animal suffering and reduce pressure on enforcement bodies later on.

Of course, enforcement remains vital where poor welfare or cruelty does occur. Local authorities, the police and animal welfare organisations all play an important part in protecting animals and holding offenders to account. As we have heard, the RSPCA alone secured more than 1,000 prosecutions in 2024, which shows the scale of that continuing work. That is why the Government's approach is both practical and preventive. We want to stop animals suffering wherever we can, not only respond once harm has already happened. That means helping owners to understand their duties, providing early advice and ensuring people know where to turn before welfare problems escalate. It also means improving traceability through stronger microchipping and better records so that lost animals can be reunited with their owners, and that irresponsible breeders or owners cannot avoid accountability. Taken together, those measures provide a clear direction, prevent cruelty earlier, target enforcement where risk is greatest, and protect animals through proportionate, workable and lawful safeguards.

I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their thoughtful contributions and for speaking so passionately on behalf of their constituents and those who signed the petition. I commend the work of the RSPCA and all organisations that support animal welfare across our country. The Government are clear about our commitment to protecting animals from cruelty, neglect and exploitation, and to ensuring that those responsible are held properly to account. Courts have the power to impose lifetime bans where appropriate, and it is right that they retain the discretion to do so.

Although we recognise the good intention behind the calls for a public register, the risks outweigh the benefits. Targeted disclosure remains the most effective approach. We are continuing to strengthen enforcement by supporting local authorities on how to utilise the tools available to them more effectively. We will continue to deliver our animal welfare strategy, which will improve the lives of millions of animals across our country. I look forward to continuing to work with colleagues and stakeholders to ensure the highest possible standards of animal welfare.

5.31 pm

Jacob Collier: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. It is great that there has been cross-party support. I hope Bea is happy about that, because that does not always happen in this place, but I think that is because we are a nation of animal lovers, as the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) said.

My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) asked whether the current systems are enough to stop a convicted animal abuser from simply buying another animal, and I think the answer is no. The Minister says that the Government want a disclosure scheme, but we need to consider how that would work in practice.

My hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) spoke about partners being able to buy pets. The Government should look at that loophole, but the Minister did not mention it in his speech.

I am always keen to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury)—particularly when he makes insightful points and people think it is me making them. What he said about trusted organisations having access to some kind of register was very important.

I pay tribute to the work that the hon. Member for Winchester (Dr Chambers) has done as a vet. He spoke with great authority about people's motivation for this crime. He talked about deliberate suffering and the warning signs of domestic abuse. As the Minister investigates this area more closely, I encourage him to work across Government with the Home Office and the Ministry of Justice.

I hope Bea has enjoyed the debate. I thank her very much for starting the petition and I thank the quarter of a million people who signed it. Hopefully, we have some good action to take forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 759783 relating to a public register of animal abusers and automatic ownership bans.

5.34 pm

Sitting suspended.

NHS Breast Screening

[MARTIN VICKERS *in the Chair*]

6 pm

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 742179 relating to NHS breast screening.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I would like to start by thanking the petitioner, Gemma Reeves, for all the hard work she has put into starting the petition and gathering over 106,000 signatures from across the UK. The petition is titled “Lower the age for invites to regular mammograms to 40 & perform annually”, and says:

“Lower the age for when you are first called to 40 and provide funding to carry out Mammograms Annually instead of every Three Years.

Early detection is key and the prevalence of Breast Cancer in young patients is rising.

I am a Chemotherapy Nurse and working in this Clinical Setting for 8 Years and I have seen a rise in Breast Cancer in Patients under the Age of 40 increase.

Early detection is key in identifying those Aggressive forms of Breast Cancer”.

This is an issue that many people here and outside the Chamber care deeply about. Breast cancer still affects too many women, and far too many women die from it every year. I had the privilege of meeting with Gemma, who is here today. She told me about her experience of being a nurse for 15 years, eight of which have been in oncology, and about her concerns from having seen a rise in breast cancer cases in younger women, especially since covid.

Breast cancer is the most common type of cancer for women in the UK—one in seven women may get it. As Gemma wrote in her petition, “Early detection is key”, and has led to improved recovery and survival rates. Over half of breast cancer cases occur in women outside the national screening age, and one in six occur in women under 50. Men, too, get breast cancer; however, they make up approximately 1% of all cases. Currently, the NHS invites women to come to their first breast screening between the ages of 50 and 53, and this goes on until they are 71. They are invited every three years, after which a woman can choose to continue going for mammograms, but will not be automatically invited. Although everyone is at risk of breast cancer, women are at a higher risk if they are over 50, have dense breast tissue, have a family history of breast or ovarian cancer, or have particular breast conditions, for example benign breast disease.

There is a breast screening pathway for those identified as NHS-targeted very high risk. It is also important to note that NICE guidelines recommend annual mammography scans for women aged between 40 and 49 at moderate risk, as well as annual mammography or MRI surveillance for some high-risk groups.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for securing this debate. Unfortunately, many women are diagnosed with this cancer each year. Invasive lobular breast cancer accounts for some 15% of all breast cancer cases, yet it is routinely missed until it

reaches an advanced stage. Hundreds of members of this House have backed the call for a dedicated £20 million five-year research investment into the fundamental biology of lobular cancers. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Minister—I believe she is sympathetic to this—must undertake to incorporate advanced screening technologies, such as contrast-enhanced mammography or MRI, into the NHS pathway for women with dense breast tissue or a suspected lobular profile? The Government must grasp the issue and do something now.

Irene Campbell: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I, too, look forward to hearing the Minister’s response on that issue.

Some 1.94 million women between the ages of 50 and 70 were screened in 2024-25, and almost 20,000 cancers were detected. Cancers were detected in nine in every 1,000 women, which is a 16% increase on the previous year. Attendance to screening reached the highest level in a decade and has been championed by charities such as Breast Cancer Now, which shares public figures, stories and personal messages.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. Does she share my concern about the difference between the numbers of first-time attendees to screening and returning attendees, at 89.1% and 63% respectively? Does she have a view on how we can increase the number attending their first screening?

Irene Campbell: Screening is key, and we have to be bolder and more inventive about how we get people along to screening. There have been many public health campaigns over the years. After a campaign, there is always a rise in attendance, but when the campaign stops, attendance falls again, so I agree that that is something that the Minister must look at.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): The hon. Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) makes a valid point. Is my hon. Friend aware that between 2020 and 2023, more than three in four women in Scotland took up their screening invitations? However, take-up is varied based on deprivation: 64.2% of women in the most deprived areas attended, compared with 82.8% in the least deprived areas. Breast cancer survival rates reflect that; women from more deprived areas in particular are more likely to die at an earlier age, because they have not been for screening and are diagnosed late. Making screening available to people in innovative ways is important, but so too is screening people in their neighbourhoods. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Irene Campbell: I fully agree with my hon. Friend. Unfortunately, that is not just the case for breast screening; bowel cancer screening is lower in areas of economic and health deprivation. We must look at how we target those populations.

It is key that we continue to increase awareness of the importance of routine health appointments and modifiable risk factors. Although screening is increasing generally, the NHS breast screening programme found that one in three women still do not take up their offer of screening. As my hon. Friend said, it is key that we continue with strategies that promote the uptake of screening in areas

of lower attendance such as by running awareness campaigns, sending reminder texts and deploying mobile screening units, among other strategies. In preparing for this debate, I met Breast Cancer Now, as well as CoppaFeel!, the UK's only youth-focused breast cancer awareness charity. They call for more screening of women who have a higher risk of breast cancer, as well as providing women identified with wraparound support.

Diagnostics are key to identifying those with breast cancer successfully, although mammography is not always the best diagnostic tool, particularly for younger women and those with dense breast tissue, so it is important to invest in other diagnostics, such as MRIs, and to consider their capacity to be scaled and expanded. Younger women tend also to have denser breasts, which mammograms are worse at analysing as the scans are harder to interpret. That can lead to women having repeated scans and extended investigations.

It is important to note that most European countries screen for breast cancer between the ages of 50 and 69, although there is some variation in age ranges and frequency, with countries such as Albania, Iceland and Sweden starting screening at 40. Although breast cancer diagnoses for women under 40 are rarer, and about 4% of breast cancer cases in the UK are in women under 40, when young women get breast cancer, they are much more likely than older women to have a family history of breast cancer and genetic mutations that are associated with increased risk.

There is an ongoing trial called AgeX, which is looking at the benefits of regularly screening women aged 47 to 49 and aged 71 to 73, given how little is known about screening women outside the ages of 50 to 70. The trial took place from 2009 until 2020, and 4 million women took part. The first report to come out of the trials is due in December 2026 and the final report is due in 2031, so it will be a few years before we know its findings. Other trials include the UK age trial, led by Professor Stephen Duffy, which looked into the effectiveness of annual mammographic screening for women in their 40s and found that the mortality benefit was greatest for the first decade after screening started.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): I am proud to have Walk The Walk—one of the country's leading breast cancer charities, which has raised a huge amount of money and awareness—in my constituency. It is pushing for mammogram testing to be extended. Does the hon. Lady agree that extending it to the under-40s and the over-70s could have a notable effect on fighting this deadly cancer?

Irene Campbell: I agree, and I look forward to hearing the Minister talk about how we can take this forward.

The UK National Screening Committee is still concerned about false positives, overdiagnosis and over-treatment. In 2012, Sir Michael Marmot chaired an independent review of breast screening, which found that the current UK screening programme prevents about 1,300 deaths from breast cancer annually. However, he also found that overdiagnosis meant that, for every death prevented by screening, about three women are treated for a cancer that they do not have. As breast cancer is less common in younger women, there is a concern that overdiagnosis would be much higher in that age group. False positive results can induce long-lasting anxiety

and an unwillingness to attend future screenings. It is important that screening programmes accurately weigh up the balance between potential harms and benefits. I am sure we will hear more about that in the debate.

It is a common misconception that breast cancer is not a problem any more, but more women die from breast cancers than from other cancers. We need to do more to look after women in their 40s and women under 40. We need risk-adapted screening to better improve our chances of early detection in the most vulnerable. I look forward to hearing from other Members and the Minister.

Several hon. Members rose—

Martin Vickers (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to contribute—as they are doing. I will not impose a time limit at this stage. If you stick to about five minutes each, we should accommodate everyone.

6.12 pm

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) on introducing the debate, and I thank everyone who signed the petition. Behind every signature is a person, a family member or a friend, who has faced the frightening possibility that cancer may be found too late. They may even have lost somebody because it was found far too late.

In Bawtry in my constituency, local people have painted the town pink over the last few years during Breast Cancer Awareness Month. They have also taken the time to promote a simple message inspired by the movie “Legally Blonde”: bend and check. It is a powerful reminder that awareness, confidence and early action can save lives. I am really glad that Epworth may also be turning the town pink later this year under Kim Penfold, who is getting shops to join in and turn their fronts pink to raise awareness of early detection and screening.

The petition calls for routine breast screening to begin at 40 and to take place annually. That is a serious and understandable ask, but we must be guided by the evidence as well as the strength of feeling. The current NHS programme invites women to be screened every three years from the age of 50 until their 71st birthday. The independent UK National Screening Committee has advised that, on the evidence currently available, lowering the age or increasing the frequency of screening could bring harm as well as benefits, as we heard from my hon. Friend. Mammograms can be less accurate for younger women with denser breast tissue, increasing the risk of false positives and unnecessary tests and treatment. However, UK Age trial findings from a study of 160,000 women over 20 years show that annual mammograms for women in their 40s significantly reduces breast cancer deaths, saving a life for 1,000 women screened—one life, millions of memories.

We cannot stand still. The question raised by this petition is therefore entirely legitimate. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed when Parliament can expect the UK National Screening Committee to consider the final AgeX trial findings and how the evidence on additional screening for women with dense breast tissue will inform future decisions.

[Lee Pitcher]

We must also focus on the women already entitled to screening, as about three in 10 eligible women do not take up their invitation. This Labour Government's work on digital innovations, mobile units, targeted outreach and more accessible equipment is welcome, but it must reach women in deprived communities, rural areas and communities where uptake is at its lowest.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I recently visited the new breast care unit at County hospital, where Michelle Ellits and Mr Sekha Marla gave me a fantastic tour. One of the things they spoke about was having separate areas as people walk into the breast care unit for those who are having treatment for breast cancer and those who are there for a mammogram, because it scares women to go to the unit if they are not confident about what they are there for. Does my hon. Friend agree that although more scans, more mammograms and better support are important, something as fundamental as building design is integral in making sure that women take up the offer to get their mammogram?

Lee Pitcher: My hon. Friend makes a valid point. The environment that people first walk into makes a massive difference in how they feel about their screening. I went to one of those units with my wife only a couple of weeks ago—she had a lump in her breast—and the warm welcome that she got as we walked in was so amazing; it put her at ease and it put me at ease so I could support her, and it made the whole experience as good as it could possibly be. I am also thankful to say that she is doing very well.

Will the Minister provide an update on what the Government are doing to ensure that the people who can already go for tests go for them? No woman should wait for a screening letter if she notices a lump, a change in shape, skin changes or anything that does not feel right. Whatever their age, they should contact their GP. Early diagnosis gives people more options, more time and often the chance to see children and grandchildren grow up. That is why this petition matters, and that is why, ultimately, we need to act on it.

6.16 pm

Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for her thoughtful opening remarks. I pay tribute to all those affected by breast cancer, those facing diagnosis, and their families, friends and carers who stand beside them. It is their experiences that make this debate so important. I also pay tribute to my constituents for signing this petition, and I thank the petitioner for starting it in the first place.

I welcome the Government's ambition for the national cancer plan, which commits the NHS to ensuring that, by 2035, 75% of people diagnosed with cancer will be cancer-free and living well five years after diagnosis. The plan will also develop further AI-assisted interpretation of images for suspected breast cancer diagnosis, and it will help us to detect breast cancer in women under 50 with denser breast tissue.

Under the last Government, cancer performance targets had not been met since 2014, leaving too many women facing delays and poor health outcomes. However, I know

that my constituents want this Government to go further and to include women aged 40 in routine invitations for breast cancer screening. According to CoppaFeel!, cases of breast cancer in under-50s are on the rise. A recent report states that we have seen a 5% increase in the last year. Patients under 50 are more likely to have their symptoms missed and to be diagnosed at a later stage in their cancer journey compared with those over 50.

That issue is even more pronounced for women from minority and ethnic backgrounds and for those from deprived and rural areas, who have less access to screening opportunities in their communities. Additional public health attention needs to be paid to that. According to Breast Cancer Research, those groups are 10% more likely to begin treatment after the cancer has already become invasive and 20% more likely to require a mastectomy.

To achieve our cancer outcome aspirations, I ask the Minister to extend routine mammogram invitations to women from the age of 40. I hope she will also consider the roll-out of alternative diagnostic measures that will affect the diagnosis of younger women.

6.19 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for introducing this important debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, of which I am also a member. Cancer is an issue that touches most of us, nearly every single day. No doubt we will all have had a friend or family member with cancer, and I am grateful that this petition has given us the opportunity to debate such an important issue.

This is an extremely poignant debate for me, as I lost two friends to cancer at the end of last year: Russell Brown, who served the Worth Valley as a district councillor on Bradford council, and Chris Graham, a former Keighley town councillor who served the Longley and Parkwood wards. Their recent losses are still felt very much across the communities that I am lucky enough to represent.

We have rightly had several recent opportunities to debate the issue of cancer, but today's debate is particularly important, as breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed in women in the United Kingdom and the second most common cancer overall, with around 60,000 new cases and 11,200 deaths each year. That equates to about 31 deaths every single day, which is far too many.

This important petition calls for early diagnosis, which is crucial. According to Cancer Research UK, 76.6% of women survive for 10 years or more after being diagnosed, and 85% of those are diagnosed at an early stage. I agree with the petition, and I thank Gemma Reeves for starting it, as well all those who kindly put their name to it, including from across my constituency.

It is right to call for early screening at the age of 40. There is compelling evidence that early detection saves lives. Breast cancers identified at an early stage are genuinely smaller and less likely to have spread, and they require less aggressive treatment. Early diagnosis and early screening are key. Early diagnosis can not only improve survival rates, but it reduces the physical and psychological burden associated with advanced diagnosis and the disease spreading.

It is equally important, however, to acknowledge that screening for breast cancer is not a one-size-fits-all approach. Screening for younger women generally produces less accurate mammograms because the tissue is denser, making cancers more difficult to detect and increasing the risk of false positives, but it should still happen. I repeat the petitioners' call for early diagnosis. It is incredibly important.

My sister was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 36. She has been through chemotherapy, radiotherapy and surgery, and I am pleased to say that she is on the mend, but that is another example of someone being diagnosed before the age of 40. If there is an historical family association with breast cancer, those under 40 should have the opportunity for early diagnosis. I agree with the petitioners that having a repeat opportunity of screening for annual check-ups rather than every three years is important.

Access to screening is not just about age; it is about ensuring that those who are eligible for screening are aware of it and choose to take part. I have major concerns about the lack of uptake across certain groups. There is 81% uptake for breast cancer screening in the least deprived areas, compared with 56% in the most deprived areas. I know that the Minister cares deeply about the issue and I commend her for her work on it; the cause is close to her heart. I would be keen to understand from her how the Government are looking to tackle that discrepancy. I would also like to understand whether there is a plan to roll out an annual screening programme rather than just a three yearly one.

Ultimately, I know that all hon. Members participating in the debate share the objectives of reducing deaths from breast cancer and ensuring that women receive the best possible care, but they cannot be achieved without a fully funded long-term workforce plan, alongside a clear, funded milestone to show how and when patients will see improvement.

I put on record my thanks to the volunteers, campaigners and professionals, including the mobile cancer screening units that operate in my constituency of Keighley and Ilkley as part of the Airedale hospital team, for their incredible and tireless work to help and support patients. I would like to understand whether the petition's aims are part of the Government's ambitions under their 10-year health plan. This poignant petition asks the Government for the right things, and, given the amount of correspondence I have received from petitioners and residents across my constituency, it has my backing.

6.25 pm

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): You will not be surprised to hear, Mr Vickers, that it is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for the way in which she introduced the debate and engaged with the petitioners.

The UK's breast screening programme is one of the greatest successes of our NHS. In Scotland, around 130 lives are saved each year through screening alone. The programme provides critical early diagnoses, improving treatment options and patient outcomes. Even in the worst cases, early diagnosis can give women precious extra time with their family and friends. However, the petition asks whether the current programme is enough. The screening used for those between the ages of 50 and 71

does not account for the fact that one in six people diagnosed with breast cancer each year are below the age of 50. Many more are diagnosed later, and tragically, diagnoses often come too late.

Studies from the USA show that women who are diagnosed with breast cancer when they are under 40 are 40% more likely to die from their cancer, and in the UK, breast cancer is the leading killer of women between the ages of 29 and 40. Worse still, the charity CoppaFeel! tells us that when women present to a healthcare professional with breast cancer symptoms, they are "routinely dismissed"—no doubt as menopausal, as often happens to women—creating missed opportunities for treatment. Sadly, those missed opportunities will only increase with the rate of breast cancer in young women, which, as we have heard, is already increasing. Although rates of breast cancer are increasing in all age groups, the incidence rates in younger women are growing faster than the rates in older women. Those facts should lead us to ask whether it is time to reconsider our current approach to screening.

I recognise that the petition's proposal to transition to annual screening and to lower the screening age could present significant challenges for the NHS. Annual testing would require significant additional resources and patient buy-in, and younger women's breasts are often denser and therefore harder to scan, which throws up more anxiety-inducing false positives. However, those challenges should not discourage us from doing more to support these women. Innovations such as the seven-minute risk assessments proposed by CoppaFeel! could help us to improve and expand targeted screening to younger women with a predisposition to breast cancer, and increased resources and publicity will drive up uptake among all women.

To close, I want to recognise the work of CoppaFeel! and Asda, as well as the House of Hope in my constituency. The report CoppaFeel! published on the impact of a breast cancer diagnosis on younger patients has informed many hon. Members in this debate, and I pay tribute to its partnership with Asda, in their Tickled Pink campaign. In Edinburgh South West last year, Asda Chesser donated £2,700 to the House of Hope in Gorgie. The House of Hope is Scotland's first bespoke support centre for those living with cancer. It provides care rather than treatment, and supports women and their families. The centre provides life-enhancing support every day, and the impact it has had in just its first year of operation cannot be understated.

The House of Hope would not be what it is without the commitment of its founder, Lisa Fleming, who, since her diagnosis at age 33, has been a tireless advocate for the cancer community. I am proud to call her my constituent. This morning, she and her mother—both are formidable—were on my Facebook page, trying to influence this debate. When I met her mother a week or two ago, I was reminded that when a young woman gets breast cancer, her loved ones, including her children and parents, are affected by it. That wider economic impact should be taken into account in our decision making.

It is through work like Lisa's and, I hope, a renewed commitment from the Minister to improve our screening processes that we can continue to take steps against this terrible disease. I feel obliged to put a question to the Minister, and I hope she will promise me this. The next time she visits Edinburgh, will she stop her ministerial limousine at the House of Hope and pay Lisa a visit?

6.30 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for presenting this important debate and the Minister for attending. I congratulate Gemma Reeves on organising this well-supported petition and her campaigning on this very important issue. Being diagnosed with breast cancer is a bewildering and terrifying experience for far too many people, as many of us know. Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK. Around 60,000 people are diagnosed with breast cancer every year, and one in seven women will receive such a diagnosis during their lifetime. Early diagnosis is crucial. Detecting breast cancer sooner gives people the best chance of successful treatment and ultimately saves lives.

In my own case, I had to visit my GP twice before receiving a diagnosis. Between visits to the GP, the cancer spread to my lymph glands. The result of that spread still causes issues for me today, 18 years later. Thankfully my treatment was successful, but many others are not so fortunate because of delays in diagnosis. More than 95% of people diagnosed at stage 1 survive for at least five years compared with around 25% diagnosed at stage 4. That is why breast screening is so important.

The Marmot review estimated that the current screening programme prevents around 1,300 deaths every year, yet uptake remains too low, particularly in England, where rates lag behind the devolved nations and pre-pandemic levels. Almost 30% of eligible women are not attending screening appointments. Around 600,000 women are missing the opportunity for early detection. Cancer Research UK found that concerns about pain are the most common barrier to attending. Others miss invitations, struggle to find the time or remain unconvinced of the benefits. Uptake is even lower in deprived communities, worsening existing inequalities in cancer outcomes. In England in 2025, screening uptake was 65% in the most deprived areas, compared with 75% in the least deprived areas.

The Government need to work on ideas to improve access to screening, particularly where uptake is lowest. Simple measures such as follow-up invitations, culturally appropriate information and community-based pop-up screening services could make a real difference by meeting people where they are and at times that work for them. Will the Minister outline what plans the Government might have to increase screening uptake, particularly through community-based services?

Improving uptake alone, though, is not enough. Serious workforce shortages and outdated equipment continue to delay diagnosis and treatment. Too much diagnostic equipment is ageing or even no longer fit for purpose. Many areas face shortages of radiotherapy capacity, faulty mammography equipment and insufficient staff to operate machines consistently. I have long called for greater investment in the NHS workforce, including during a debate in Westminster Hall last year. Although I welcome the Government's national cancer plan, the commitment to provide 28 new radiotherapy machines falls well short of what is actually needed. Instead, the Government should be looking to provide at least 200 additional machines; that is what is required to tackle the backlog and ensure timely diagnosis and treatment. That is why my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I have

called for a 10-year capital investment programme so that every cancer patient can benefit from faster, more accurate diagnostics and treatment.

What further plans do the Government have to invest in both the workforce and the equipment needed to improve breast cancer outcomes? We know that breast cancer screening works and that early diagnosis saves lives. Now the Government must ensure that everyone can benefit by improving uptake and providing the investment that our cancer services urgently need.

6.35 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for introducing this debate. I also thank all those who signed the petition and who have campaigned to raise awareness of this issue.

Breast cancer is one of the most common cancers in women in the UK. While there may be a lot of talk of statistics today, the impact of breast cancer is not a number on a chart or in a table; it is real life, and it is heartbreaking. It is a mother, daughter, sister, friend or colleague—almost every one of us knows someone whose life has been touched by this terrible disease. We know that the earlier breast cancer is detected, the greater the chance of successful treatment, and screening remains the route most likely to find breast cancer early. As we have heard, the 2012 Marmot review found that our screening programmes prevent 1,300 deaths from breast cancer every year, so I understand where the petitioners are coming from. Even one misdiagnosis feels like one too many. That concern is real, and it deserves to be taken seriously.

The stories of my friends Laura Turnbull, mum of Louis, Josh, Alfie and Zac and wife of Richard, and Anne Wise, mum of Louis and Lauren, have brought this home to me all too painfully. Both were under 50 and had reached remission at least once, but both sadly saw their cancer return in different forms, tragically cutting their lives short. I send love to their families—especially to Anne's, because it is her funeral on Saturday. Sadly, Laura and Anne are not alone. More than a decade ago, I lost another friend, Fiona Bennett. Her breast cancer also reached her before she was 50. These stories are powerful reminders that breast cancer does not only affect older women, and explain why so many people are asking what more can be done.

That is why we should follow the science. As new evidence emerges, technology improves and we learn more about detecting breast cancer earlier and more accurately, our screening programme should continue to evolve to ensure that it delivers the very best benefits to our patients. Alongside that, we must not lose sight of the opportunity we already have. In 2025, only 70% of Portsmouth women aged 53 to 70 had attended a breast screening in the last 36 months. That is more than 4% behind the average of local authority districts in the south-east, and the gap has been widening in recent years. Whatever changes may come in the future, we must also make sure that every woman who is currently eligible takes up the opportunity to be screened.

Improving the uptake of screening among those already eligible must be an absolute priority, so I would like to ask the Minister how we are identifying barriers and what we are doing to break them down. Sadly, we know

that levels of deprivation directly affect screening attendance. That is why I welcome the Government's new cancer plan, which will include targeted campaigns to improve screening uptake in deprived and underserved communities, helping to ensure that where people live or what they earn does not determine their chance of cancer diagnosis. Can the Minister say more about that?

Unfortunately, after 14 years of Conservative mismanagement, the NHS has not met its cancer target since 2014. England's cancer survival rates have slipped behind those of many comparable countries. That is not good enough. It is so important that, as we discuss expanding access to breast screening, we also recognise that the quickest way to undermine that principle would be to move towards an insurance-based healthcare system, as advocated by Reform UK, which could alienate even more people and stop them taking up that screening opportunity for fear of what it would cost.

Labour has set out ambitious reforms to cancer diagnosis and treatment, which are expected to save more 320,000 lives over the plan's lifetime. More scanners and advances in diagnostic technology mean that we will have a real opportunity to diagnose cancers early and improve outcomes by shifting more healthcare into our communities and neighbourhoods. We can make screening more accessible and less daunting so that Portsmouth women will attend, whether through health hubs on the high street or having opening hours at weekends, in the early morning or evening, which would widen access. I would welcome working with the Minister on how we can get these diagnosis centres open in Portsmouth North, so that we can raise attendance from 70% to 100%.

This debate is not about choosing between improving today's screening programme and preparing for tomorrow—we must do both. We should continue to listen to clinicians, researchers and campaigners, and be prepared to strengthen and adapt programmes as the evidence develops. At the same time, we must ensure that every woman entitled to screening because of age, family history or symptoms is encouraged and supported to attend. The screening programme works only if people use it. Every invitation accepted is another chance to detect cancer early, another opportunity for less invasive treatment, and another family spared devastating news.

If we continue to improve the science, widen access where the evidence supports it and ensure that more eligible women come forward, we will save more lives and spare many more families the heartbreak of Laura's, Anne's and Fiona's.

6.40 pm

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for leading this debate.

Gemma Reeves is a breast cancer nurse at the Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother, my local hospital in Margate. She started a petition that I noticed on my Instagram feed a few months ago, which calls on the NHS to establish annual mammograms for 40-year-old women. I noticed that it was getting a lot of traction on my feed and that a lot of people I knew were signing up to it. I explored it more and wanted to understand where the policy would end up, but then—my colleagues will recognise this—it became another one of those campaigns I said I would do.

One day, however, I found that Gemma was up here in Westminster with her son, Mason, and I came to meet her in Central Lobby. She told me what she had seen as a breast cancer care nurse in the hospital in Margate, during the pandemic and since: an increase in the number of women under 50 presenting with breast cancer. What she saw corroborates research from CoppaFeel! showing that breast cancer in young women is on the rise. She became increasingly concerned that the people she was caring for could have had screening that might have meant that, when they finally presented at hospital, their cancer was not so advanced. More than half of all breast cancer cases in the UK occur in people outside the national screening age—one in six are under 50.

From having those conversations with Gemma, and since with the Minister, I know that many challenges come with tackling breast cancer in women under 50. We need to work out the best way of tackling breast cancer in younger women. I am delighted that the Minister met me, Gemma and her friends, who were previously her patients. They have become not just her friends but her co-campaigners, because they have experienced getting breast cancer under 50 and also wish that there had been some kind of screening to identify their cancer earlier.

We and many people contributing to this debate know that screening is currently designed for older women; mammograms are designed for women over 50. Therefore, if we are looking for a way of screening young women, we may need to think about and explore different kinds of technologies, from MRIs to ultrasound.

We also need to avoid false positives, as many of my colleagues have referred to. More women could end up fearing that they have breast cancer than actually have it if we introduce screening that produces false positives. We also need to recognise that, for many people, having an early test or check-in that includes things such as family history would enable them and their medical carers to spot the risks they are exposed to and decide whether they should go for early screening.

Whatever the answer, it is clear that the status quo is not acceptable, because it is not built for young people. It is also clear that the evidence on the occurrence of breast cancer in under-50s is out of date; the most recent evidence is from 2018. Therefore, I am absolutely delighted that Gemma has been able to come forward and lead this campaign, gathering so many signatures to her petition from across the country, particularly in east Kent. I hope that the Minister will take seriously her request not only to publish the evidence, but to act on it, and to find new ways of making sure that women younger than the current screening age of 50 are able to access screening to get their breast cancer spotted early.

One of our big missions in our mandate from the election was to tackle healthcare via prevention. Around 30% of breast cancers could be prevented through exercise, diet and alcohol control. Additionally, the earlier women are screened, the more likely it is that we can prevent illness and death. That is why I have supported Gemma in this campaign. I hope the Minister will be sympathetic to exploring further ways of making sure that young women can be confident that breast screenings will spot cancer early.

6.45 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for leading this important debate and setting out the argument so clearly. I welcome the petition upon which the debate is predicated, and I recognise the calls from the petitioners, including the 141 signatories from Mid Cheshire.

Any measures that can increase breast cancer diagnosis rates, improve treatment options, enhance survival and, ultimately, save lives must be considered carefully. A diagnosis of breast cancer is devastating at any stage, but when it comes too late—when opportunities for early detection have been missed—the consequences are profound and irreversible.

Behind every statistic is a person, a family, a future altered forever. Today, I want to focus on the story of my constituent Sarah. Sarah was identified as being at higher risk of developing breast cancer due to her family history. In March 2020, she took the responsible step of seeing her GP and was referred for genetic testing, but as the covid-19 pandemic took hold, all non-symptomatic breast screening, including family history assessments, was paused locally.

Sarah did everything right—she repeatedly followed up and sought answers, and was assured that she remained on a waiting list—but the appointment never came. Just over a year later, in May 2021, Sarah found a lump in her breast. Following investigations, she was diagnosed with triple negative breast cancer, an aggressive form of the disease. She underwent a mastectomy and chemotherapy, but even then her journey was marked by delays in test results and in the start of treatment. Less than a year later, in April 2022, Sarah discovered another lump. This time, the cancer had spread. What had once been treatable was now incurable; treatment could only manage it.

Again, delays followed—delays that no patient in such a fragile situation should ever endure. Nevertheless, Sarah wrote:

“I would like to make it clear that I very much appreciate the care and support I have received despite the obvious overwhelming and continuing pressures on the NHS. Almost every single NHS employee has been extremely kind and professional and have made many difficult experiences at least a little easier. They appear to share many of the frustrations.”

Tragically, Sarah passed away in May 2024, aged just 46.

Even in the face of her own mortality, Sarah fought for change. She spoke out about her experience and called for improvements to ensure timely testing and treatment. Crucially, she argued that non-symptomatic screening must never again be paused, even in times of crisis, because early diagnosis saves lives.

Sarah was absolutely right to highlight the significant impact that pausing non-symptomatic screening had on early diagnosis, treatment options and patient outcomes. Any disruption to early detection has lasting and devastating consequences. Her call for us to ensure that future pandemic preparedness protects vital screening services must be heeded. After Sarah's death, her husband Dave carried forward her campaign with extraordinary courage and determination. His advocacy, born of grief, was powerful and inspiring, but tragically Dave took his own life a few short months ago.

We cannot let their story end here. Their experience lays bare the cost of delay, the cost of inaction and the cost of systems that fail to prioritise early diagnosis. We must act by strengthening screening programmes, ensuring resilience in times of crisis and delivering timely care for every patient. Let this be the legacy of Sarah and Dave: a legacy not of loss alone, but of change. We owe it to them, and to every family, to ensure that no one else endures what they did.

6.49 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Vickers. I thank the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for leading this important petition debate on NHS breast screening.

It is hard to follow the passionate speech by the hon. Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), but this is important, because there are about 60,000 new cases of breast cancer in the UK each year. Breast cancer represents 15% of all new cancer cases and 30% of all new female cancer cases. It is the most common type of cancer among women: a woman is diagnosed with breast cancer every nine minutes and there are approximately 11,200 deaths due to breast cancer each year in the UK. The human costs behind those statistics cannot be overstated. In the short span of today's debate, 10 women will be diagnosed with breast cancer and two will tragically lose their lives to the disease.

Over recent decades, we have made huge strides in the diagnosis and treatment of breast cancer. It is remarkable that approximately 76% of women now survive for 10 years or more following their diagnosis. But as with any cancer, diagnosing breast cancer early remains vital and saves lives. Breast screening remains the most effective way to detect cancer at an early stage, which is also when treatment is most likely to succeed. More than 95% of people diagnosed at stage 1 will survive for at least five years, compared with about 25% diagnosed at stage 4.

The Marmot review estimated that the current screening programme prevents about 1,300 deaths a year. In 2024-25, about 2.75 million women aged 50 to 71 were invited to be screened—a 10% increase on the previous year—and 2.15 million of them took the offer up. Nearly 20,000 women had breast cancer detected through that screening, but as those figures highlight, around 600,000 women did not take up the essential offer of breast cancer screening.

Recent screening data reveals an alarming trend of women not attending their first screening appointment. The impact of not taking up the screening offer only compounds the issue. Women who do not attend their first breast cancer screening appointment are much less likely to take up subsequent screening invitations. In 2024-25, only 20.9% of women in England who had never previously taken up screening invitations attended, compared with the 89.1% uptake among women who had been screened in the last five years. Since the creation of the modern NHS breast screening programme, uptake for first-time screening invitations has never reached 70%.

Had the screening uptake level reached the NHS achievable standard target of 80% in 2024-25, over a quarter of a million more women would have undergone routine screening, and that would have resulted in an estimated additional 2,228 cases of breast cancer

being found. The scale of the missed opportunity to catch more cancer early is unacceptable, and women and their loved ones are paying the tragic price. I urge anyone who is eligible to take up the offer of breast cancer screening.

The Liberal Democrats are clear that so much more must be done to ensure that every eligible woman attends screening when invited, particularly in England, where uptake is lagging behind the devolved nations and pre-pandemic levels. There are many reasons why women do not attend their breast cancer screening appointments, including misconceptions about the screening process and breast cancer, the fear of receiving a diagnosis, and cultural beliefs and attitudes. Others may not be able to attend due to everyday challenges such as limited transport, clashing work schedules or the burden of caring responsibilities. Health inequalities also affect screening uptake. Women from ethnic minority communities, those living in disadvantaged areas and women with disabilities often face additional barriers that reduce their access to breast screening services.

What actions are the Labour Government taking to improve screening uptake nationally, particularly among disenfranchised women? What steps are the Government actively taking to support pop-up screening initiatives in community settings, and what is being done to ensure that those vital health services are meeting people where they are and at times that work for them? What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that women are able to receive the best screening test for their individual health needs? That might include, for example, providing women with an increased risk of breast cancer with an ultrasound if they are unable to have an MRI or they have dense breasts. That is particularly relevant to younger women with an increased risk, for whom an ultrasound will provide greater accuracy in screening their dense breast tissue. Mammograms can struggle to identify cancer in dense breasts, as cancers and dense tissue present in exactly the same way on imaging.

The Liberal Democrats are also very concerned that so much NHS equipment, including diagnostic and scanning equipment, is out of date and decrepit. A quarter of England's 280 radiotherapy machines are now operating beyond their 10-year lifespan, with a further 26 due to exceed the recommended lifespan by 2027. England has fewer radiotherapy machines than comparable European countries. Radiotherapy UK's research reveals that England has just 4.8 linear accelerator machines per million population, well behind France at 8.5 and Italy at 6.9.

Radiotherapy lacks clear accountability. While responsibility for commissioning it sits with integrated care boards, freedom of information requests found that around 70% of ICBs do not have a named person responsible for radiotherapy. Access to radiotherapy is well below international expectations. Around 52% to 53% of cancer patients are estimated to need radiotherapy, but only around 35% receive it in England. In some areas, the figure is as low as 22%. Radiotherapy also has the longest waiting times. Only around four in 10 patients—and, in some areas of the country, as few as two in 10—receive radiotherapy on time.

Whether it is radiotherapy deserts or the mammogram machine glitch that left 7,000 women in parts of Essex without a screening service for almost two months, breast cancer patients are routinely being let down by faulty and inaccessible equipment. That is unacceptable

and we must take action now. To address that, the Liberal Democrats are campaigning for a 10-year capital investment programme, under which all patients, including women with breast cancer, would benefit from easier access to newer, quicker and more accurate machines.

Alongside screening, speed and quality of treatment are central to increasing breast cancer survival rates. The Liberal Democrats would introduce a guarantee that 100% of patients would be able to start treatment within 62 days of urgent referral. We would also replace the ageing radiotherapy machines and increase their numbers to guarantee that no one must travel ridiculous distances to receive the treatment that they desperately need. Currently, 3.4 million people in England live further away from a radiotherapy centre than the NHS target of 45 minutes.

Taking those steps now is vital. We need to prepare our local cancer services for the future, as demand is increasing. Cancer cases are expected to rise by about 30% by 2040, and the new national screening programme is likely to identify more patients who need curative radiotherapy treatment. Without urgent action, the existing pressures on radiotherapy services will only worsen. We would also recruit more cancer nurses so that every patient had a dedicated specialist supporting them throughout their treatment, and halve the time for new treatments to reach patients by expanding the capacity of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency.

The future looks bright, with early pilots and trials using AI to analyse mammograms showing promising signs of potential improvement in both the speed and the accuracy of screening, but we must support our life sciences sector much more to champion vital research and innovation. The Liberal Democrats would pass a cancer survival research Act requiring the Government to co-ordinate and ensure funding for research into the cancers with the lowest survival rates.

I want to reflect on the 10 women who were diagnosed with breast cancer and the two who will have tragically lost their lives to the disease in the short span of today's debate. For them and the thousands of people—mostly women, but also men—living with breast cancer and their loved ones, I urge the Minister to carefully consider the important points and perspectives raised in the debate.

6.58 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Vickers. I congratulate Gemma Reeves on bringing forward the petition and the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) on introducing this important debate. It has been very moving to hear so many stories from hon. Members on both sides of the House reminding us of the human cost of this disease.

Breast cancer is very common, as other Members have said, affecting one in seven women during their lifetime. The Minister and I have had a number of debates in this Chamber about various diseases and forms of cancer. One of the core principles we often discuss is that early diagnosis saves lives. Cancer Research UK says that 85% of women who live more than 10 years after a diagnosis of breast cancer were diagnosed at stage 1 or 2—the earlier stages to be diagnosed at. It was for that reason, and on that principle, that the UK introduced

[Dr Caroline Johnson]

the world's first national screening programme for breast cancer in 1988. Since then, much has changed. In particular, survival rates have improved dramatically. Now, 76.6% live more than 10 years; the figure was very much lower in the 1980s.

There are still some issues with screening, however, as hon. Members have said. One is that women with denser breasts find it more difficult to locate lumps, and when doing mammograms, it can be more difficult to locate cancerous tumours. Will the Minister update the House on what work has been done on using ultrasounds and MRIs to identify tumours in women with denser breasts? I understand that the National Screening Council is looking at this subject in detail. When is it due to report its findings to the Minister, and when does she intend to bring them to the House?

The effectiveness of treatment has improved, but the risk of overtreatment is higher in younger women. The incidence of the disease is increasing in younger and older women: the Cancer Research UK website says that the rate has increased by 12% in women aged between 25 and 49, and by 72% in women aged between 65 and 69. Should younger women therefore now receive screening, and should older women receive more frequent screening?

The cancer plan, which the Government published earlier this year, said that they will engage with manufacturers to look at mammograms that are more accessible to those with a physical disability, who at the moment struggle to receive their screening. Will the Minister update the House on the engagement she has had with manufacturers and on the progress that has been made?

The age trial in Oxford is looking at women aged between 47 and 49, and between 71 and 73—the ages just outside the current range of screening. I understand that early results are due in December 2026. Has the Minister had any indication of the results yet, and is she preparing for any results that come forward? Has she engaged with the people running that important trial?

Community diagnostic centres, which were initiated by the previous Government and rolled out across the country, provide screening close to people's homes, which makes it much easier for them to attend. Will the Minister update us on how she is improving the number of CDCs available across the country?

The Government have talked about the shifts that they want to produce in healthcare, one of which is about prevention. According to the Cancer Research UK website, 23% of breast cancer cases are preventable. Will the Minister update us on what she is doing to reduce the number of preventable cases of breast cancer?

Many hon. Members have talked about attendance at screening tests. The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) spoke about some of the reasons why women do not attend screening. It is important that we understand why about a third of women do not attend. It is only by understanding what puts women off and makes them not attend that we can improve the services so that more women do attend. It was sobering to hear how many lives could be saved if more women attended screening. How are we making screening more accessible for women? Are we ensuring that women know that it is

happening and that they need it? Do they understand the benefits of it? I would be interested to hear the Minister's thoughts.

Another shift relates to the digital NHS. AI provides us with a number of ways to improve breast cancer screening and treatment. It could help us to understand who should be invited to screening and how often, and it can help when looking at mammogram scans. A few years ago, the Health and Social Care Committee visited Stanford in California and looked at the AI there. We saw a study comparing two radiology consultants looking at a scan, two AI computers using two different programmes, and a person and an AI computer. It discovered that the person and the AI computer were the most accurate. That can help to reduce the number of people we need in the workforce and, importantly, can improve the accuracy of screening results.

That brings me on to the workforce. We know that the Government have a workforce plan, although its publication has been much delayed. We have been told repeatedly over the past few weeks that it has moved to "imminent" status—imminent being quicker than soon—but we do not know when imminent is. Does that mean it will be published before the summer, or do we need to wait for the new Prime Minister to make a decision? It would be helpful to know that from the Minister. As we heard about radiology and radiotherapy, the workforce is incredibly important. We need a thorough plan, otherwise we will have recommendations from the NSC for screening and no people to provide that care.

I also wanted to raise with the Minister the Lobular Moon Shot Project. We have discussed before the importance of research into lobular breast cancer, which is more difficult to diagnose and treat. The last time we spoke about this, the Minister was looking at research projects that the Government could fund to identify new treatments and ways of screening for this disease, hopefully saving lives. Will she update us on how she is getting along with that?

Much of my time at the moment is spent with another Health Minister—the Minister for Secondary Care, the hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth)—in Committee Room 9, debating the Health Bill. That is where I will be tomorrow. The Bill relates to one of the important organisational factors in screening. At the moment, screening programmes are generally organised by NHS England, which is being abolished. NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care wrote a letter in March saying that commissioning responsibility will be directly delegated to ICBs, in the same way that they are currently delegated to NHSE, by the Secretary of State. Does the Minister expect that to cause any disruption to the breast screening programme?

Integrated care boards have had their budgets cut by 50% just as they are asked to take on this work. We know that they are merging and reorganising in cells. The Government's plans are that they should follow the mayoral authority boundaries, but the mergers that have taken place so far do not follow those boundaries. There is therefore a risk that we will need reorganisation all over again. Does the Minister think that that will have an effect on the screening programme? If so, what is she doing to mitigate that effect to ensure that as many people as possible get the very best screening and we can reduce the number of people suffering from the disease?

The screening programme offers a real opportunity to diagnose, treat early and save lives, but it needs to be delivered well. We need to ensure that the right people get the right type of screening at the right age, and at the right frequency. I will be interested to hear the Minister's response.

7.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mrs Sharon Hodgson): How long do I have to speak? I have a lot to get through; let us see if I can make it.

I start by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington), her constituent Gemma, Gemma's son, Mason, and the other ladies in the Public Gallery today for their campaigning on this petition and for gathering so many signatures that we can debate it. I pay tribute to them and thank them for joining us. I was very pleased to meet them last month to discuss this important issue.

I pay tribute to my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton). I commend her constant courage in speaking so openly about her experience of breast cancer. I send my very best wishes to her throughout her ongoing treatment.

Behind all the figures we are discussing today, there are women, men, families and communities who have been affected by breast cancer in the most difficult and personal of ways. I pay tribute to NHS staff in breast screening services across the country, who work tirelessly to ensure that women and men are offered this important preventive measure.

Last year, our highly effective NHS breast screening programme screened nearly 2 million women. Each year, the programme is estimated to save 1,300 lives, but we must be honest about the scale of the challenge. Around 11,500 women still die from breast cancer each year. Many thousands more go through treatment, with all the fear, uncertainty and disruption that brings for them and the people who love them. That is why I am clear: we need to do more and will do more.

The national cancer plan published earlier this year sets out how we will improve outcomes for breast cancer patients. We will speed up diagnosis and treatment, ensure that patients can access the latest treatments and technology and, ultimately, drive up this country's cancer survival rates. The plan commits to rolling out breast pain clinics nationally by the end of the year. It also builds on successful initiatives such as mobile breast screening units. Cancer alliances will receive funding to work proactively with local communities and providers so that more cancers are diagnosed earlier.

I will now speak to points that were raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur), the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones), my hon. Friends the Members for Broxtowe (Juliet Campbell) and for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire)—there might have been others, but those are the names I scribbled down. They raised issues about serving ethnic minority communities as well as underserved, deprived communities.

Building on successful initiatives such as mobile breast screening, as I mentioned, cancer alliances will receive funding and work proactively with local communities and providers to improve early diagnosis rates. They will focus on increasing people's awareness of symptoms, and support primary care to spot the signs of cancer early. The work will also include reducing the gap in screening uptake between the most and least deprived areas. There will be particular efforts to reach ethnic minority communities and underserved groups because no one should be left behind.

The NHS also runs its "Help Us, Help You" campaign in England, which helps to increase knowledge of breast cancer symptoms and address barriers to acting on them, as well as encouraging people to come forward to see their GP as soon as possible. I understand why many people ask whether screening should begin at a younger age. It is a deeply human question that is often asked by people who have seen the impact of breast cancer at first hand. We are looking carefully at the evidence, but the picture is complex. I will come on to everything about that that has been raised.

As we have heard, younger women tend to have denser breast tissue, which can make mammography less effective. Screening can save lives, but it can also cause harm through false positives, unnecessary tests, avoidable anxiety and overdiagnosis. That is why decisions must be made carefully and on the basis of robust evidence. My hon. Friends the Members for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), for Broxtowe and for Edinburgh South West, as well as other colleagues, no doubt, raised that issue. As we know, some women will have denser breast tissue and unfortunately that makes mammography less effective because a potential cancer can be harder to spot. We are working to find the best solutions to that problem.

A study called BRAID—breast screening risk adaptive imaging for density—is looking into whether supplementary imaging techniques like MRI or ultrasound could be used for women with dense breast tissue. The independent UK National Screening Committee is in contact with the researchers and reviews the evidence as it becomes available. Ministers in the Department and across the Government will consider its recommendations as soon as they are made.

A number of colleagues asked about the AgeX breast screening trial, which is the biggest trial of its kind ever undertaken. It will provide robust evidence about the effectiveness of screening in age groups above and below the current screening age. The trial has been looking at the effectiveness of offering some women one extra screening between the ages of 47 and 49 and one between the ages of 71 and 73. AgeX is the biggest trial of its kind ever to be undertaken and will provide robust evidence about the effectiveness, benefits and harms of screening in those age groups. The UK NSC will review the publication of the AgeX extension trial when it reports. The trial began in 2009, and results are expected in 2027, something the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) asked about.

Screening trials require extended follow-up periods to generate robust evidence on whether screening reduces disease or death, while also assessing any potential long-term harms. The UK NSC continuously monitors emerging evidence through horizon scanning and maintains active engagement with international peers. Should robust

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

evidence regarding the extension of breast screening age thresholds become available, the committee will look at it right away. In the meantime, NHS England has produced a suite of public-facing information resources, communicating that women, especially those aged 71 or over, can have screening every three years if they so wish.

The hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley also asked why we do not screen annually. The three-year intervals of the national breast screening programme are based on a successful Swedish trial. The frequency of screening balances the risk of harm from over-diagnosis with the benefits of early detection, and women at high risk of breast cancer are often called more frequently.

Robbie Moore: I want a bit of clarity from the Minister, because the petitioners are calling on the Government to lower the age at which women are first called for breast cancer screening to 40 and to roll out screening on an annual basis rather than every three years. I know that they are not intending to do that, because we have seen the written response from them in advance of the debate, but what further evidence do the Government need to be able to achieve what the petitioners are asking?

Mrs Hodgson: As I said, the AgeX trial has been running since 2009 and has been researching the efficacy of providing breast cancer screening to people above and below the current screening age. It is due to report next year, so hopefully it will provide the further evidence that is necessary. It is already in train. These decisions are not taken lightly, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman appreciates.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), asked me about AI. We are supporting the early detection using information technology in health, or EDITH, trial. It will test new AI technologies that could enable one specialist—rather than two, as is currently required—to complete a mammogram screening process, increasing capacity in the screening system while maintaining patient safety.

We are entering a new era in science and technology. Advances in data, genomics and predictive analytics will allow the NHS to deliver care that is more personalised, more proactive and better matched to each person's individual risk. New tools, such as liquid biopsies and other non-invasive tests, may help us to detect cancer much earlier, and often before symptoms appear. The NHS is preparing to seize those breakthroughs so that patients can benefit from the full power of modern innovation.

The national cancer plan has identified priority areas to accelerate access to new technologies, including artificial intelligence-assisted interpretation of pathology images for suspected breast cancer diagnosis. We will continue to horizon-scan for better methods of screening and to build the evidence base for any future changes. Our ambition is clear—to save more lives, to diagnose cancer earlier and to do so in a way that brings more benefit than harm.

Ms Billington: I am interested in the possibilities of AI helping with detection and speeding up that process, freeing up resources to be directed into earlier detection by focusing on screening for younger women. If we are

to harness the potential of AI, surely the first thing that we should do is to redirect the resources that are saved into ensuring that we can save more lives, potentially those of the young women who have campaigned so strongly on this petition.

Mrs Hodgson: Yes; saving more lives and freeing up resources is exactly what we should be doing. In relation to the AgeX trial evidence and other evidence that is being looked at, that will be happening within the next year. Hopefully for my hon. Friend and others here today and the campaigners, the evidence will be looked at and, if it is strong enough, things will change.

Colleagues raised a number of other issues that I want to touch on. The hon. Member for Wokingham, chair of the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer, always reminds us that it is not just women who are affected. Sixty thousand people a year are diagnosed with breast cancer, and a small proportion of that number will be men. It is always important that we remember that, and he is doing an amazing job as chair of the all-party group. If I am here and the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), who speaks for the Opposition, is here, the hon. Gentleman is often here as well—we have become a regular trio in these debates on a Monday.

I must mention my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), who gave a very emotional speech about his constituent Sarah and her husband David. What happened was so tragic. I thank my hon. Friend for sharing that, and I want him to know that all of us here having heard it already means that it was not in vain. He said that he wanted to make sure that their story had been heard—how tragic it was, its consequences, and how long-lasting the effect of this awful disease is, not just on those who suffer, but on the wider family.

My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North asked me about cancer waiting times more broadly, and I cannot let this moment go without stressing that cancer patients are now getting diagnosed in the shortest time on record. I am pleased to report that.

The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham raised the very important issue of women with physical disabilities. We have spoken about this before. The NHS has an obligation to make appropriate accommodations for people with disabilities, as I know she is aware. Unfortunately, however, some mammography machines are not a good design for people in wheelchairs and those who cannot support their own torso. For women for whom mammography is not an option, a physical exam can still be offered; and where a GP is concerned about the findings following a physical exam, the woman can be referred for further diagnostic tests. The NHS is talking with manufacturers about amending the design of mammography machines, and NHS England is considering whether alternative testing tools could be used instead of a mammogram in those specific circumstances.

I can reassure the hon. Lady that the workforce plan is still imminent; I have nothing further to add on that. She mentioned lobular breast cancer and the Moon Shot project. As she is aware, in April Lord Vallance, the Minister for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear, and I, alongside NIHR and MRC representatives, met the Lobular Moon Shot Project team to discuss how best to progress research in this area.

Following that meeting, a scientific roundtable on lobular breast cancer was organised earlier this month. Lord Vallance hosted the roundtable, and Professor Patrick Chinnery, executive chair of the MRC, chaired a discussion considering the challenges and opportunities for progress in invasive lobular breast cancer research. The NIHR is actively encouraging high-quality, ambitious research proposals on lobular breast cancer, having launched a highlight notice in late 2025. We hope that the team will make an application for that.

I cannot finish my speech without stating one message as clearly as I can. If hon. Members or their constituents are, at any time, worried about breast cancer symptoms, such as a lump, an area of thickened tissue in the breast or any change in how their breasts look or feel, no matter what age they may be, I say this: “Please do not wait to be offered screening. Please contact your GP at any stage.” Coming forward early, as we know—and as Gemma and her friends know more than most—can make all the difference. I want to make sure that message goes out loud and clear.

7.26 pm

Irene Campbell: It has been a privilege to open and close such an important debate. We have heard from many Members and the Minister about how important early diagnosis and treatment are for breast cancer, and how key it is that we tackle this issue quickly and effectively. We have also heard about health inequalities and deprivation, and how they can impact the take-up of screening opportunities. We must do more to address that.

The NHS 10-year plan has committed to diagnosing 75% of cancers early by 2028, and the national cancer plan has a 75% five-year survival target for all cancers. This is an area that is very important to so many people across the UK, and we must do all we can as a Government to improve recovery and survival from cancer, particularly the most common type of cancer in women.

I would like to finish by thanking the petitioner, Gemma Reeves, again and congratulating her on gathering over 106,000 signatures, which is a great achievement.

I would also like to thank Lily Parsey, Sophie Conway and Lily Ewin from CoppaFeel!, Nele Gewert and Hannah Maybour from Breast Cancer Now, Cristina Visintin and Ros Given-Wilson from the UK National Screening Committee, and Professor Sacha Howell and Sarah Hindmarch from Manchester University for meeting me and my team before this debate.

Finally, as always, I thank the staff of the Petitions Committee, who work tirelessly every week to make sure that these debates go ahead in such a smooth and effective way.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 742179 relating to NHS breast screening.

7.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 29 June 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership: June 2026 Update

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): In Melbourne, Australia, at the 2025 comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership ministerial commission meeting

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cptpp-joint-ministerial-statement-in-melbourne-21-november-2025>

CPTPP Ministers identified that Indonesia, the Philippines, and the United Arab Emirates are in line with the Auckland principles—principles that CPTPP parties consider when assessing accession applications. At that same meeting, CPTPP Ministers committed to meeting again in the first half of 2026 to take further decisions on these three accession applicants, as appropriate.

Ministerial commission meeting - 26 June

In the early hours of 26 June 2026, I attended a virtual commission meeting alongside CPTPP Ministers and representatives; to meet the commitment we made in Melbourne. At this meeting we approved by consensus to begin preparatory discussions on accessions with Indonesia, the Philippines, and the United Arab Emirates. We have tasked CPTPP officials to commence these discussions over the coming months.

At the commission meeting, CPTPP Ministers also:

Noted the substantive conclusion of negotiations with Costa Rica and that we have commenced Uruguay's accession working group.

Approved the establishment of an ad hoc working group to enhance cooperation on rules of origin, customs administration and trade facilitation to maintain a fair and transparent trading environment.

Took note of ongoing work to upgrade the CPTPP agreement following the general review.

Recommitted to the work underway in dialogues between CPTPP parties and the EU and ASEAN.

The full joint ministerial statement of the meeting outcomes can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cptpp-joint-ministerial-statement-from-the-10th-commission-meeting-26-june-2026/comprehensive-and-progressive-agreement-for-trans-pacific-partnership-cptpp-joint-ministerial-statement-on-expansion-implementation-and-co-operation>

Energy security and supply chains for essential energy products and other impacted commodities

At the same meeting, CPTPP Ministers issued a joint ministerial statement emphasising the importance of maintaining free and open markets and rules-based trade in energy and other impacted products, in light of recent global disruptions:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/cptpp-joint-ministerial-statement-on-energy-security-and-supply-chains-for-essential-energy-products-and-other-impacted-products/comprehensive-and-progressive-agreement-for-trans-pacific-partnership-cptpp-joint-ministerial-statement-on-energy-security-and-supply-chains-for-ess>

Next steps

CPTPP Ministers will convene again towards the end of this year for the CPTPP commission meeting under Vietnam's chairship, I look forward to keeping the House updated on future CPTPP developments.

[HCWS154]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Resident Doctors: End of Industrial Action

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (James Murray): I am pleased to inform the House that the Government and the British Medical Association's resident doctors committee have agreed a deal to resolve their dispute on pay and training places, bringing an end to a period of industrial action that has seen 21 days of strike action in the past year. This follows a referendum of all resident doctor members of the BMA, in which a majority voted to accept the deal.

The deal is fair to doctors, affordable for the taxpayer and in the best interests of patients. Resident doctors will benefit from improved pay scales, better working conditions, enhanced career progression, and up to 4,500 new training places over the next three years.

I am incredibly grateful to staff across the NHS who have kept the NHS going during the recent rounds of industrial action. The absence of strikes by resident doctors will allow the NHS to focus on supporting patients and improving working conditions for all staff, rather than managing disruptive industrial action. When unions and the Government work together, patients, staff, and services benefit.

The deal means resident doctors will be on average 35.2% better off than they were four years ago. It also means resident doctors will benefit from pay structure reform, leading to more frequent pay progression as they develop and gain additional skills which benefits the health service.

Up to 4,500 additional training places will also be created, giving more resident doctors the opportunity to progress in their careers to more senior roles. This builds on the Medical Training (Prioritisation) Act 2026, which now means UK medical graduates, and doctors with significant NHS experience, are prioritised for foundation and specialty training posts, which has halved competition ratios from 4:1 to just 2:1.

The offer will also put money back in doctors' pockets, tackling the unique costs resident doctors experience through the reimbursement of mandatory royal college portfolio and examinations fees, and will improve working conditions for locally employed doctors and those who work less than full time.

Taken together, these measures recognise the vital contribution resident doctors make every day, while supporting the long-term sustainability of the NHS workforce. These changes are not simply investments in doctors. They are investments in patient care.

I want this agreement to mark the beginning of a new chapter of co-operation with resident doctors.

We must now begin to implement this deal and embed a new working relationship so that the NHS remains a place where doctors can thrive and develop.

This Government are getting the NHS back on its feet and making it fit for the future. Waiting lists have fallen by 400,000 since we took office, satisfaction with general practice has increased from 60% to 76% and ambulances are arriving faster. The acceptance of this deal by resident doctors today is a significant milestone on that road to recovery.

[HCWS157]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Asylum Accommodation

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Alex Norris): This Government inherited an asylum system under significant strain, with hundreds of hotels in use at considerable cost to the taxpayer.

I wish to update the House on the Government's action to fix the asylum accommodation system, ending the use of asylum hotels and replacing them with alternatives that work.

We are scaling up alternative accommodation by expanding the use of large, basic facilities, including former military sites, to replace unsuitable hotels. Three new ex-military sites are now under consideration: MoD Barnham, MoD Bicester and MoD Linton-on-Ouse. Together, these sites could eventually provide accommodation for around 3,750 asylum seekers, subject to feasibility assessments, planning and the necessary approvals.

We will also seek to extend the use of Crowborough and expand both the capacity and duration of use at Wethersfield. Following detailed assessments, the Government have decided not to proceed with Cameron Barracks in Scotland as a potential site for asylum accommodation, and it will be returned to the Ministry of Defence.

Alongside this, and as part of the next phase of delivering our commitment to end asylum hotel use by the end of this Parliament and return them to communities, we are closing a further 20 asylum hotels across England.

Hotel use has now more than halved since its peak. Just under 170 asylum hotels remain in use, down from around 400 at the height of the previous Government's

reliance on hotels. The number of people accommodated in hotels has also been cut by more than half, from a peak of 56,000 in 2023 to around 21,000.

This follows the first tranche of 11 hotel closures announced in April. These latest closures are part of wider reforms which will restore control of the system, including faster decision making, increased returns, and stronger action to deter illegal entry into the UK.

This marks a decisive shift away from the unsuitable use of hotels that spiralled under the previous Government, and towards a more controlled and sustainable accommodation system that tackles the factors driving demand.

The Home Office operates all sites safely and securely, working closely with local authorities, police and partners, just as we have successfully done at Wethersfield for several years. Public safety and community cohesion will remain central to this work.

The Government will provide further updates to Parliament as this work progresses.

[HCWS155]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Repeal of Vagrancy Act

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): Today I am confirming that the Vagrancy Act 1824 has been repealed.

This Government are drawing a clear line after over 200 years of criminalising people for sleeping rough.

The moral case is clear: no one should be punished for having nowhere safe to sleep, and people facing homelessness deserve dignity and support, not criminalisation.

This change allows us to focus on what really matters—preventing homelessness, intervening earlier, and making sure people receive the right support at the right time, as set out in “A National Plan to End Homelessness”.

We have also been clear that repeal needed to be implemented responsibly, without leaving gaps in the law where community safety issues arise. Replacement measures have been introduced alongside repeal. These are narrow and targeted. They do not criminalise rough sleeping or target people simply for being destitute. They are focused on specific issues including exploitative organised begging and trespass with intent to commit a crime.

Repeal is not the end of our work to prevent homelessness and support people away from the streets, but it is a significant step forward. We will now focus on delivering that shift in practice—through earlier intervention and ensuring people get the right support at the right time.

[HCWS156]

Petition

Monday 29 June 2026

OBSERVATIONS

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Newcastle-under-Lyme Green Belt

The petition of residents of the constituency of Newcastle-under-Lyme,

Declares that the land to the south east of Junction 16 of the M6 should not be released from its green belt status for development; further declares that this proposed change of use would be significantly detrimental, particularly to the Parish of Audley; further declares that the business rates income from any development would go to Newcastle Borough Council and thus be of limited benefit to Audley Parish residents, wildlife, local businesses and farming communities; further declares that the proposed employment site would represent a loss of 6% of the parish (of which all is green belt), before considering the impact of further green belt land being needed for housing, and that this would have a devastating impact on the rural character of the conservation area in the parish; further declares that there is no evidence to suggest that there are major problems with employment within the borough, and that the location of the proposed development at Junction 16 means that the jobs would be more accessible to those travelling in from further afield than to residents of the borough; further declares that the proposed development would put increased pressure on the A500/M6 roundabout and therefore subtract from the peaceful environment of rural lanes nearby for walking, horse riding, cycling and other activities; further declares that the village infrastructure would not support a large increase in vehicles on the road for access to the site, and that there is no guarantee that HGVs would not travel through the villages; and further declares that the proposed development would result in poor air quality, noise, litter, loss of habitat and illumination for up to twenty-four hours a day, as well as severely impacting the views across the Cheshire plains and North Staffordshire, and having a devastating impact on the local community.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to encourage Newcastle-under-Lyme Borough Council not to permit land south east of Junction 16 to be considered for release from its green belt status for development.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Adam Jogee, *Official Report*, 28 April 2026; Vol. 784, c. 872.]

[P003196]

Observations from the Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Ministers from the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government are unable to comment directly on planning applications due to their quasi-judicial role in the planning system.

The Government have a brownfield-first approach to development. The national planning policy framework makes clear that substantial weight should be given to the value of using suitable brownfield land within

settlements, including the development of under-utilised land and buildings to meet the need for homes and other uses.

Through the revisions made to the NPPF on 12 December 2024, we broadened the definition of brownfield land, set a strengthened expectation that applications on brownfield land will be approved, and made clear that plans should promote an uplift in density in urban areas.

Between 16 December 2025 and 10 March 2026, the Government consulted on a new NPPF. That consultation, which can be found on gov.uk, included a range of policies to further strengthen support for development on brownfield land. We are currently analysing the feedback received and will publish our response in due course.

The Government are committed to preserving green belts that have served England's towns and cities well over many decades, not least in terms of checking the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas and preventing neighbouring towns from merging into one another.

However, we know that there are simply not enough sites on brownfield land registers to deliver the volume of homes that the country needs each year, let alone enough that are viable and in the right location. That is why we acted to replace the haphazard approach taken to green-belt designation and release by the previous Government with a strategic and targeted approach.

We have not changed the five purposes of the green belt set out in paragraph 143 of the NPPF, and we do not propose to alter its general extent. Relevant green-belt guidance makes it clear that when assessing contribution to these purposes, large built-up areas and towns do not include villages. Considering whether any particular settlement constitutes a village is a matter for the given local planning authority to judge, which may be informed by the adopted local settlement hierarchy.

The framework still contains strong protections for the green belt, making it clear that inappropriate development should not be approved unless justified by very special circumstances. Where it is necessary to release green-belt land for development, national policy makes it clear that local development plans must take a sequential approach: first exhaust previously developed land, then consider low-quality grey-belt land that is not previously developed, and only then consider other green-belt locations. Under our revised approach, the sustainability of green-belt sites must also be prioritised, and local planning authorities must pay particular attention to transport connections when considering whether grey belt is sustainably located.

The definition of grey belt, for the purposes of plan making and decision making, is provided in the glossary of the NPPF. We published updated green-belt guidance on 27 February 2025, to ensure a consistent approach to the identification of grey-belt land. Where land is identified as grey belt, that does not mean it is automatically granted planning permission. The potential consequences of any planning proposal should still be assessed in light of all relevant local and national policies.

Where green-belt land has to be released for major housing development, we have put in place new golden rules to ensure that development delivers higher levels of affordable housing; the provision of new or improvements to existing green spaces that are accessible to the public; and the making of necessary improvements to local or national infrastructure.

The draft NPPF continues to make clear that the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, by managing the use and development of land in the long-term public interest. The NPPF promotes positive plan making by expecting development plans to meet the development needs of their area while providing for the improvement of the environment and seeking to mitigate climate change and adapt to its effects.

We believe that communities must remain at the heart of the plan-making process, and that local people must have a meaningful say on planning policies that will affect them and their local areas. We want to encourage open dialogue between authorities, communities and other key stakeholders such as statutory bodies about key local decisions and trade-offs, to help influence the production of genuinely local plans at the earliest stages of plan making.

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